

# The Beginning

**I**F THE YEARS leading up to the formation of the Cathedral Schola Cantorum in 1937 were full of challenges for Father Ronan, what lay ahead for this very determined priest was to be even more difficult of accomplishment. He had to nurture this frail thing he had created, and develop it into a fully-fledged boys choir school. The process began almost immediately, and by the end of the first academic year there were 34 boys on the register.

A glance at the registry of the School in 1937 — 38 showed a preponderance of Irish, Scottish and English surnames: Norbert Downing, Dan Fahey, Leo Lismar, Archie Parker, Donald Young, Ray Holland, Donald Fraser, Tommy Quigley, George Maugeri, Donald Wainman, John Kelly, David Boyd, James Kelly, Leo Killoran, Bernard O'Connor, Billie Whitehead, Robert Hastings, Michael Fallon, Edward

Boys of the early Cathedral Schola Cantorum. This photograph, taken in 1939, shows, in the back row, left to right: B.J. Flynn and Basil (later Father) Breen. In the front row, left to right, Louis (later Father) Quinn, Bernard (Barney) McKeever, who was to develop into a powerful tenor, and George Maugeri, brother of Rudi, of the Crew Cuts.



LaRose, Paul LaRose, Otel Sturino, Basil Breen, William Flynn, Joseph Macdonald, William O'Grady, Joseph Voide, William Castleford, Philip Short, George Flanagan, William Lee, Robert Carney, Frank Miner, Harold Jones and Harold Bruce.

This situation was to change drastically over the next few decades, and particularly after the second World War, as Toronto became a much more cosmopolitan city, with new immigrants coming from all over the world. (In 1987 there are upwards of 40 different ethnic groups represented by the 387 students in the School).

By 1939 there were too many students for Father Ronan and Joan Hopperton to manage on their own, and Kathleen Mann was engaged to help out. She had completed her teaching course at Normal School, and had also taken a commercial course.

Miss Mann remembers being "a little frightened" when asked to teach, as she knew she would have five grades in one room. But she accepted the challenge, as she was to accept many more in the ensuing years.

Space was very quickly at a premium as the reputation of the fledgling choir school and its Director spread to the Catholic population of Toronto. But the financial remuneration for the teachers was small. In 1939 Miss Mann's salary was \$600. a year. Eighteen years later it had risen to a dizzying \$1600. And this for *at least* 60 hours of work a week.

From the beginning, it was Father Ronan's wish to provide a complete course of academic study, with the added benefits of a sound musical education. All boys in the School studied the theory of music as well as piano. Many boys were also prepared to become parish organists.

In the early 1930's the Rector of St. Michael's Cathedral asked Father Ronan to take over the music for the High Mass. He did so with alacrity; the mixed choir was disbanded and the boys replaced them. Thus began a tradition which has not changed since.

Distinctive maroon-coloured soutanes, with short capes worn outside white surplices, were the order of the day for all boys and men at liturgical services. School uniforms consisted, as they do today, of maroon blazers, gray trousers and black shoes.

The Somerville brothers, Peter and Stephen, entered the School in 1939. Later both studied at St. Augustine's Seminary in Scarborough and entered the priesthood.

Father Barrett Armstrong, the present Choral Director of the School, entered as a Grade 9 student in 1942. He also studied at St. Augustine's before becoming a priest. His musical ability was recognized early on, and soon after his ordination he was sent to study at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome. After three years he returned to Toronto and worked in many musical and teaching capacities at the Cathedral Schola. He was very close to Father Ronan, who often consulted him when composing. It has been said that Father Ronan depended upon Father Armstrong for many musical matters at the School. In the opinion of one observer, "There were few decisions made since the early 1950's that were not enriched by Father Armstrong's unusual intelligence and wisdom".

When the writer retired, in 1982, after 15 years as a chorister in the Senior choir, and was tendered a dinner by the School, I said "Where else could I have gone to choir practice each Wednesday, and been regaled with musical witticisms, with a superb musician, in the person of Father Armstrong, illustrating a point or making tricky passages seem easier to learn, by playing on the piano similar-sounding passages from opera, ballads, popular songs or even "God Save the Queen?".

Like his mentor, Father Armstrong is multi-lingual, speaking fluent Italian and French. The breadth of his musical knowledge and interests are truly staggering. He recalls that during part of his examination by Father Ronan for entry into the Schola, he played some "boogie-



JOAN HOPPERTON

woogie” on the piano. He must have been very good at it, although history does not record Father Ronan’s reaction.

In 1942, keenly aware that his boys were growing up, and would soon need to go to High School, Father Ronan added Grades nine and ten to the School. This meant at least one more teacher, and Father obtained the services of Brother Cleophas Gagnon, a Christian Brother, who taught both these grades for nine years. Graduates of the School who are now in their 50’s, or more, might suspect that Brother Cleophas was also on the staff as a disciplinarian. He ran what came to be called “The Monday morning wrap-up”, where each boy’s behaviour in the Cathedral on the previous day would be examined in detail, and, presumably, punishment meted out to the offenders.

In the early days of the School, and for a period of about 25 years, Father Ronan, with the “Faithful Few”; Harold Armstrong, Joan Hopperton, Kathleen Mann, Fathers Peter Somerville and Barrett Armstrong assisting, ran Summer Schools of liturgical music, in Toronto and elsewhere, where priests, nuns and lay people could come together for periods of from two to five weeks, and broaden their

musical horizons. These were very successful, and attracted students from across Canada and the United States.

In 1946 the Cathedral Schola became a purely private school, and soon afterwards, Father Ronan, realizing that he was quickly running out of space, began to think of the ultimate solution — a new and exclusive school building. A year later he consulted with the newly-elevated Prince of the Church, James C. Cardinal McGuigan, Archbishop of Toronto, and broached the idea. The Cardinal wrote Father Ronan a very encouraging letter, in which he made his own position very clear. “. . . .If suitable arrangements can be made, we should



HAROLD ARMSTRONG

go ahead with the Choir School, because you are quite capable of administering it from a financial point of view, as well as from the musical and artistic viewpoint”. In addition to this unqualified support, and even though the Archdiocese was at the time \$4 million in debt, Cardinal McGuigan made a magnificent gesture when he gave Father Ronan the \$50,000. “purse” which the clergy and people of the Archdiocese had given him on his elevation to the Cardinalate.

Father Ronan was also, late in 1947, to be moved upwards in the hierarchy of the Church.

On November 22nd, Pope Pius XII made him a prelate of the Papal Household, with the title of Monsignor, in recognition of the magnificent work he had done in the teaching and promotion of liturgical music. Whether the feast of St. Cecelia was chosen because the Saint is generally recognized as the Patroness of Music, or whether it was purely by chance, is open to speculation. Miss Mann recalls the day very clearly: “I was in the office working with Father Ronan when he received a long-distance telephone call. The caller asked to speak to “Monsignor Ronan”, but was told there “was no Monsignor here. This is Father Ronan speaking”. Thereupon the caller read out, over the telephone, the cable received from Rome announcing the appointment. Father was speechless”.

The site for the new School building was selected, opposite St. Michael’s Cathedral. The plans were drawn by Toronto architect James Haffa, and the cost of construction was estimated at \$192,712., or 70¢ per cubic foot. A campaign committee, headed by Judge Frank McDonagh, a long-time friend of Monsignor Ronan, was established. Other members of the committee were Charles Gillooly, Berkley Hynes, Wilfred McDonald, Arthur Kelly, James



KATHLEEN MANN



IT LAUS  
PLENA  
SIT  
SONORA

SIT JUCUNDA  
SIT DECORA  
MENTIS  
JUBILATIO

*The official Opening and  
Blessing of the new  
St. Michael's Cathedral  
Schola Cantorum by His  
Eminence James C. Cardinal  
McGuigan, June 18th, 1950*

*Msgr. J. E. Ronan, D.P., M.C.G.  
Founder and Director*



*From Corpus Christi Sequence "Lauda  
Sion" St. Thomas Aquinas*

E. Wall and A.P. Murphy. Henry Somerville, father of Peter and Stephen, was publicity chairman. The initial campaign raised the net amount of \$73,266.71, and this was supplemented by later appeals and collections.

The first sod for the new School was turned in May, 1949 by the co-founder, James C. Cardinal McGuigan. On June 18th, 1950 the official opening and blessing of what was still called the Cathedral Schola Cantorum, was performed by the Cardinal. Joan Hopperton designed a commemorative card for the occasion, bearing the Latin inscription SIT LAUS PLENA SIT SONORA, SIT JUCUNDA, SIT DECORA, MENTIS JUBILATIO. (THEN BE THE ANTHEM CLEAR AND STRONG, THY FULLEST NOTE, THY SWEETEST SONG, THE VERY MUSIC OF THE BREAST). The words are taken from the Corpus Christi Sequence in the Lauda Sion Mass of St Thomas Aquinas. The card is reproduced in these pages.

Throughout the entire process of the design and layout of the building, Monsignor Ronan consulted with his colleagues Joan Hopperton, Kathleen Mann and Harold Armstrong, on an almost daily basis.

Monsignor Ronan intended from the beginning that the School would accept day students only, but a few boys from outside Toronto were accepted, and therefore had to be boarded. Because of financial constraints, they had to pay a small monthly fee.

Monsignor wrote at about this time: "You will see at once that it (the School) is not merely a Schola Cantorum, which would mean literally a School of Singers. It is that in reality, but it is also, in a very special way, a School of Music, particularly of Church Music".

Father Basil Breen, one of three men in the same family who entered the priesthood, and one of the students in the first class at the School in 1937, taught at the School from 1951 to 1954. Father (later Monsignor) Peter Somerville also taught at the School from 1954 to 1981, serving as its second Director for his last 17 years.

So in the late 1940's Monsignor Ronan had a staff of five, a student enrollment of approximately 100, and supreme confidence that he would shortly get his new building. As we have seen, he did not have to wait long.

In 1962 further recognition of Monsignor's work was announced. He was appointed Protonotary Apostolic. Archbishop Baggio, the Apostolic Delegate to Canada wrote: "The cultural value (of the School) alone would make it worthwhile, but "ars gratia artis" alone is not enough for the Christian and the priest. It has to be "ad majorem Dei Gloriam".

Perhaps the crowning achievement of Monsignor's work came in 1955, only 18 years after he started his School. He wrote at the time: "The greatest recognition that could have come to our School arrived on May 17th, 1955. The boys were presenting a concert in the Eaton Auditorium in honour of the Silver Jubilee of Cardinal McGuigan's Episcopal consecration. His Eminence came on to the stage to address the audience. He had in his hand a document that had arrived that day from the Congregation of Seminaries and University Studies in Rome. It was a decree stating that in response to the recommendation of His Eminence and 25 English-speaking Bishops of Canada, our School is granted affiliation with the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome, under the name "St. Michael's School of Sacred Music", with the power to grant the degree of Bachelor of Sacred Music, with a particular degree in Gregorian Chant. We feel very happy that the Bishops recognize our School as a help in their Dioceses".

Four years later Monsignor Ronan suffered the first of a series of debilitating strokes. These robbed him of some of the tremendous energy and vitality of his earlier years. But ill health did not, however, prevent him from continuing to compose and to work for his beloved boys. During the last three years of his life he supervised changes to the organ in St. Michael's Cathedral, and planned new additions to the Schola Cantorum buildings at 66 Bond Street.

On October 15th, 1962, as he was getting ready to go to the Auditorium to hear some Grade 8 students sing, John Edward Ronan, in his 68th. year, collapsed and died shortly afterwards.

The funeral, held in St. Michael's Cathedral after the body had lain in state in the Auditorium of the School, was said by one observer to be "The biggest funeral in Toronto

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since Archbishop Neil McNeil died in 1934". St. Michael's Cathedral was filled with students, graduates, priests, nuns, relatives, friends and admirers. Cardinal McGuigan, Archbishop Pocock and Bishop Marrocco were all in Rome attending the Second Vatican Council, which had started four days earlier. It fell to Bishop Marrocco to return to Toronto to celebrate the funeral Mass. He said at the time that he considered it a privilege to have been asked.

The Right Rev. Joseph McDonagh, a life-long friend, preached the funeral oration, and the pallbearers and honorary pallbearers included two Monsignors, five priests, two judges, several well-known church musicians, including (the late) Dr. Charles Peaker, and David Ouchterlony, organist and choir director of Timothy Eaton Memorial Church in Toronto, as well as many other life-long friends of the deceased priest-musician.

In a front page editorial, The Canadian Register, the Toronto Archdiocese newspaper, under the heading "A giant passes", said that Monsignor Ronan was a giant in stature as well as intellectually. The editorial continued: "His heart was so big that it seemed to warmly embrace everyone with whom he came into contact. He had but one purpose in life: to praise his Maker in song. St. Augustine said that he who sings praises to God prays twice (Bis orat qui cantat). Monsignor's entire priestly life was like a song to his God".

Writing in the Toronto Telegram, David Ouchterlony said "He was a truly dedicated person, and it was one of those wonderful coincidences of life that he was able to offer his vision, talents and strength at a time when his Church in Canada was ready for, and needed so much, the project which he developed so magnificently".

So, 25 years after Monsignor Ronan had founded his School, its scholars and graduates were left to mourn the passing of a devoted priest, an inspired teacher and a musical genius. It was not only the end of an era but the beginning of a new one, as the School moved on to an ever-increasing enrollment, and new challenges represented by a new administration and a changed liturgy.

Please join in singing this hymn by our Founder  
**THOU ROYAL KNIGHT FROM COURTS ON HIGH**



1. Thou Roy-al Knight from courts on high, Thou Prince of Hea-ven's Host;  
 2. This world is torn with war and strife; The na-tions groan in pain,



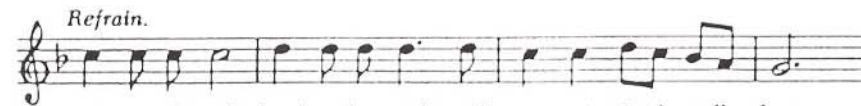
Dread foe of all the spi-rits dark, Thro' pride and ha-tred lost,  
 A-gainst God's rule, God's Church, God's peace, fell Sa-tan strives a-main.



Thou An-gel Pa-tron, War-rior true, A pray'r to thee we breathe,  
 But "Mi-chael" is our bat-tle-cry, and "Who is like to God?"



"Once more in ho-ly wrath stand forth, Thy fla-ming sword unsheathe."  
 O Is-rael's Guar-dian! save from death, God's peo-ple so down-trod.



*Arch-an-gel bright, lend us thy might; The star of Faith still beams,*



*As thro' the night we seek the light, Thy ban-nered cross out-gleams.*

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| <p>3. O strengthen thou our faith, our hope,<br/>                 And heal our spirits sore;<br/>                 And share with us thy burning love,<br/>                 That God we may adore.<br/>                 Then teach us how the seraphs pray<br/>                 Before the great white throne;<br/>                 Take our poor prayers as incense mild,<br/>                 To offer with thine own.</p> | <p>4. Thou saw'st the sun-clad Mother fair:<br/>                 The Father's Power dread<br/>                 Bade thee cast warring Satan down.<br/>                 Thou heard'st the voice that said:<br/>                 "Salvation! Strength! God's Kingdom<br/>                 Comel" In thy sublimity<br/>                 Bless Father, Son and Holy Ghost,<br/>                 Knight of the Trinity!</p> |
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*Refrain.*

*Refrain.*