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A Short History of the North Shore Choral Society

Founded in 1936, the North Shore Choral Society is the oldest choral organization on the North Shore. Now in its seventy-fourth season, the Society is an independent, self-governing body, incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1978. It takes this as its credo: The North Shore Choral Society explores, studies, and performs a wide range of choral music for the enrichment and enjoyment of its singers and audiences. To achieve this goal, the Society prepares and presents three or more concerts each year, relying on authentic performances that use not only the composers' original vocal scores but also their designated instrumentations.

The North Shore Choral Society was born in Winnetka as a men's chorus. Soon, however, its director, Lawrence Yingling, was persuaded to lead a mixed chorus, whose initial appearance was on December 18, 1932. But the first rehearsal of the musical organization which still goes by that name today was held on March 3, 1936, under the direction of Madi Bacon, who received an annual salary of \$250. Two concerts were given each season, accompanied by a string quartet, piano, or organ. Early spring concerts were held in an outdoor garden. In 1945, the chorus welcomed back ex-servicemen and others who had been too busy to sing during the war.

John Halloran succeeded Bacon in 1946. Two years later, the Society began presenting a weekly fifteen-minute radio program. A special feature of a 1950 concert was a motet set to an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem by Bain Murray, a senior at Oberlin College from Winnetka. Under the leadership of the next director, Alden Clark, the Society regularly presented its two annual concerts at the North Shore Country Day School and was often joined by the local Flute and Fiddle Club for its Christmas programs. Alice Parker was prominent in the Society as accompanist and arranger. After a two-year period with Barbara McFadden at the helm, Vincent B. Allison took over the director's role and changed the programming from a large number of shorter works to major choral compositions, such as Bach's St. Matthew's Passion and Brahms' German Requiem.

Nineteen sixty-five was a watershed year for the North Shore Choral Society, which was plagued by a small chorus and dwindling attendance. But, largely through the efforts of a Women's Board, the Society was revitalized. The new director, Ronald Schweitzer, initiated a three-concert season with Tuesday rehearsals and Sunday performances, as is the case even today. And it was during his tenure that the Society selected the Parish Church of St. Luke's in Evanston as its primary venue. The first challenge for the next director, Richard Rosewall, was to prepare the chorus for a performance of Rossini's Stabat Mater with the Lake Forest Symphony under the baton of Victor Aitay, to whose fast tempos Rosewall strongly objected--but in vain.

From 1973 to 1984, David Larson led the Society. Perhaps the most glorious concert during the Larson years was the performance of Haydn's The Seasons, with members of the Lyric Opera Orchestra and with a grant from the Illinois Arts Council for the first time. Mr. Larson did double duty when he directed from the harpsichord after the accompanist cut her finger along with some meat that very morning. In 1978, the Society became a not-for-profit organization in order to continue applying for grants. The following year the Society's current accompanist, Sharon Rich Peterson, was engaged. When Larson took a year's leave of absence to teach in Japan, James Winfield took the helm.

Donald Chen became the North Shore Choral Society's tenth music director in 1984. Chen put his own stamp on the repertoire of the Society by presenting rarely heard works in at least one of the annual concerts: Milhaud's Les Amours de Ronsard and Miracles of Faith, Argento's Jonah and the Whale, Bernstein's Chichester Psalms, Schickele's Concerto for Piano and Chorus: The Twelve Months as examples. In 1988, the part-time position of General Manager was established. Gala celebrations were held to celebrate the Society's fiftieth and sixtieth anniversaries. In 2000, the present formal dress code was initiated. For several summers, the Society sang under Erich Kunzel at the Ravinia Festival. A highlight of the 2004-2005 season was a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Chicago Philharmonic Orchestra. NSCS celebrated its seventieth season with a unique program featuring works by Brahms, Shostakovich, Schumann, and Orff—and collaborating with the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra, the Agape Handbell Ringers, and the Red Rose Children's Choir of Lake County.

The North Shore Choral Society entered a new phase in its long and proud musical history when Dr. Chen announced his plan to retire at the end of the 2008-2009 season. After a two-year search for his successor, the Society welcomed its new music director, Dr. Julia Davids, beginning with the 2009-2010 season. Julia's energy and enthusiasm, not to mention her musical capabilities, have, in a short time, convinced the Society that their choice was the right one. We feel certain that she will continue to fulfill the Society's mission statement: The North Shore Choral Society explores, studies, and performs a wide range of choral music for the enrichment and enjoyment of its singers and audiences.