

Formation of the University Singers

“We are not a professional choral group, but we do the best music to the very best of our ability.”

Richard Eaton, interview, 1967

A New Choral Challenge

From the time he arrived in Edmonton, a lot of Dick’s time and energy were absorbed by the Mixed Chorus, the Choral Lab Choir and later the Banff School Choir. He enjoyed young people, and all three groups were to remain very satisfying vehicles of musical expression for him, a wonderful means of teaching the joy of singing to young people, and channels through which his passion for good music could be transmitted to the community at large.

However, there were limitations to what one could accomplish with a choir that operated for only six weeks each summer and varied in membership each season. The same could be said of the Mixed Chorus, which had a one-third turnover in membership annually, so that a whole new Chorus had to be trained from scratch each fall. Many members were musical illiterates when they came to him, and despite their best efforts could not be expected to have the time or training to attempt large-scale choral works.

Dick always had in the back of his mind the idea of some day forming an adult group of stable membership with which he would be able to tackle the great masterpieces of choral literature. He had had an early exposure to them under Stanley Bulley in Victoria, and his experience with the choir leadership course in 1948 had served to whet his appetite even more.

The opportunity came in 1951.

When Dick took over the Mixed Chorus there were a few alumni and other adults from the academic community who were anxious to sing under him. He allowed them to be part of the student group, and indeed welcomed them, especially if they were tenors. However, as more and more young people flocked to join the Chorus, numbers became a problem, and he found it necessary to limit the size of the group. For one thing, there simply wasn't room enough on the Convocation Hall stage to hold them all. By 1951 Dick regretfully had to turn away the non-students who wanted to sing in the Mixed Chorus.

One evening that fall the Eatons' telephone rang, and when Dick got off the line he had a familiar glint in his eye. He told Peggy, "They want me to form a new choir." "They" was a small group spearheaded by zoology professor Richard Miller and Jean Rawlinson, his old friend from McGill. Needless to say Dick leapt at the bait. He agreed to discuss things with the would-be choir members, and before long a small group of adults had begun meeting for choral lessons under Dick's direction. From then on he was conducting three choirs from September to April each year.



University of Alberta Archives

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There were thirty or forty adult singers in the group at the start. Things were so casual at first that records were not kept. Most people were from the university community, including Department of Fine Arts Head Geo Glyde, Duncan Campbell of the Department of Extension, Jean Rawlinson, wife of HE Rawlinson of the Department of Medicine, and Richard Miller of the Department of Zoology. Others were sought out by the conductor. Schoolteacher Orval Doney was taking an Extension conducting class from Dick, and was invited to join. Evelyn and Charles Norman, having now moved to Edmonton, were asked to be part of the group. Evelyn, with all her training and experience as a pianist, was nevertheless under no illusions. She knew that Dick wasn't after her. What he really wanted was Charles' deep bass voice, and Dick guessed that if Evelyn joined she would see that Charles kept

The University Singers, Convocation Hall, 1955

coming. He was right. Another member from the early years was Olie Rudyk, a former member of the Brandon Symphony and the Brandon Operatic Society. Alice Shymko, a student teacher who sang in the Mixed Chorus, joined the University Singers, as did her fiancé, teacher Quentin Mix.

In November *The Gateway* announced:

Mr RS Eaton, Associate Professor of Music and Director of the University Mixed Chorus, has recently organized a new choral group to be known as the University Singers. The Mixed Chorus has proved a popular medium for musical expression of the student body since its organization several years ago, but there had existed no group in which other members of the university community could participate.

At first the new choir met in Hut H. Later it moved to a classroom on the third floor of the Arts Building. Jocelyn Rogers agreed to take on the added duties of accompanist of the new choir as well as the Mixed Chorus.

First Concert of His Adult Choir

Early rehearsals took the form of choral singing lessons, but every choir must have a goal to work towards, so Dick was soon preparing his singers for a recital of Christmas music. The first appearance of the University Singers took place on Sunday afternoon, December 9, 1951, in the Mixed Lounge of the Students' Union Building. The Christmas recital was put on jointly with the U of A Symphony Orchestra, now led by Art Crighton, and was sponsored by the U of A Musical Club. Jocelyn Rogers accompanied those choral numbers that weren't sung *a cappella*.

The orchestra opened the program with the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 8. The University Singers' first number was Orlando Gibbons' *This is the record of John*, with Jeanne Rogers (now Lougheed) singing the solo part. There followed two Bach Christmas chorales and two Christmas carols, one arranged by Healey Willan. Art conducted the orchestra in the "Pastorale" from Handel's *Messiah*. Next was the Vaughan Williams *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, a work presenting considerable vocal challenges for an amateur choir so recently formed. Ole A Olson sang the

baritone solo in that. After another orchestral number, Dick led the choir in “And the Glory of the Lord” from *Messiah*. As the icing on the cake, he turned to the delighted audience and conducted everyone in a rousing sing-along of familiar Christmas carols – once again assuming the role he loved.

The first program was repeated two days later in Convocation Hall, this time with Ernest A Moore, Director of Music at Alberta College and organist at McDougall United Church, as guest performer. That concert was sponsored by the Women’s Musical Club of Edmonton.

Those two December 1951 concerts were the official launching of the Edmonton choir that years later would carry Dick’s name – the Richard Eaton Singers – although the name was chosen much later, and not by him. Dick called the choir the University Singers; it would have been completely out of character for him to name a choir after himself.

From the start Dick had much higher ambitions for his adult choir than for either the Mixed Chorus or the Music Division Chorus. There was a vast repertoire of great choral music that had never been performed in Edmonton, or indeed in Alberta, and with great determination he set about creating a choir that would be capable of singing it. The organizational and administrative aspects of the choir, such as they were, were taken care of mainly by Dick himself, with the secretarial help of Jean Rawlinson.

By the fall of 1953 the University Singers had placed an advertisement in the *Edmonton Journal*: “Applications will be considered from singers interested in thorough choral training, including class instruction in sight singing.” Applicants were to contact Richard Eaton’s office to arrange an audition.

The University Singers – Early Years

Despite the serious commitment implied in the ad, the University Singers in the first few years maintained a comfortable family feeling, perhaps in part because their numbers settled at about seventy and they all knew each other well. As for joining the choir, auditions were not too difficult. When Marianne Elder asked Dick what the requirements for membership were, he

replied somewhat gruffly, “Got to be regular!” She thought she could fulfill that, so she auditioned and joined the choir. Nearly forty-five years later she was still a contributing member – and still regular!

In the early winter days in Hut H there sometimes could be furnace problems. Once when the place was too chilly, Olie Rudyk excused herself, drove home and came back with a big pot of homemade soup to warm everyone at the break. No one thought of cancelling the rehearsal. On another frigid winter’s night when a monumental blizzard had made driving all but impossible, Orval Doney and Ole Olson struggled to rehearsal on foot, taking two steps forward into the bitter north wind, then walking backwards for two steps. Orval said later, “It was dress rehearsal, and you didn’t miss that!” No one did, and the concert sold out for two nights despite the brutal weather.

Anne Burrows, a piano teacher recently immigrated from Britain, had lost her eyesight in childhood. She joined the choir – as did her golden retriever, Silva, who sat patiently beside her throughout rehearsals, only occasionally expressing boredom with a yawn on high C. Anne was a dedicated member for a number of years. She had the music dictated to her, then transposed it painstakingly into Braille. Members said they never heard her miss a singing cue or come in late. Anne’s loyalty to Dick and to the choir exemplified the feelings of all members.

By 1954 rehearsals were taking place in an amphitheatre in the Medical Building. Dick often conducted from a sitting position, perched on a lab counter at the front of the room. He would illustrate what he wanted by singing, or often by whistling, which was probably less taxing on his breathing apparatus. He had an uncanny ability to conduct with his hands while pounding out the rhythm with his heel against the front of the lab counter, which acted as a sounding board. He could even conduct different rhythms simultaneously with his hands and his heel, rather like the pat-your-head-rub-your-tummy routine. On one memorable occasion he pounded his heel so hard that it went right through the wood of the counter, and got stuck. There was some consternation and embarrassment mixed with muffled laughter before he was able to extricate his foot.

University Singers rehearsals were every bit as intense as those of the Mixed Chorus. If anything, Dick was even more demanding of the adults. He had high standards and a short fuse, but storms blew over quickly, and he had an ability to lighten things up afterwards with his irrepressible humour. Some felt that the sarcasm that was sometimes used as a weapon in the Mixed Chorus was less evident with the University Singers, perhaps because he felt less free to use it in front of a group of adults.

On occasion Dick's wit could be at someone else's expense. One male member kept time quite audibly with his foot (so did the conductor, but that was his privilege). Once Dick stopped the choir and said in exasperation, "Can you believe it? We have an accountant who can't count to four!" Such remarks were funny so long as one was not the butt of the joke. Brothers Jim and Johnny New sat together, and whenever Dick wanted to speak to the one of them he addressed him as, "James, son of Zebedee, brother of John..." one of the many biblical references that tumbled out quite naturally and hearkened back to his Anglican upbringing in Victoria.

Gordon K Greene (Dean of Music, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1979 to 1989) sang under Dick in both the Mixed Chorus and the University Singers, and later was a music specialist with the U of A Department of Extension. He expressed his memories of Dick Eaton with eloquence:

He felt no need to articulate a mission statement – he simply programmed the great choral works and set about, with the incredible energy he brought to every rehearsal, to realize in choral sound the scores of Mozart, Bach, Brahms, Vaughan Williams, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Byrd (to name only a few). ...The compositions were demanding, rehearsals were exhausting, but the rewards in the end were incredible. Always incredible! They would have been merely credible to the singers if we had not worked so hard and learned so much about singing, about diction, about choral discipline, and about the expressive geniuses who created the works we sang. I remember vividly having a huge lump of emotion choke off my voice during a performance of Handel's *Messiah*. This was quite different from standing up in awe during the Hallelujah Chorus. The thought that overwhelmed me was: listen to this sound, hear how finely tooled and

refined and expressive it is, imagine having the talent to create such a work, and Greene, you know something? You could never have this experience alone. You have to be in a good choir like this one, and you have to be worked hard, you have to unite behind a skilled leader, and then it can happen. In that performance it was happening.

Many years later Gordon Greene's memories of University Singers rehearsals with Dick were still vivid.

He was usually impatient during rehearsals, driving to accomplish as much as possible in those precious two hours a week. That almost desperate striving sometimes flared out, even at individuals. A casual observer would have found these attacks bitter, uncaring, even brutal, but we knew from whence they came. We knew he respected above all the composer's intention, that it was the chasm between our falterings and his vision of the score that caused his frustration. We also knew that the more vicious the attack, the more caring it was – caring for the music and caring for those of us who were committed to helping him realize the score. He had to badger and cajole us to heighten our attentiveness. No one took his strident comments as personal abuse; these were his tactics to lift us from one plateau to another, and lift us he did. I have attempted to train choirs at various times since then, and I often think of the vast amount of energy Richard Eaton expended during rehearsals, particularly in distancing himself from his friends in the Chorus, seeing the realization of the music as the only matter at hand, and clawing his way up the sheer rock-face carrying all of us on his back.

University Singers rehearsals were not always serious by any means. The Eaton humour was always present to break the tension. James New recalled:

I remember him stopping the orchestra one time. He wanted the cellos to double the time, and he told the story about Sir Ernest MacMillan admonishing a cello player, 'Between your legs you possess God's greatest creation, and all you can do is sit there and scratch it!'

Most singers dreaded hearing Mr Eaton say, "Someone's not singing this correctly," because they knew he'd then go down the row and have each person sing the passage alone until he isolated the problem. Dick could be

testy with local soloists too, and wasn't above berating them in front of everyone if he felt they hadn't come prepared, "but I just let it all roll off me," said June Hunt, a former choir member and frequent guest artist.

Dick's most savage attacks were reserved for professional musicians who didn't measure up, because he felt they should know better. All who witnessed the incident carried with them the memory of a major explosion Dick directed at a local professional percussionist who had the temerity to come in too early with a loud crash.

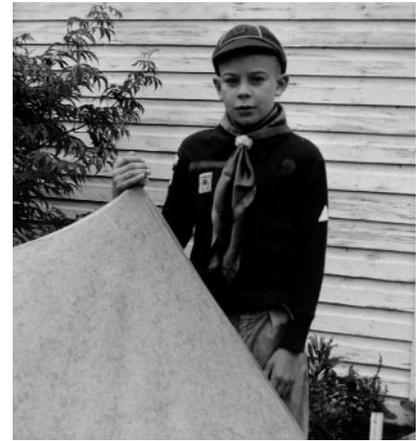
Practices could have a lighter element. On one occasion Dick announced, "We are going to have an important visitor this evening." The visitor turned out to be his son, Chum, who appeared in his Cub Scout uniform to solicit sales of nuts or Christmas cards.

No one ever saw Dick use a nebulizer to ease his asthmatic wheezing during rehearsals, but he often did during the half-time break, when the men gathered in the washroom to listen to Charles Norman's bottomless reservoir of jokes, to which Dick tendered his share. Dick's ribald humour was sometimes displayed in the privacy of that all-male enclave, but never in front of the choir.

Christmas Concerts and Overtown Appearances

Beginning in December 1952 the University Singers joined Dick's other two choirs, the Mixed Chorus and the Music Division Chorus, in the annual University Christmas concert in Convocation Hall. Each choir performed a couple of pieces on its own. Professor Nichols played two organ selections and the University Symphony Orchestra under Art Crighton entertained. Then Dick led everyone in carol singing.

The University Singers, which had actually become a community choir with real although unofficial connections to the University, also made off-campus appearances, usually at local churches. The first such over-town recital of sacred music was given on Sunday, March 15, 1953, in Robertson United Church, after the evening service. Said the church bulletin, "This is an



Cub Scout Chum Eaton

opportunity for the people of Robertson and their friends to hear one of the finest choral groups in the province;” such was the choir’s reputation in less than two years of singing together. The Robertson United Church recital featured the Palestrina *Missa Brevis* and some shorter works, and was interspersed with organ selections by Douglas Millson, who had recently been appointed music director at the church. Doug Millson was teaching music appreciation in the Department of Extension on the side, and for a number of years was one of Dick’s examiners for the Western Board. The two fellow organists hit it off from their first meeting, enjoyed each other’s company immensely, and worked together happily on a number of musical projects in Edmonton over the years.

Many “Firsts”

By the fall of 1953 Dick was already beginning to expand the range of music, both in variety and in difficulty, that he was teaching the University Singers for the annual campus Christmas concerts. That year he ambitiously tackled Parts I and II of Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio*, having choir members sing the solo parts. The *Christmas Oratorio* had never before been performed in Edmonton. As a choir alumnus once said, “Practically everything we did was a first!” As if parts of Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* weren’t challenge enough, Dick also led all three of his choirs in Part I and the final chorus of Handel’s *Messiah*, his first conducting of part of the work that many years later was to become synonymous with his choir’s name in Edmonton. It was still too soon for the University Singers to attempt a complete *Messiah*, although there is no doubt that it was on his agenda. He always said it took ten years to develop a first class choir, and he was right on schedule.

In April 1954 the University Singers presented what became known as their First Annual Concert, their first appearance without the collaboration of Dick’s other choirs. On that occasion they performed William Byrd’s *Mass for Four Voices*, JS Bach’s Cantata No. 106, *God’s Time is the Best*, and Edvard Grieg’s *Psalms for Mixed Voices*. Also on the program was the Edmonton

String Quartet led by Edgar Williams, well-known local violinist. From that year on the University Singers gave their own concert each spring.

Dick was becoming more ambitious all the time in his choice of music, and often his programs leaned towards the contemporary. By April 1955 he had the choir tackling Zoltán Kodály's *Missa Brevis* and Ralph Vaughan Williams' cantata *In Windsor Forest*, both of which had been quite recently published. Also that year the choir cut its first record, featuring both works, with Dick conducting, Art Crighton at the organ and an accompanying string orchestra assembled for the occasion.

By fall he was resolutely driving the University Singers to learn excerpts of JS Bach's monumental *Mass in B Minor*, determined that this masterpiece should become part of the choir's repertoire – his reach often exceeded his grasp, but that certainly didn't keep him from trying! Over the next few years he made several attempts at the *Mass in B Minor*, and he did program parts of it for several concerts. He obviously would love to have conducted the whole mass, but that dream eluded him, and in the end it was left to another conductor to prepare the choir's first complete performance.

Dick's choir members seemed to understand that his was a very complex personality, and that as a perfectionist he made even greater demands on himself than on those around him, all in the service of his muse. He gave so much, and expected much from others. He once told an interviewer, "We are not a professional choral group, but we do the best music to the very best of our ability." He inspired great loyalty in any of his singers who shared his vision. Dick's old friend Jean Rawlinson once wrote in a brief historical review of the early days of the University Singers:

A biographical sketch in a Symphony program describes Professor Eaton as 'the genial conductor of the University Singers.' Assuming that we are talking of the same man, I shall merely add that we are



Ruth Gillis New

Soloist Ruth New, conductor Dick Eaton, at choir's first concert with Edmonton Symphony Orchestra

eternally grateful to him for organizing the Singers in the first place, and for piloting us from thin to thick. We love him very much, even if it is sometimes in the key of B flat minor.

Remarkably, although so much of his time and energy were devoted to the Music Division, the Mixed Chorus and the University Singers, Dick was at the same time becoming involved in many other activities, both on and off campus, as his vision and goals continued to expand.