

## **WESTMINSTER CHOIR COLLEGE AT NINETY**

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Few who were there, perhaps only one among the seventy or so gathered, could see ahead to the world-famous music school that would grow from the fledgling choir as the music director tapped them to attention that late summer morning in September 1926. A few years before, Dr. John Finley Williamson helped lay a cornerstone for his new church, Westminster Presbyterian of Dayton, Ohio. He had a clear vision that volunteer singers, with training by professional musicians, could best serve the church. The modest choral school he formed that day for his “Ministers of Music” would flourish for the next ninety years and ultimately become identified with a great Princeton landmark, the renowned Westminster Choir College.

### *The Ohio Years*

Gradually, Dr. Williamson gave his time over more and more to teaching and practicing music. Originally calling themselves the Dayton Westminster Choir, his volunteer group had been singing together even before the new church went up, and now began touring outside their own area. Under Dr. Williamson’s direction, his so-called “Westminster Choir” received considerable local recognition, and in 1928 gave what is believed to be the nation’s first coast-to-coast radio broadcast from Ohio station WLW with the Cincinnati Orchestra conducted by Fritz Reiner. Over the next few years, they would broadcast a total of sixty half-hour radio programs from NBC’s New York City facilities. Annual tours of the United States found them performing with prominent at Carnegie Hall (New York), Symphony Hall (Boston), the Academy of Music (Philadelphia), Orchestra Hall (Chicago), and even at the White House for President Calvin Coolidge in 1926. Their premiere commercial recording with RCA Victor issued that same year.

On the eve of the Great Depression towards the end of 1929, with their fame far outgrowing the bounds of Ohio, the Westminster Choir launched its first of many European tours with a kick-off concert in New York City's Carnegie Hall. Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony, endorsed the tour, which would include 26 concerts in major cities across the Continent, and Dayton philanthropist Katharine Hauk Talbott (1864-1934) as their sponsor. In later years, Dr. Williamson would often say that what later came to be known as Westminster Choir College would never have existed without the spiritual and financial support of Mrs. Talbott; she was the group's chief patron throughout her lifetime.

### *Becoming a School*

The Westminster Choir School had come into being when Dr. Williamson recruited a faculty of ten trained musicians and selected sixty promising students from the Dayton Choir for that original convocation of September 1926. The training method he practiced was unlike any other music school in the world. Whether the students chose to study piano, organ, conducting, composing or vocal performance, they were are required to sing daily in a choral ensemble. Originally, his educational plan was that of a three-year program leading to a certification of completion. But their success and popularity in public performances soon outgrew Dayton, and Dr. Williamson moved his new Choir School to what is now Ithaca College in New York State's Finger Lakes region. There the curriculum was enlarged to a four-year program culminating in a Bachelor of Music degree. However, this ambitious effort was defeated by the financial distress of the Depression. Another location would be needed.

But first---Dr. Williamson needs a more formal introduction. Encouraged by the famed St. Olaf Choir founder F. Melius Christiansen, encouraged Williamson in the very beginning in 1920 – 21 and encouraged Westminster Choir to tour. Dr. Williamson demanded perfection and committed singing, but never at the expense of an individual's unique timbre. Numerous arrangements and original

compositions owe their existence to his advocacy, and it is believed that most authorities on American choral music consider his place in history unassailable. *The New York Times* called Dr. Williamson “the dean of American choral conductors of the 20th century.” A complete catalog of his Williamson’s choir tours and broadcasts may be found in Joseph G. Beck, *America’s Choral Ambassador: John Finley Williamson* (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2014), pages 20-23; along with a discography of the Westminster Choir and an essay on “recordings as history” at pages 176-206. Beck has also reprinted 81 pages of Dr. Williamson’s own writings from *Étude* magazine on choral arts. Dr. Williamson died of the heart attack while conducting a choral festival at age 76 in Toledo Ohio.

### *The Princeton Connection*

The cornerstone-laying for the new Dayton church brought Presbyterian dignitaries from afar, including John G. Hibben, then the 14th President of Princeton University and himself an ordained Presbyterian minister. His friendship with Dr. Williamson lasted at least until 1932, when Hibben retired from the University, and presented more than one occasion for Hibben to introduce the choir-master to others among Princeton’s leading citizens, especially Jay Ross Stephenson, president of the Princeton Theological seminary. Charles R. Erdman, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church on Nassau Street in Princeton. Erdman, was also a member of the Seminary faculty, and was in addition the moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. At Erdman’s urging, a meeting had been arranged with Hon. A. Harry Moore, Governor of New Jersey, with a view to allow Dr. Williamson to settle his Choir School in the friendly Presbyterian locale of Princeton. The governor promised to obtain a New Jersey charter for the school, and the location halfway between the great musical centers of New York City and Philadelphia seemed perfect. Although the school would no longer be affiliated with any church and all agreed it should remain non-denominational, Dr. Williamson enthusiastically agreed to move his school to Princeton.

There had been another connection with Princeton as well. Ralph Adams Cram was the architect both of Princeton University's collegiate gothic chapel, designed in 1921 and built 1924-28, and of the Dayton Westminster Presbyterian Church, completed in 1926, the first home of the Westminster Choir. (While the Princeton Chapel was still under construction, the Dayton group presented the Princeton builders with a limestone ashlar that is now incorporated into the western portal of the Princeton Chapel, incised thus:)

SERVE THE LORD WITH GLADNESS  
COME BEFORE HIS PRESENCE WITH SINGING

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WESTMINSTER CHOIR COLLEGE

For the first two years, academic classes, as well as choir rehearsals, and piano and organ lessons, were held in the First Presbyterian Church and at the Princeton Seminary. Princeton University granted permission to use Alexander Hall for Westminster Choir concerts. Princeton University Chapel would also become the setting for Sunday Vespers, sung by all the students of the Choir School for many years.

Eager to help the Choir School settle at Princeton, the Presbyterian philanthropist Sophia Elizabeth Strong Taylor of Cleveland offered substantial funds on May 16, 1933, for the acquisition of property and for the construction of a new campus somewhere in Princeton. Tragically, on that day of much celebration for the new school, it also lost one of its earliest supporters when Princeton University President John G. Hibben was killed in an automobile accident in Union County.

### *Growing Ever Deeper Roots*

On July 7 of that year, the newly chartered Westminster Choir School purchased a tract of ten acres for the new campus from the estate of O.H. Howard on what is now Hamilton Avenue at the corner of Walnut Lane in northeastern Princeton Borough. Having chosen as their

architect Professor Sherley W. Morgan of the Princeton University's School of Architecture, now Professor Emeritus of Architecture, Dr. and Mrs. Rhea Parlette Williamson traveled to Morgan's summer home in Manchester, Vermont, to view his Georgian colonial plans for an administration building and two dormitories "with the aura of permanence." William R. Matthews Construction Company was engaged to carry out Morgan's plans. September 6, 1933 saw the groundbreaking ceremony, and in November Sophia Taylor made an additional gift to the school for the immediate construction of a chapel, including a commons area underneath, thereby completing a tree-lined Quadrangle. An Aeolian-Skinner pipe organ was installed in the new chapel, made by the just recently merged Skinner and Aeolian companies, and both were dedicated on March 29, 1934. Carl Weinrich, organist of the Choir School, played for the dedication; subsequently he would become organist for the Princeton University Chapel.

When all four of the new Georgian colonial buildings had been completed, the school moved into its new home later in 1934. Formal dedication of the new campus was marked by a performance of J.S. Bach's *Mass in B Minor* in the Princeton University Chapel with the Westminster Choir, soloists, and the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Leopold Stokowski. Because of his high regard for Dr. Williamson and the Choir School, the cost of this entire performance was a gift from Maestro Stokowski himself.

Earlier in 1934, as the new campus was under construction, the choir made its second European tour lasting nine weeks, the highlight of which was a live radio broadcast from Russia to the United States. Several news correspondents at the time observed that, in the few years since its founding at Dayton, the Choir had already earned international acclaim with two European tours and now had a beautiful campus of its own. For a while, this new institution was referred to under various names, including the Princeton Choir School. In 1939, the State of New Jersey granted the School accreditation, and the official name "Westminster Choir College" was formally adopted.

In years to come, the Choir would have regular concerts with the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra. The Westminster Choir sang with the New York Philharmonic for the first time in 1939, conducted by Sir John Barbirolli. Since then, they have sung over three hundred performances with the New York Philharmonic, a record number for a single choir to perform with any orchestra. Later that year, the Choir sang with the NBC Orchestra conducted by Arturo Toscanini. Sergei Rachmaninoff conducted the Choir with the Philadelphia Orchestra. The Westminster Choir, directed by Dr. Williamson himself, sang at the dedication of the 1939 New York World's Fair, with a volunteer orchestra of Princetonians including Albert Einstein on his violin. The performance was broadcast by shortwave to 53 countries around the world.

### *Academy Award Nomination*

In 1940, the Walt Disney film *Fantasia* featured the Westminster Choir singing Schubert's *Ave Maria* conducted by Leopold Stokowski. In 1944, Stokowski conducted them with famed contralto Marian Anderson in a short film for Christmas, to be shown to American military personnel stationed overseas. Later, the choir conducted by Toscanini, was featured with the NBC Symphony in the patriotic film, *Hymn of the Nations*. This film was nominated for a 1944 Academy Award for the best documentary.

In the following years, aided by the GI Bill, enrollment at the College increased and the choir reached even higher levels of national prominence. In 1955, when the Westminster Choir gave their 100th performance with the New York Philharmonic, *The New York Times* critic Howard Taubman wrote: "If the New York Philharmonic Symphony had not had the Westminster Choir College Symphonic Choir at his disposal in the last decade and a half, it might have had to go out and invent something like it." The following year, under the auspices of the U.S. State Department Cultural Exchange Program, the Choir undertook a five-month world tour, giving concerts in twenty-two countries, covering 40,000 miles and appearing before an estimated

quarter of a million people.

Dr. Williamson retired as President of Westminster Choir College in 1958. However, he continued to give choral clinics and seminars around the world. Most notably in 1959, the U.S. State Department asked him to organize a Westminster alumni choir to tour Africa. Called "The Westminster Singers from Princeton," their African tour consisted of performances in fifty cities in twenty-six countries with audiences totaling more than 250,000 people. Following that tour, many vocal teachers and choral conductors invited Dr. Williamson to preside over choral clinics and vocal festivals throughout the United States, Japan, Korea and the Philippines. A South American choir tour was being planned by the State Department but was canceled because of Dr. Williamson's untimely death on May 28, 1964.

In accordance with his own request, Dr. Williamson's ashes were scattered on the Quadrangle of his beloved campus. Dramatically, this ceremony occurred during a performance on July 3, 1964 of the Verdi *Requiem* by the Westminster Festival Choir, soloists, and the Festival Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy. This performance on the Westminster campus was part of the Tercentennial Celebration of the State of New Jersey. The following day a memorial service for Dr. Williamson was held in the Westminster College Chapel, Lee Hastings Bristol, Jr., officiating.

### *Growth in the Sixties*

William MacCalmont served as president from 1959 through 1961, followed by Lee Hastings Bristol, Jr., a Princeton businessman and amateur musician, who served until 1969. The College saw considerable growth during this decade, while Warren Martin as musical director kept the Choir's standards high. In 1964 Martin was followed as musical director by George Lynn, a graduate both of Princeton University and of Westminster. Lynn continued the collaboration with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. During the Martin/Lynn tenure, the Choir would perform with such conductors as Leonard

Bernstein, Bruno Walter, Guido Cantelli, Herbert von Karajan, Dimitri Metropolis, Kurt Masur, Seiji Ozawa, Erich Leinsdorf, Riccardo Muti, and Eugene Ormandy. Later the choir under Joseph Flummerfelt would receive numerous invitations over the years to sing with such touring orchestras as the Berlin Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Vienna Philharmonic, and the Royal Concertgebouw of Holland.

The stature of the College was still further bolstered during the Bristol years when the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools granted accreditation to the College during Lynn's administration, allowing the College for the first time to grant degrees in music education and adding a new dimension to its curriculum. In 1967, with the retirement of renowned Alexander McCurdy, head of the Organ Department, Bristol appointed Joan Lippincott as head of that department. She served until 1994, when she moved on to be the organist for the Princeton University Chapel.

The Bristol tenure also was responsible for the purchase of another 13 acres of land, extending the campus farther northwards along Walnut Lane, until the entire grounds, now a total of 23 acres, filled the rectangle bounded by Hamilton, Walnut, Linden Lane and Franklin Avenue. This expansion allowed the construction of new campus structures completed in 1968. The newest dormitory complex of three buildings has an underground passage connecting them which includes sixteen voice and piano practice rooms. Thirteen organ rooms for teaching and practice, plus a small recital hall with a three manual Casavant organ, also taking advantage of the underground quietude. Honoring the past, these three new buildings are named Dayton, Ithaca and Princeton. The Talbott Library and Learning Center, named for the college's earliest benefactor, opened in 1969. Altogether, these projects cost more than \$2 million. In 1969, Bristol retired, confident that he had accomplished what he had set out to do---to steady the College financially and to insure the future. In recognition of his stewardship, the College's Chapel was formally renamed Bristol Chapel.

## *The Robinson Years*

The long presidency of Ray Robinson, from 1969 to 1987, reinvigorated both the curriculum and the Library. Robinson reinstated a graduate program that had been temporarily suspended in 1967 in order to concentrate more resources on undergraduate programs. His administration also revitalized the church music department and created the Westminster Conservatory division in 1970. The Conservatory is the community music school of the College. Welcoming young musicians of all ages, skill levels, instrument preferences, and economic backgrounds, the Westminster Conservatory provides focused, one-on-one lessons in a local musical environment, and offers a wide range of classes and performing ensembles to engage every student, from the beginner to young maestros, regardless of age. Some classes are intended as an introduction to music and require no previous experience, while others are designed to complement private instruction. An “early childhood” department at Westminster specializes in bringing developmentally appropriate music instruction to children from birth to eight years of age. Particularly gifted students have the opportunity to join the Conservatory's honors program, which offers a comprehensive curriculum designed towards mastering total musicianship. The Westminster Conservatory of Music is a nationally recognized institution, maintaining active membership in the National Guild for Community Arts Education. The Conservatory joined the National Guild as a provisional member in 1983 and was granted full membership in 1986.

Construction of a student center for the College, now known as Scheide Hall, was made possible in 1969 by a gift from William H. Scheide, a Princeton University graduate and world-famous J.S. Bach scholar. His commitment to higher education reached far beyond his alma mater, in robust relationships with both Princeton Theological Seminary and Westminster Choir College, serving each of these institutions both as trustee and as generous benefactor. For 27 years, Scheide served on the board of Westminster Choir College, nine of those years as its chairman of the board. A frequent lecturer and internationally

recognized J.S. Bach scholar, Scheide proved his earnest belief in the mission of the College with his generous support. Later, in January 2007, to commemorate his own 93rd birthday, Scheide would sponsor a charitable concert to benefit the Choir College, with Mark Laycock conducting the Vienna Chamber Orchestra and the Westminster Symphony Choir before a packed audience in Princeton University's Alexander Hall.

Robinson also furthered the College's summer program. Since the groundbreaking of the Princeton campus, summer courses instituted by Dr. Williamson had helped the Choir College add to its prestige. Each summer students came from all parts of the United States to study at Westminster. The summer program continues to the present day, including such choral luminaries as Robert Shaw, Roger Wagner and Joe Miller, current director of choral activities.

Appointed in 1971 as music director and conductor of the Westminster Choirs, Joseph Flummerfelt directed his considerable energies to reaching out to musicians across the country. The number of national tours by the Westminster Choir increased actually, and concerts in New York and Philadelphia under his direction continued to garner high praise from audiences and critics both. Under Flummerfelt's guidance, the Westminster Choir was invited to be "chorus in residence" at the Spoleto Festival in Italy; the festival was later moved to the United States and is now known as the Spoleto Festival USA, located in Charleston, South Carolina. It thrives today, and Westminster Choir is the resident choir of the festival, now directed by Joe Miller.

In the summer of 1976, the College celebrated its fiftieth anniversary on the Princeton University campus, highlighted by a performance of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* by the Atlanta Symphony, the Westminster alumni soloists and alumni choir, all conducted by Robert Shaw. A 1982 television broadcast, *Live from Lincoln Center*, featured the Westminster Symphonic Choir and the New York Philharmonic performing the Verdi *Requiem*, conducted by Zubin Mehta.

Ray Robinson resigned 1987 as president, to take a two-year faculty residency in Cambridge, England. William Fuller, a 1950 graduate of Westminster, became its fifth president in 1988. Maintenance issues related to the campus buildings and a temporarily declining enrollment had adverse impacts on the College. Perhaps due to distress over these difficulties, Fuller retired in 1990. Like most temporary challenges, these too passed.

Succeeding administrations have been able to expand the core programs still further and have also increased the student enrollment of the College, until today there are at least 440 full-time U.S. and international students enrolled, the highest peak since the school's founding. Robert Annis became the new dean of the College and its director in 1994, and it was hoped the Choir College would continue to grow until his planned retirement. More recently, an ambitious building program made possible by two very large private bequests to the College has added both the renovated "Playhouse" and the Henry L.Hillman Performance Hall to the campus's major structures, together constituting the Marion Buckelew Cullen Center. These handsome structures were dedicated and opened for student use in September 2014.

### *How Could It Come to This?*

After much discussion, the Westminster trustees decided, in June 1991, to seek an affiliation with another body for financial stability, and announced their intent to merge with Rider College of Lawrenceville, New Jersey. The merger was made official in 1992. In March 1994, Rider College was designated a "teaching university," and the Choir College, despite its New Jersey charter of long standing, took the new name Westminster Choir College of Rider University. (Recent presidents of Rider have been Mordechai Rozanski until 2015 and Gregory G. Dell'Omo through the present.) Unfortunately, Rider University in 2016, after several years of its own falling enrollment, is now running at a deficit that is projected to amount to \$13.1 million by 2019. Rider University's board of trustees, desperate now to save their own financial

plight, has announced it is contemplating selling the historic Princeton campus of Westminster Choir College and moving everyone---the whole choir school, students and all---to their main campus on U.S. Route 206 in Lawrenceville, a bland campus with no facilities for piano, voice and choral rehearsals facilities, comprised of approximate (5,500 students?) in business administration, education, liberal arts, sciences, counseling, and leadership. A number of unofficial disclosures from sources familiar with Rider's finances indicate the Rider's deficits are not being caused by Westminster Choir College.

Alumni faculty and staff of Westminster have expressed strong opposition to Rider sell-off proposal. Many feel that the proposal would destroy the qualities and opportunities that only the Princeton campus can give. Many worry that Westminster's highly disciplined and music-focused culture would clash with Rider's more traditional college environment and greatly diminish the Choir College's prestige. They also point out that it would cost an estimated \$80 million to \$100 million to relocate Westminster to Lawrenceville, much more than Rider could possibly gain from the sale of the 23 acres of land and college buildings that now stand in Princeton.

A group of alumni and friends of the College, calling themselves the "Coalition to Save Westminster Choir College," met on January 5, 2017, in the Princeton Municipal Building to discuss the feasibility of obtaining official landmark status for the campus and its historic buildings. Some noted that such an effort should have been made long ago, but that if nothing else, it could make the campus more difficult to sell and certainly draw more public attention to the injustice they foresaw if the College were forced to move. They appeared before the township's Historic Preservation Commission, which could, absent objections, recommend historic designation to the Princeton Town Council, which will have final approval.

In 2016, Westminster Choir College celebrated its 90th anniversary in its historic Princeton home. For all those who love the choral arts, the accomplishments of Dr. Williamson are legendary. He was born in the 19th century, was a major influence in the field of choral singing in the 20th century, and inspired not only the College he founded but also the practice of the music he loved by those who come after him---and who will come after us---in the 21st century. The monuments he helped to build here are as much a part of his legacy as the music he taught us to sing and to love.

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### *Postscript*

In 2016-17, in response to Rider University's intent to separate from its responsibilities to the Westminster Choir College, a group of prominent alumni, former and present faculty, friends and donors of the college formed a corporation in the State of New Jersey named the *Westminster Foundation of Princeton New Jersey, Inc.* Its mission is to ensure continued existence and support of the Westminster Choir College as an independent musical institution in its present home of Princeton, New Jersey. The Foundation is committed to protecting Westminster's future and preserving its legacy. This distinguished group will lead the Foundation in its initial stages. Complete information is available on its website, which includes valuable information about the Foundation, its mission, and ways in which you can help support its endeavors. [www.westminsterfoundationprinceton.org](http://www.westminsterfoundationprinceton.org)

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