

# Walter Downes: A Life in Music



*Walter Downes singing in the PS Canadian Legends concert, February 2020*

"Throughout his life, music was Walter's passion," says Kathryn, Walter's wife of sixty-one years.

From singing to playing the organ and the piano, music was always a central part of Walter's life. He particularly loved choral music, singing in various choirs, as well as directing a few. One of his great loves was to attend choral services in the great stone cathedrals of England whenever we were visiting. Especially in the last year of his life, listening to classical music gave Walter much joy and peace.

Walter, who passed away on January 25, 2023, at the age of ninety, was a founding member and keen supporter of the Peterborough Singers. He sang bass with the choir beginning in the early 1990s, when the fledgling group of choristers was known as the Peterborough Symphony Singers, and only ended his time as a chorister in February 2020, just after the concert pictured above. And he served on the board of directors and as a sponsor and donor.



*The Peterborough Singers, circa 2003. Walter is sixth from the left in the back row.*

As is the story for many Peterborough Singers, Walter came from a musical household. His father sang in Peterborough's All Saints' Anglican Church choir, and his mother "played the piano beautifully." He and his sisters had music lessons as children, with Walter finding the

perfect piano teacher in Eveline Foster, who was inducted into the Peterborough and District Pathway of Fame in 2002. Walter recalls in his memoirs that she taught him chording and both classical and modern pieces, which makes sense as Mrs. Foster, as she was known locally, had worked professionally in Peterborough's early motion-picture theatres playing both violin and piano — so she loved all types of music.

In his early years, Walter also joined the All Saints' Church choir, which he left after starting high school. But the All Saints' connection became important to him during his teen years. "I had stopped music lessons early in high school but continued playing the piano for my own pleasure," Walter writes. "I also played for worship services at All Saints' Church Young People's meetings." During one of these meetings, Norman Hurrle, the organist and choirmaster at the church, overheard Walter and, being mightily impressed, offered the young man free organ lessons for a year if, at the end of that time, Walter would agree to take over Hurrle's duties during his sabbatical year. Thus began Walter's love of the organ — and some pretty impressive successes too!



*Walter and fellow organists prepare for "Peterborough's second annual hymn sing," circa 1958. Waler is standing at the back in the middle.*

By early 1958, Walter had passed both his Grade 8 organ and theory examinations—with First Class Honours. In August of that year, he received notification that the mark he had received for Grade VIII Organ was the highest in Ontario. And by that fall, he had begun his year-long tenure as All Saints' organist and choirmaster, directing not only the adult choir but also the 30-member boys' choir, which had reached a very high standard. Walter was about twenty-six. Oh, along the way, he also won first prize for organ at both

the eleventh and the twelfth Peterborough Kiwanis Annual Music Festivals, in March of 1957 and 1958, respectively. (For those who want to know, Walter played for his examination a "Bach Prelude and Fugue . . . the fugue was well played — the part playing clear," a "Mendelssohn piece" that was "effectively handled," and a "Willan piece" that "'came off' well." The examiner's remarks seem a bit tame for a best-in-the-province performance; I wonder whether examiners are still so effusive today!)

And what of choral singing? you ask. Walter took this up again in the summer of 1959, when he took a two-week course from the Royal School of Church Music at Chichester Cathedral in England. Walter made lifelong friends there: Ralph Chapman and Richard Swift. Walter was “a special, mature guest” at the “course for young men and boys,” recalls Ralph, then seventeen. And “soon a little group of friends formed,” comprised mainly of grammar school boys, those in state-funded schools, notes Ralph. “I complimented Walter on lining up with more ‘normal’ individuals, and this he found intriguing.” Here are Ralph’s recollections of that important time:

The two-week course was unrelenting, with new music every day and three services on the Sundays; just two days were “free,” on the second of which I joined my family, who had just arrived on holiday. This day preceded the last service of the course, which was to be broadcast on national radio. . . . I toasted myself on the beach, only to later suffer from severe sunstroke. Back in the dormitory, I was very ill. . . . Walter came to my aid, somehow managing to keep me going, kindly bringing fruit in for me and not letting others know I was ill — he knew I was desperate to perform in the broadcast. I still have the BBC vinyl record of the service and will never forget his kindnesses towards me.

Typical Walter: he susses out exactly what is needed and helps provide that very thing, without fanfare and often behind the scenes.

Walter enjoyed “cathedral” singing so much that he jumped at the chance to join Toronto’s Grace Church on-the-Hill choir, which “was looking for four extra counter-tenors for its upcoming two-week singing engagement in Westminster Abbey ... in the summer of 1960.” Did I mention that Walter sang counter-tenor at this time? Throughout the winter and spring of 1959/60, Walter took a train to Toronto every Saturday for rehearsals.



*Walter, in the middle again, of a group wearing Grace Church on-the-Hill choir blazers, circa 1960*

In April 1959, the Grace Church choir sang evensong at All Saints’ Church, a practice run, perhaps. An article in the *Peterborough Examiner* notes that “the choir gave an object lesson in choral singing: distinctive for its balance, shading, and beautiful blend of sound.” After the two weeks of services at the abbey, the choir

gave evensong at York Minster Cathedral and travelled through the Lake District to sing once again at St. Mary’s Cathedral as part of the Edinburgh Festival. Perhaps Walter was the first nascent Peterborough Singer to sing at York Minster!

But it was the Westminster experience that Walter remembers. “Singing in the abbey, with all its royal and historical associations and traditions, was a great thrill,” he writes.



*Grace Church on-the Hill choir in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey, London, August 1960. Walter is the tall one with glasses near the back of the line on the left.*

In the fall of 1960, after he had settled in Kingston, he joined the St. George's Cathedral choir, still as a counter-tenor. As Kathryn recalls, the excellence of the choirs in Kingston was one reason Walter chose to teach there. But all this singing in different cities — Peterborough, Kingston, Toronto — made for a hectic schedule, especially before Kathryn and Walter married in 1961 and settled into their lives as a couple in Kingston, where Walter was the principal of Lord Strathcona School and Kathryn taught grade 4 at Kingscourt. Still Walter travelled, for both education—Walter didn't stop until he earned his doctorate—and music.

And the renowned St. George's Cathedral choir travelled extensively too. In 1964, it was invited to Washington, DC, to sing a memorial service for President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, with anthems by Maurice Greene ("Lord, let me know mine end"), Hubert Parry ("My Soul, there is a country"), and Henry Purcell ("O God, Thou art my God"). The service was televised coast to coast from the Washington National Cathedral on Sunday, November 22, 1964, the one-year anniversary of Kennedy's assassination. Also offered on that solemn evening was the motet *Take Him Earth for Cherishing*, which Herbert Howells was asked to compose for the joint Canadian-American memorial service.



*The National Cathedral, Washington, DC*

By all accounts, the 40+-voice, all-male choir had a busy time. The bus left Kingston early Friday morning and (after rehearsal, of course) enjoyed a private tour of the White House, a conducted bus tour of the capital, and a visit to Arlington Cemetery, as well as a dinner put on by the Canadian Embassy. And that was only Saturday! After the 4 pm memorial service on Sunday, the choir was entertained with dinner at the

National Gallery, prior to giving an evening recital there for the Washington Diplomatic Corps. Then it was back on the bus.

Although this might have been the most memorable of Walter's experiences with St. George's Cathedral choir, it was not his only away gig. The choir was a regular on the "Cathedral Concert Series" tour, according to *Advance News* out of Ogdensburg, NY, singing at St Mary's Cathedral in that city at least twice. And Walter notes that the group sang in Boston several times, as well as all around "Southern Ontario and Upper New York State."

Of course, this was not Walter's only choir in Kingston. He also performed with the Cecilian Consort, a madrigal group of eleven or so singers that made its CBC debut in Ottawa in November of 1963, singing to a "standing-room-only audience" at the National Gallery.



According to Laretta Thistle of the *Ottawa Citizen*, "The Kingston group chooses its repertory with taste and sings with a high degree of sophistication. Since it boasts countertenors, too, it has a great deal to offer." Way to go Walter!

*Walter (to the far right) and the men of the Peterborough Pop Ensemble, 2008*

Walter's love of close harmonies, small-group singing, and all types of music, from classical to pops, had him leaping at the chance to join the Peterborough Pop Ensemble, initially

established as a small group within the Peterborough Singers. He was a member, under the baton of the incomparable Barb Monahan, from 2002 to 2008.

But this story ignores one of Walter's other musical endeavours—choral conducting—and another source of his travels, according to Kathryn. In 1978, Judy Wells and Carolyn Kitchen approached Walter for help in forming a women's choir, there being no female adult choirs other than church choirs in the city. Here is Walter's description of his response to this "ask":

With some trepidation, as I wasn't convinced of my skills as a choir conductor, I consented, and fourteen ladies came to the first practice in November of that year on the top floor of the former Teachers' College. The choir very quickly grew to about thirty members and combined with the Bonachords Men's Chorus for a concert each spring, a tradition that continues. The choir chose as its name "The Jubilaires."

Walter had no need to worry about his ability as a conductor. Under his direction, The Jubilaires excelled, winning high marks for its rendition of "She's Like the Swallow" in the Kiwanis Music Festival of 1980 and walking away with the Allen Trophy for the best choir of that year. Walter continued as conductor until he and his family began their year in England in 1982.



*Walter and the Jubilaires in their winning year, 1980*

Of course these highlights form only the tip of the iceberg. Walter's career in education also saw him contributing musically, as Master in Psychology and Music at Ottawa Teachers' College and as Master of Music, School Management and Administration, and Social Studies at Peterborough Teachers' College. And, knowing Walter, I am sure he supported many music students unobtrusively or at least taking a back seat. A quick look through newspaper clippings hints that he played that sort of role. For example, while Walter was a principal in Kingston, he found the time to be an accompanist when the Kingston Collegiate and Vocational School performed Gilbert & Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* in 1961. I wonder how many other individuals and groups he "helped out" with his talents.

Two things are clear. First, Walter was remarkably true to himself, following his passion for both education and music until the end of his life. And finally, because of this integrity, Walter will be truly missed.



*Walter teaches the next generation of musicians.*

*Written by Karen Taylor*