

## WALTER CUTTINO: A MEMOIR

Walter Cuttino served as musical director of The Palmetto Mastersingers from 1996 to 2016. With him we made a lot of music, and we cherish so many memories.

With Walter we sang, literally, all over the world: Germany, France, Russia, China, and Canada. We sang for Mass at the Vatican in Rome and also at the Notre Dame in Paris. We performed at the Dom in Cologne, on a cruise ship on the St. Lawrence Seaway, at the Air Force and World War II Memorials in Washington, and at the White House.

On our 2001 trip to Germany, we sang at the *Johanneskirche* in the city of Rheydt. During Walter's earlier tenure as an opera singer in Europe, he served as choir director at this church. When we got off the bus, his former parishioners greeted him with hugs, and they applauded as we entered the church and for a long time after we left. Their love for Walter was apparent. And it was definitely an advantage to have someone fluent in German leading this trip!

Walter produced three CDs of our music. He insisted that the first be of sacred music, and we recorded "Sing Me to Heaven" at the University of South Carolina School of Music. On "Under the Boardwalk," he sang the lead on "Carolina Girls." His poignant rendition of "One For My Baby" on "One More for the Road" had personal significance to him. Frank Sinatra recorded this song, but honestly, when you compare them, Walter's version is better.

While Walter made the chorus front and center during our concerts, he also shared his marvelous tenor voice on some selections. I got goosebumps when he sang the lines, "Let my people go" in Moses Hogan's "Go Down Moses." He soloed on "Maria" for our "South of the Border" concert in 2009. He was part of the small group that sang the be-bop classic, "The Longest Time."

And Walter loved to joke around! He frequently interrupted our rehearsals with the telling of some tale, perilously close to off-color and not quite politically correct. For our Christmas concert in 2003, he wrote and performed "A Baby Boomer's Salute to Christmas," followed a few years later by a parody, "Night Before Christmas Rap." To our dismay, these numbers persist even to this day on YouTube.

Walter was always gracious in recognizing our accompanists, first Sharon Rattray and then Allison Hilbish (sisters!), and their talents complemented each other.

Walter had a great relationship with fellow School of Music faculty member Dick Goodwin, and Goodwin's Big Band was a fixture at our spring concert for several years. Goodwin put together some of our favorite medleys, including "Mastersingers Hit The Road" and a compilation of Beatles songs.

The 2015 concert at Piccolo Spoleto in Charleston, at the Circular Congregational Church, was one of the most memorable under Walter's direction. He sang the lead on "Ride the Chariot," and as the audience applauded, he joked, "It's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it." We had been told by the organizers that there would not be time for an encore, so we didn't prepare one. But the standing-room-only crowd simply refused to stop applauding. I went up to Walter and said, "Let's just ask them to join with us in the National Anthem." Allison gave us the pitch, Walter said "I love Charleston," and we had a wonderful moment with an appreciative audience.

Walter died on April 25, 2021. We had a marvelous twenty years with Walter, and we will always cherish the good times we had and the good music we made. Not only was Walter a great musician, but he was a great friend. Tenor Benj Cliatt, who has known Walter since college, summed it up well when he said, "Walter is assisting Dr. Daraz (our founder) and soloing in the eternal choir. Great sorrow, even greater joy!"

Charles Hill

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