

An Oral History of Choral Success: The Don Wright Chorus and the Earle Terry Singers

Patricia Skidmore

In the 1950's two London, Ontario, community choirs achieved unprecedented success. Widely known across Canada and beyond were, from 1946 to 1956, the Don Wright Chorus and subsequently, from 1948 to the 1970's, the Earle Terry Singers. Between 1946 and 1969 throughout North America, listeners tuned their radios to a network station weekly to hear one of these London choirs and praised the original arrangements and skilled voices. As a result of the broadcasts, the Don Wright Singers inspired the Tabernacle Choir of Utah and the Earle Terry Singers represented Canada in Europe and the United States, toured extensively, presented countless live concerts, did frequent television "specials" and made recordings. That two such choirs should originate virtually simultaneously and quite independently in one small city arouses the historian's curiosity¹.

Several original members were willing to record memories about both choirs², and Conductor Don Wright, an active octogenarian, cooperated in a lengthy interview in search of the factors that account for this unusual choral moment³. Their contributions make it possible to depict the foundations of two voluntary community adult arts organizations nearly half a century ago. Verification and supplementary information came from contemporary newspaper coverage, especially in

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1. Other Canadian choirs performing at this time included the Bach-Elgar Choir of Hamilton, the Mendelssohn Choir and the Leslie Bell Singers of Toronto, and the Elizabethan Singers of Stratford. These and other prominent choirs of the era have markedly different histories yet to be told in detail.
 2. Original tapes and full transcripts of interviews for this project are deposited in the archives of Brescia College, affiliate of University of Western Ontario, in London, Ontario.
 3. Conductor Earle Terry and wife May were unavailable for interviews due to failing health. Mr. Terry died on March 10, 1999, in London, Ontario.

the *London Free Press*, memorabilia such as programmes and photographs housed in the London Public Library and at the University of Western Ontario Regional Collection, and several Canadian reference sources.

Analysis of the interview material gathered by the author between Spring, 1996, and early 1999 along with relevant printed sources reveals that three factors were fundamental to the choral success of the Don Wright Singers and the Earle Terry Singers. First is the dynamism, musical knowledge and “networking” skills of the founding conductors; these are the men after whom the choirs were named. Second is the remarkable presence, in the crucial years, of media attention and London community support. Finally, in both organizations, the singers exuded an ethos of commitment, loyalty, and dedication to task, ensuring that the choirs would achieve unusual success.

This article will examine the two choirs separately and take up each factor in turn, relying on transcriptions of interview material and supplementary archival and published sources. Although the perspectives of those interviewed differed, each contributor provided lively accounts and meaningful details that pointed toward the reasons for their choirs' success. Their memories of Wright and Terry, their examples of community backing, and their unabashed fondness for their choir work stand out and make the achievement understandable.

The Don Wright Chorus

Settling into an interview with Don Wright at his Toronto home in July of 1996, I felt I ought to be making a life history of this pioneer in music education⁴. Wright exuded the energy and revealed the innovative mind that gave rise to the Don Wright Chorus in 1946 and many other achievements. Born in 1908 in Strathroy, Ontario, he became Director of Music for London schools, worked in radio and television in Toronto, composed and arranged for nationwide TV and films, won awards ranging from athletics to education, wrote books and endowed scholar-

4. The merits of life-histories are explored in Stephen Caunce, *Oral History and the Local Historian*, New York, Longmans, 1994, pp. 27 - 33.

ships⁵. Nonetheless, a defined focus was necessary in order to record Wright's observations about the reasons for the Chorus' impressive achievement in choral history⁶. After recording his summary of years as a child cellist, a family orchestra leader, a university band leader, and a school music teacher, I asked:⁷

What gave you the idea to create the Chorus in 1946-7, and how did you find the singers? It looks from news articles like you did it almost instantly?

Don Wright: *...I got to CFPL [radio] as Manager; Walter [Blackburn, owner of the London private station] talked me into it. Walter and I were close friends and he had seen all the Wright Brothers Orchestra and the University of Western Ontario Band and that sort of stuff....CFPL was rated [poorly] because they didn't do anything for development of talent.*

I decided that the best thing to do, because of the success with the Beck Collegiate choir⁸, was to do a chorus, called "The CFPL Chorus." So I auditioned hundreds of people to get the sound that I wanted.

Wright's long musical experience served him well as he constructed what would soon be known as the Don Wright Chorus. After years of arranging music for his family's orchestra and teaching choral music to secondary school students, he had firm ideas. He located a pianist and an organist who could improvise. To begin, he created new arrangements akin to those he had used as a teacher, with accessible harmonies, using a "plain ordinary major chord, [which] sounds beautiful if you hang onto it and "ooo" and "aah" and crescendo. [Singers] loved the sound, the enjoyment of getting a beautiful sound." Next, he auditioned singers for his CFPL chorus:

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5. "Wright, Don," *Canadian Who's Who*, University of Toronto, 1995, p. 1281 and "Wright, Don" *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 2nd ed., ed. H. Kallmann, G. Potvin, K. Winters, University of Toronto, 1992, p. 1425.
 6. Alistair Thomson, "Fifty Years On: an International Perspective on Oral History," *The Journal of American History*, September, 1998, p. 587.
 7. Don Wright, Toronto, Ont., July 23, 1996.
 8. In addition to coaching athletics and teaching Latin at London's Sir Adam Beck Collegiate, Wright, a 1908 native of Strathroy, Ont., taught music at Beck from 1934 to 1940. He built the Glee Club by writing arrangements for it, "never asking them to do what they couldn't do. You get their range, write within the capabilities of those singers....That's where it all began." He then served as Director of Music for the London Board until 1946.

Wright: *I didn't want a professional sound. I wanted people to blend. All the same types of voices. So I auditioned and auditioned until I found the sound of the voices that I wanted. I got myself 4 sopranos, 3 altos, 3 tenors and 4 bases -- that's all.*

Assembled by Wright, The CFPL Chorus began singing in January, 1947, as one of many radio entertainment groups fostered by the station. "It was a local show, and it was pretty darn good," Wright recalls. As CFPL's programme manager, Wright eventually "discovered" Tommy Hunter, Max Ferguson and others who went on to national prominence. The Chorus ascended beyond the local scene first, due to a serendipitous opportunity. Wright remembered the 1947 chance development this way:

There was a funeral in London. Bud Walker of the CBC Dominion network knew him, so ...some people from CBC Toronto came down and they heard the Chorus. We were rehearsing in Studio One when they poked their heads in. "Hi, Don, how are you?" They listened to it and said, "Hey, let's put that, just for the chance, on the ... network. We're gonna just try that." So, in 1948 they put it on the Trans-Canada network and the reaction was good, really good.

Factor in Wright's energetic talent, a key factor. As it began to broadcast nationally, the Chorus changed its name and its style. Wright says:

I realized then that I couldn't still do [simple] stuff. I had to find something that would give it a flavour -- to take familiar songs and do unusual arrangements of them. So I got the Cole Porter and the standard songs everybody would know, but that you had never heard chorally. And I wrote unusual arrangements for them.

These "unusual arrangements" became a Don Wright Chorus trademark, contributing to its fame. Experienced Chorus singers could mentally sing Wright's chord progressions in advance. London musician J. Alex Clark, accompanist for the Chorus from 1953, recalled in an interview that other, later musicians' arranging styles were linked to Wright's. "I think you can tell a Don Wright arrangement when you hear one," he said⁹. Wright's technique grew out of his thorough knowledge of "modern" music. His jazz orchestra years and his brief arranging work for London voice teacher Keith MacDonald's student choir gave him what he calls

this peculiar style [music] that is easy but sounds good... has maybe funny chords every once in awhile, with big chords and changing the

9. J. Alex Clark, London, Ont., July 31, 1996.

standard chord progressions that you would have in a hymnal to something that was more of the modern thing, maybe jazz.

Wright's arrangements, broadcast live from London by the newly named Don Wright Chorus, were well received across Canada. His was the first London programme to reach the network¹⁰. The CBC management in Toronto called to ask if Wright could increase his programme from 15 minutes to 30, doubling his "unusual arrangements" from 9 numbers each week to 18. If so, they would put the London programme by the CFPL Chorus on the Mutual broadcasting service. There, it would be heard across North America, via some 500 stations.

As 1949 began, Wright plunged in, writing new arrangements at lightening speed week after week. The choir sang on the NBC and CBC radio all of this year. Wright recalls that letters of appreciation came quickly, by the hundreds. The Don Wright Chorus was on the air with annual series contracts continuously until 1956¹¹. For part of this time, the early fifties, it was sponsored by Westinghouse Canada. The modest income went to Chorus expenses¹².

The Chorus would rehearse until they were confident, and then broadcast from Studio A at CFPL in London to all of North America on Sunday nights. Wright's wife Lillian¹³ was the producer of these broadcasts, drawing on her musical training as an accompanist and developing a keen sense of sound production. Wright recalls:

She produced the whole gol' darn show. She had a great feeling for sound and she worked on microphones...to get out of 14 voices the sound of [a grand] choir, with the different types [and placements] of microphones.

The Don Wright Chorus succeeded in large measure due to Wright's talent, innovative imagination and unflagging energy. But a part of the success was also due to the strong backing he received in his community. This backing came from the radio, the newspaper and the public at large.

For ten years, London's CFPL radio station carried the Don Wright Chorus as a regular programme into thousands of local homes and sent it

10. *London Free Press*, March 14, 1956.

11. *London Free Press*, Oct. 20, 1990.

12. "The Neighbors Who Sing for Canada," *Maclean's Magazine*, March 1, 1953, p. 44.

13. Lillian Mary Laura Meighen married Wright in 1935. They had 3 children, one of whom, Priscilla, became a teen pop star in her own right, singing Wright's arrangements, and continues to sing jazz professionally.

out to North America over the Mutual broadcasting network¹⁴. CFPL also featured his occasional "specials." During each half hour broadcast, using a basic format of Wright's, the Chorus opened with its theme, "When Music Sounds," which Wright composed to fit the words of a Walter de la Mare poem. Then came a variety of ballads, standards, waltzes, hymns, and pop favourites, but no song was repeated in a given year. Wright arranged the Chorus' music so that the keyboard instruments would cover the breathing and provide support and rhythm. He moved each of the programmes along by using his set of "devices" such as fading by the Chorus or subtle modulation by the organ, bell notes, bridges, and "teaser" announcements for the next week. Each show had a theme (imagination, memories, travel, winter, a decade, a holiday.)

Wright and his Chorus had the run of the studio as they prepared and practised on Sundays. He conceived, programmed, scripted and arranged everything. The station provided equipment, plenty of advertising, technical expertise and connections to other station executives and network management personnel, including those at CBC headquarters. The latter contact was immeasurably important in the ascent of the Don Wright Chorus. For example, in 1952 the *CBC Times* ran an article about London, Ontario, which featured the Chorus along with the Earle Terry Singers¹⁵. The author asserted that "the Don Wright Chorus was encouraged and sustained by private and national radio, working closely together."

The station and the Chorus helped each other to reach a wide audience. This was during the golden era of radio, when three fourths of Canadian families listened regularly to favourites and someone in these families listened to speciality programmes--sports, drama, music¹⁶. The

14. "The Whole Country Looks to London, Ontario," *CBC Times*, March 23-29, 1952, p. 2.

15. "The Whole Country Looks to London, Ontario" *CBC Times*, March, 1952, pp. 2-3.

16. Mary Vipond, *The Mass Media in Canada*, Toronto, Lorimer, 1989; Mary Vipond, *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting 1922-32*, McGill-Queens University Press, 1969.

Don Wright Chorus was a perfect fit. Listeners' reactions, preserved by Wright among his personal files, included the following:¹⁷

Gordon Sinclair, Toronto radio columnist: Well drilled and very versatile ... a sparkling program.

D. J. Williams, St. Catharines, Ont., music critic: One of the finest choral groups in this ... country - exceptional arrangements - refreshing, dazzling tone colours - infinite precision and flexibility.

National print media gave important coverage as well. In March of 1953, *Maclean's Magazine* ran a four-page article on the Don Wright Singers entitled, "The Neighbours Who Sing for Canada"¹⁸. By photos and anecdotes, Don Wright and his singers were depicted as dedicated vocal musicians with a lively approach to broadcasting and a consistent perfectionism. *Maclean's* readers were encouraged to listen in and discover fine entertainment. Responses such as this from the local and larger community caused CFPL to renew the Don Wright Chorus programme repeatedly (until, as Wright explained in our interview, "television came along and took the budgets out of network radio.")

The *London Free Press* gave support to the Chorus in several ways, not unrelated to the fact that it owned CFPL Radio¹⁹. When the Chorus presented a public programme, it was well reported. Wright's personal achievements were similarly documented throughout his career²⁰. Typical of London newspaper feature stories about the Chorus was one entitled "Music Lovers Make Trip...to Hear, See Don Wright Chorus Sing"²¹, explaining that one David Hughes, a music teacher in Illinois, had come to London just to "see and hear the artists perform in person." Hughes explained that he listened on Chicago's WGN, recording the music to use in his teaching. He offered one clue to the Chorus'

17. Don Wright Productions, "Listeners' Reaction," unpublished typescript, n.d. Wright's personal file items about the Chorus were copied and placed in the Brescia College archives at London, Ontario, where the writer teaches oral history. Particularly useful is his "The Don Wright Chorus" containing several pages of description and points of interest. The archives also received cassettes of Chorus radio broadcasts of 1954, 1955, and 1956.

18. March 1, 1953, pp. 22-23, 42, 44.

19. For a discussion of such connections, see Frank W. Peers, *The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting, 1920-1951*, University of Toronto Press, 1969.

20. "Natural Track Man Leads Five Inductees into Hall of Fame", *The London Free Press*, Oct. 20, 1990.

21. *The Free Press*, April 25, 1949, p. 8.

popularity: "Their brand of singing is invaluable in teaching *enjoyment* of music," he said.

Wright's personal abilities created a unique Chorus, and his community, particularly the London media, gave it exposure. The final component which lay beneath their success was the long term commitment of the choristers. The fourteen singers were amateurs, working regular jobs and maintaining family life. They included a stenographer and a receptionist, salesmen, teachers, housewives, and people working in transport, mining and advertising. The only fully trained members of the Chorus were organists Max Magee (to 1952) and Alex Clark (1953-56) and pianist Marion McLellan, professional music educator in London. In the interview, Wright was quick to pay tribute to the singers:

The voices did practically everything: moving parts, fills, etc. Very different from the usual chorus show.

He recalled watching them responding to directions as they produced their special sound by changing tone or colour, abruptly changing tempo or key, moving through unusual progressions or surprising dynamics.

Essentially the 14 members stayed with the Chorus until it disbanded. Mostly without extensive training, they loved to sing and had exceptionally rich voices. Their Sundays were given over to a three hour studio rehearsal and then the broadcast. Two midweek rehearsals lasted some three hours each, "long, intense rehearsals to get the music ready for broadcast," remembered accompanist Alex Clark's wife, Joan, who became a singer in 1953²² Most of their work went into the weekly show, although they recorded commercials for radio use as well.

In an interview filled with warmth, Ruth Casler recalled the closeness of the singers²³.

We were all thrilled to be a part of it. The singers had a wonderful, wonderful relationship -- like a family. Through the years, we got married, had babies, shared family experiences. [The Chorus members] spent a lot of extra time with each other, at parties and gatherings. We'd go to each others' houses.

In the years since Don Wright's 1956 move to Toronto, the Chorus members marked special occasions with him, such as his honorary

22. J. Alex Clark, London, Ont., Jan. 8, 1999.

23. Ruth Casler, London, Ont., Jan. 9, 1999.

degree from University of Western Ontario in 1988 and his Distinguished Service Award from the Ontario Choral Federation in 1996. They share a sincere admiration of Wright's talent and character. Ruth Casler and many others of the Chorus have continued their friendships some forty years, proof of the strong bonds that lay beneath the sound of the Don Wright Chorus. Without these bonds and the shared commitment to the Chorus, it is unlikely that the singers would have persevered through long rehearsals over many years, mastering Wright's distinctive arrangements and earning the appreciation that translated into community support.

The Earle Terry Singers

A different kind of choir, but equally famous and successful, was the Earle Terry Singers of London, active from 1947 to 1978. Five of the Singers agreed to interviews and proved to have extensive and insightful observations; one shared her archival collection and recordings. Through these interviews, it became clear that the factors that explain the Earle Terry Singers' success are remarkably similar to those discussed above: a dynamic conductor, unusual community support, and absolute dedication on the part of the singers. Unlike the Wright group, which was essentially a broadcast choir that did occasional public appearances, the Earle Terry Singers was a performance choir. In addition to annual major Christmas festivals remembered by Londoners to this day, in the 1950's the Singers performed countless concerts in outlying Ontario towns and cities, made two recordings, and toured in the Maritimes, Montreal, Ottawa, several cities in the United States, and in Europe. Alongside all of this, they broadcast network radio series for many years and TV shows from CFPL in London.

Conductor Earle Terry's drive and resourcefulness shaped the choir from the very beginning. Longtime member Margaret MacDonald of Waterloo, Ontario, is currently assembling a history of the choir, tentatively titled " 'We Never Walked Alone:' A History of the Earle Terry Singers." She agreed to share her knowledge and when I arrived for our day-long interview, MacDonald ushered me into a study filled with thirty years of memorabilia, singers' personal scrapbooks, programmes, photos, etc. After briefly outlining the Singers' history,

which peaked in the middle years from 1951 to 1964, she talked about Conductor Earle Terry.²⁴

MacDonald: *It was Mr. Terry. He organized everything, really. He had a lot of contacts in London and throughout Canada....He is a very affable person. To know him is to love him. He is very warm and friendly. People just want to bend over backwards and do things for him....He was just really great. He managed it. He just did it all.*

Like Wright, Terry began his career as an educator²⁵. He taught school first in New Toronto while using his training as a pianist and organist to direct a local church choir²⁶. Discovering he loved choral music, Terry took formal training under Peter Wilhousky, Choral Assistant to Toscanini in New York, and with Dr. K. Fricker, conductor of the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir²⁷. He moved to London from Toronto in 1947 to begin his thirty year career as Director of Music for the London Board of Education, replacing Don Wright who had moved to management at CFPL. (In addition, Terry taught choral music at the University of Western Ontario from 1951 to 1981, directed the music of New St. James Presbyterian Church, conducted the Western Ontario Conservatory Choir (1953-68) and adjudicated music festivals.)

Within a year of the dynamic Terry's 1947 arrival in London, the Earle Terry Singers appeared. Having worked with the New Toronto Girls Choir for eight years, Terry was ready to fill a void for young London women high school graduates.

MacDonald: *Mr Terry started the choir in the first place because he was working with the choirs in the schools and there were all these wonderful voices in high school -- [but] you finished grade 12 or 13 and then there was no place to sing, there was nowhere for us.... It was largely word of mouth. Mr. Terry started it that way. [For example, one young woman was invited after] he heard his neighbour singing, the story goes, out the kitchen window....He just gathered people that he knew had [good] voices and then gradually the group grew.*

The resourceful Terry used his professional contacts as Director of Music for the London Board. One of the original Singers recalls that some of his 1948 recruits were teachers; one worked in the Board office

24. Margaret MacDonald, Waterloo, Ont., June 22, 1998.

25. "(William) Earle Terry," *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 2nd ed., p. 1279.

26. *London Free Press*, Feb. 19, 1965.

27. *London Free Press*, Sept. 18, 1959.

of the Director of Music²⁸. In the first few years, many Singers were graduates of London's Sir Adam Beck Collegiate Glee Club who wanted to continue singing. In addition to drawing on his school network, Terry's magnetic personality enabled him to find singers. Some were invited to audition by Terry when he heard them while adjudicating area music festivals. Terry's fellow church music directors spread the word. Even the London Life Insurance Company's bulletin board carried an effective notice²⁹. The recruits included nurses, office workers, housewives.

Before long, thirty young women aged 18 to 25 realized they were singing for a remarkable person. Rehearsing weekly, usually in schools (Alexandria, Ryerson, Beal) where Terry could easily make the arrangements and pay for custodial time and on many occasions in the Terry family home, the choir was cheered and challenged by Terry.

MacDonald: He was good with a quip, he could make us laugh, he was able to break the tension if it was building, with a funny story. He was just a hilarious guy to work with. I can almost count on one hand the number of times that Mr. Terry would ever get really angry. If he spoke extremely sternly, we knew something was really amiss because it just didn't happen.

Always personable, Terry's knowledge of choral music and performance standards were high. He arranged hundreds of pieces for four *female* voice parts rather than the conventional bass, tenor, alto and soprano. These included choral classics (Pergolesi, Verdi) as well as traditional songs (Green Cathedral; Flo Gently, Sweet Afton), show tunes (Oklahoma) and contemporary favourites (You'll Never Walk Alone, Zippa-dee-doo-da.) Terry encouraged his singers to arrange music as well; Erla Telfer Stewart often did arranging as well as accompanying and singing. Some pieces would be kept in the repertoire for years, growing more polished and becoming audience favourites. Periodically, Terry would arrange a bevy of new songs, often for his annual Festival of Christmas Music at H. B. Beal Technical School.

Terry believed that all music had to be sung from memory:

MacDonald: Most of the time -- any concert, any time we sang in front of anybody else -- it was all memorized. The reason Mr. Terry was able to get the most out of us was that when you got that eye contact,

28. Sheila Hill Schaus, London, Ont. Jan. 12, 1999.

29. Sheila McKenzie, London, Ont., Jan. 12, 1999.

it was like an invisible thread going from eye to eye. He had the control.

Responding in 1958 to a newspaper reporter's inquiry, Terry explained his approach to choral music³⁰. "You can't give a song to an audience unless you feel it yourself. Keep a song alive, keep the excitement in your voice. But don't throw the song out at the audience. It must be more subtle; leave something for the audience to do...You must build a mood." Twenty years later, he was still telling them, "Ya gotta have heart³¹."

With musical performance skills and strength derived from their director, the Earle Terry Singers gained wide renown due to Terry's organizing talent. He recognized opportunities and created some of his own. Singer Sheila Hill Schaus recognized his special charisma: "He was skilful at drawing people to his side. And he was creative, very creative³²." He immediately organized a 1949 Christmas show that featured the Earle Terry Singers. It eventually grew into an annual, three evening festival which filled the 1200 seat auditorium of Beal Tech and include a 3-act show with scenery, lighting, costumes, dancers, organ, piano duet, and male chorus³³. Terry recruited husbands and brothers and fathers to volunteer behind the scenes.

One of Terry's greatest assets was his wife, May Terry (nee Ada May Taylor)³⁴. Beginning with the first concert and the first Christmas production, May Terry was in charge of programme and personnel details. She created the Singers' gowns and costumes. At the outset, her ingenuity led to striking gowns made from simple draped fabric; later, she designed and had gowns made by sewers or by local businesses such as the C. Wallace Company. On choir trips in Ontario and abroad, she monitored health and happiness for all. In addition, she served as music librarian and Singers archivist for decades³⁵.

30. *London Free Press*, Nov. 29, 1958.

31. *London Free Press*, May 7, 1977.

32. Schaus interview

33. *London Free Press*, Nov. 24, 1990. (actually full details were in LPL clipping 1994 but no date in my notes)

34. Marlene Fagan, Jan. 5, 1999. Several interviewees recalled the later pink and blue satin costumes (and others) and all commented on May Terry's work: she designed and acquired the choir's gowns and the many costume changes for their regular three-segment concerts.

35. Barbara Baillie, Jan. 22, 1999.

Supported by May Terry, Earle Terry tapped into his network of acquaintances and broadened the Singers' reach. He secured for the Singers an invitation to perform at the opening of London's Victoria Park Bandshell in 1950. In 1951, the Singers third year, Terry called upon his long association with the YMCA and took the choir on a concert tour to sing for the International YMCA Conference in Cleveland, Ohio. There the Earle Terry Singers appeared on radio and television. The following year and many other years, Terry arranged for them to tour:

MacDonald: When the girls went on a trip, he had some connection with the [Canadian National railway] and we had a special car and there were doctors notified along the way.... The publicity for the concerts was [done by] the people in charge of that concert... We were billeted; they opened their homes up and we were all well looked after.

Through Terry's stature among music educators, his group was invited to perform at the International Conference on Music Education in Brussels, sponsored by UNESCO in early July, 1953³⁶. Virtually single handedly Terry organized performances during their crossing on the "S.S. Atlantic" and an extended concert tour with performances in Switzerland, France, Luxembourg Holland and England.

Alongside their conductor's unusual abilities, the second factor behind the Earle Terry Singers' high profile was community support, noticeable in the faithful attendance at their Christmas festivals and in many other ways. Londoners clearly played an important part in the Singers' success. The choir's trip to Belgium was made possible by community support. The 1953 concert tour cost upwards of \$15,000 for travel and living expenses³⁷ and the individual Singers, as usual, paid only a portion³⁸. The City of London provided a \$1,500 grant³⁹ and donations arrived from the Rotary International, Kiwanis, Masonic Lodges, and many individual backers. Similar donations came for the other tours (Flint and Detroit, Michigan; Canadian Maritimes in 1951

36. MacDonald interview

37. *London Free Press*, Feb. 23, 1953.

38. Marg Van Tilbourg Gauld, Jan. 12, 1999.

39. *London Free Press*, Nov. 29, 1958.

and 1954, New York in 1952 and 1959, and Ottawa and Montreal in 1956, 1962 and 1967⁴⁰.

Community support came in three important forms besides money: regional and local invitations to perform, newspaper coverage and loyal listeners for the Earle Terry Singers' radio and television shows. Regularly, the Singers were invited to perform in London or to travel to an Ontario location and perform under the sponsorship of a local church or group.

MacDonald: *We were always doing lots of concerts.... Mr. Terry would be contacted and asked if the girls could do something and then he would check his schedule first, and then he would check the girls' schedules. Then he would give the go ahead. [Sometimes] you'd get a phone call ... - each choir section had their own kind of "section leader" - to say, "We need to meet at ... the London Hotel" (because that was easily accessible to everybody.) A bus would be there to pick us up and take us to, say, Strathroy.*

Interviewer: Did you do a lot of convention singing? Several times a year?

MacDonald: *Oh, certainly, yes, especially locally. It was a sea of faces, all sitting at tables and they had finished their meal and we came in and did about thirty minutes, [using] the ones the choir knew really well; you never rehearsed.*

These performances for community groups earned modest fees and earned the loyalty of the public. MacDonald remembers,

I think what appealed to them was the fact that you could tell we believed in what we were singing. We sang from our heart....As soon as the song is ended, we're smiling at the audience and Mr. Terry is taking a bow for us. Quite often some of the songs we sang...touched people.

As early as 1952, the Singers had been invited to Forest, Sarnia, Aylmer, Petrolia, Listowel, Ingersoll, and Paris, Ontario⁴¹. The community support for the group endured for decades. In 1990, long after its formal dissolution, more than 1,000 London patrons attended "A Christmas Celebration: A Tribute to Earle Terry" and relished the reunion choir's medley of Christmas songs taken from its annual Christmas Festivals.

40. Concert programme notes, "A Christmas Celebration: A Tribute to Earle Terry Singers," December 2, 1990, in the author's possession.

41. "The Whole Country Looks to London, Ontario," p. 3.

Newspaper coverage provided steady community backing. In every year of the Earle Terry Singers' existence, the *London Free Press* gave extensive coverage to their concerts, broadcasts and tours. The Christmas Festivals were advertised, appeals were made for particular needs, and feature articles gave an annual update on the Singers' doings. Staff Writer Lenore Crawford called the choir "the voice of London and Western Ontario ... and the voice of Canada ... in Cleveland and Brussels" in her detailed article of November, 1958. All of the interviewees were aware of the *Free Press* support and recall it readily. "They did *lots* of articles, and they were really enthusiastic about us," Sheila McKenzie said. Since the *Free Press* was owned by the Blackburn family who also owned CFPL, the newspaper never failed to report the choir's radio work.

Probably in part because of constant newspaper reminders, the audiences continued to support concerts, appearances, and broadcasts. Especially important were the CFPL radio shows, eventually titled "Music in the Air." Broadcasting began in 1951 from CFPL's London Studio A, the same site used for a different programme by the Don Wright Chorus. Unlike the Don Wright weekly programmes, these broadcasts were usually part of a defined contract series. At first only local, by 1952 the broadcasts were on the national network on Tuesday evenings. In May of 1953 at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, the Earle Terry Singers offered a special national programme to mark the occasion. There followed a 20 week series for CBC coast to coast, beginning in February, 1954. At 8:30 each Sunday evening, accompanied by the CFPL Strings, the Singers offered live "Music in the Air." By that spring, they were rehearsing on Tuesdays and taping the shows on Thursdays for broadcast on Sunday evenings. These series became a regular part of the Singers work: a 6 week series sponsored by CBC called "A Festival of Christmas Music;" a 13 week series of half hour programmes during 1959, and the like⁴². Marg MacDonald's archive of the choir includes an October 27, 1958, script. With Alex Clark on the organ and Clifford Poole at the piano, the Earle Terry Singers entertained their radio audience with:

It's a Grand Night for Singing
Drink to me Only
Blue Skies

42. *London Free Press*, June 5, 1959.

*Moonglow
Around the World
Over in Killarney*

During these years, some of the Singers recorded commercial breaks for the station, earning money for the choir.

MacDonald: *I remember the girls doing jingles, and that was paid. We couldn't all get off [work.] You see, by that time I was a teacher and they were going down at noon hour to record these things. By the time I could get down and back there wasn't enough time left for me to help record.*

Alongside radio shows came television appearances. The first of these was a CBC special on Dec. 21, 1955, broadcast live at 10:30 p.m. across Canada⁴³.

MacDonald: *We wore our blue gowns...I can remember that [TV] camera! They were scary looking things in those days. They looked like three eyes coming at you. It was really strange, and of course, you weren't allowed to look. You had to look straight at Mr. Terry.*

These radio and television broadcasts gave the Earle Terry Singers their wide renown, and they rested upon the continuing interest and loyal listening of the local community. Maintaining the link with the community, the Singers frequently gave benefit performances for a good cause. Sometimes they donated part of their concert revenue to local charities, such as \$500 to the London District Crippled Children's Treatment Centre in 1956.

A final component of the Singers' success is comprised of the commitment of each singer over the years. Usually 18 to 20 years old when they began singing, many women found that deep and lifelong friendships came naturally. Many of the "girls" were courted and wed in the keeping of their choir mates and they sang at one another's weddings. Everyone recalled seeing boyfriends through the glass of the CFPL studio, waiting long hours for rehearsals to finish so they could take their girlfriends home. Sheila Hill's boyfriend volunteered to be stage manager for the Christmas shows and carried on in that post for ten years, becoming her husband in the interval. Several women who moved away from London rejoined the Singers years later when their families returned to live in the city. Turnover was not excessive; perhaps a majority of the

43. *London Free Press*, December 22, 1955.

first singers stayed 10 years or more⁴⁴. Between 1951 and 1978, approximately 200 different singers were part of the 30 voice choir.

MacDonald: *We became a family. The Terry Singers were part of our extended family, to use today's language. It was that camaraderie. I can go back to [a Singers gathering] and not have seen a girl for twenty years and it's like yesterday...I don't know if that happens with other groups or not, but I think that is more what we were about.*

The mutual love of singing, the personal loyalty to the talented “Mr. Terry,” the respect of their community, and the many shared experiences in performance, touring and broadcasting welded the Singers into a powerful musical force. In turn, their cohesion gave the Singers a distinctive sound and an ability to meet long term commitments and undertake significant challenges under the direction of their dynamic conductor.

Conclusion

Through an extended series of interviews with choir personnel, accompanied by research in published local and scholarly sources, it is possible to explain the outstanding achievements of the Don Wright Chorus and the Earle Terry Singers of London, Ontario, beginning in 1946. The confidence gained by young musical men such as Wright and Terry during the war years, and the energy released at its end, combined to enable these men to dream on a large stage. They formed their choirs during the immediate post-war era when the need to build a strong, integrated social fabric was felt by all, giving rise to supportive institutions, attentive media and loyal audiences in the London area. Wright and Terry did their creating in a thriving regional centre whose 100,000 people enjoyed a prosperity broadly based on “washing machines and water pumps, beer and brass goods, stoves and cereals, biscuits and bridges educational techniques and scientific and medical discoveries⁴⁵.” London had enough wealth and leisure to support the arts

44. Schaus interview. Schaus was adamant that a *Free Press* reporter had erred in 1958 when suggesting only 3 of the original singers were still active; Schaus could name ten with certainty.

45. “The Whole Country Looks to London, Ontario”, p. 2. London in the 1950's sustained an amateur symphony, theatre, several bands, several choirs, and at the University of Western Ontario, the Conservatory of Music, a Glee Club and an Opera Workshop.

with vigour. In addition, the young adults who joined the choirs responded to the challenge of their conductors and enjoyed the hard work. The conductors and loyal singers offered their skill, time and talent to a receptive and supportive community. The combination propelled the Don Wright Chorus and the Earle Terry Singers to fame.