

From our history: Music at St. Matthew's

Music has always been an important part of the life and worship at St. Matthew's. Today we are used to hearing the lovely pipe organ, handbells, a grand piano, and – of course – the singing of a senior choir that includes both men and women. It wasn't always so.

The history of St. Matthew's entitled *A Sentinal on the the Street* tells us that in the early 19th century, congregational singing was accompanied by a cello, which is now called the Kirk Fiddle. The Fiddle graced worship services for more than half a century, but was used less often once the church acquired its first organ in 1873. Although the instrument is valuable more for its history than for its artistic quality, the congregation preserved the instrument, which sits in a glass case at the front of the church. In 1998 the Fiddle was rededicated in a service conducted by Rev. John Moses, director of music John Hudson, and the choir. The instrument was played that day by Shimon Walt, principal cellist with Symphony Nova Scotia, who performed an unaccompanied cello suite by Bach.

In the early years of the congregation only men would have sung in the choir. We're told they sat in a special singing pew, and many were soldiers who were stationed at the Halifax Garrison. The excellence of the choir was recognized as early as the 1840s, when singers not only participated in church services but also gave charity concerts and guest performances. The gender barrier was broken in 1882 when a female singer was hired to lead the choir, and from that point on women were regular participants. Today's choir, which numbers 35-40 singers during the winter months, upholds a fine singing tradition that dates back nearly 200 years.

The first organ was installed in 1873, but not without controversy. Some feared any distraction from the essence of plain worship, and others were deadly opposed to instrumental music. Some people actually left the church over the issue. However, with the passage of time, the organ became a completely accepted feature of the service. In 1921 the congregation installed a Casavant pipe organ. It was restored a few years ago to eliminate redundant stops and give it a brighter sound, a moveable console, electronic pre-settings and computer compatability. The church was without the organ for a year while the pipes and console were sent back to St. Hyacinthe, Quebec, for restoration.

Our history also tells us that in the 1800s the quality of congregational singing was frequently a matter of concern. One minister declared that "bad singing tells heavily on the minister, and good singing enables him to preach with increased life and freshness." Obviously things have improved. The church has used a variety of hymnals over the years, and the enthusiasm with which you use the current version, *Voices United*, is testament to both your musical talent and your joy in singing hymns and psalms together.