

THE THING THAT TRANSCENDS

THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY IN UNISON® CHORUS CELEBRATES
20 SEASONS AS A MUSICAL FAMILY.

BY TERRY PERKINS

The first performances of the renowned St. Louis Symphony IN UNISON® Chorus took place in the 1994–95 season, when Robert Ray, then the assistant to Symphony Chorus Director Thomas Peck, was charged with forming a new chorus to accompany performances of Hannibal Peterson's *African Portraits*. For this chorus, Ray recruited talented African American singers from throughout St. Louis, melding them with select members of the existing Symphony Chorus.

Glen Williams, one of the original members of the In Unison Chorus, and who performed in *African Portraits*, is still a member. "I'm originally from St. Louis, and I actually started out musically as an instrumentalist, playing the violin," says Williams during a recent conversation at Powell Hall before a rehearsal for December's sold-out Gospel Christmas concert. "After my college years at the University of Missouri, I began singing in the choir at the Antioch Baptist Church, and I heard about the chorus the Symphony was putting together for *African Portraits*. I decided to audition, and I became a member."

At the time, recalls Williams, the new African American members of the chorus never expected to be singing again accompanying the Symphony at Powell Hall. "We loved being part of *African Portraits*, but we thought it was going to be just a one-time thing after those four performances," Williams recalls. "But pretty soon, we were told they wanted us to come back and be part of an annual concert series. And it's just grown every year."

Rochelle Calhoun



The seeds of In Unison were sown two years earlier, when the Symphony inaugurated the In Unison Church program. The effort was designed to build a relationship between the Symphony and African American churches in the region. Musicians from the orchestra performed at Sunday services and special events. In turn, In Unison Church members were eligible for discounts on Symphony tickets, tuition discounts to area music camps, and college scholarships for



Glen Williams

high school music students who belonged to participating churches.

Robert Ray became a driving force in nurturing and keeping the In Unison Chorus active. Under his leadership, In Unison became an official part of the Symphony family, performing twice each season at Powell Hall—with the highly popular Gospel Christmas program every December, as well as a Black History Month concert in February. In addition, In Unison also performs an annual spring concert focused on the Black Spiritual tradition at an In Unison Church.

During Ray's tenure as director, the In Unison Chorus continued to build its reputation in St. Louis as well as on the national stage. The Chorus performed at Carnegie Hall in 1998, and was featured on the CBS television network program, *Sunday Morning*.

Before Ray's retirement as director, the In Unison Chorus also shared an expanded Powell Hall stage—designed to accommodate their members as well as the St. Louis Symphony Chorus and orchestra in a 2009 performance of Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*. For Williams, the memory of that performance is still a symbol of both the growth of In Unison artistically—and its place as part of the Symphony family.

"Robert wanted to expand the musical horizons for In Unison—while still remaining true to the roots of gospel music," says Williams. "He wanted to make sure we were not placed in a box as only a gospel choir. So when we were there for *A Child of Our Time*—and knew that they expanded the stage so we could be there—we really knew we were part of the Symphony family. And we knew we were growing musically as well."

When Ray retired as Director of In Unison in 2010, his persona was so strongly linked with the chorus that many members—including Williams—wondered how the new director, Kevin McBeth, would be able to establish his own identity and direction for the group.

"A lot of the members were unsure about what would happen with Robert gone," recalls Williams. "But it turned out to be perfect timing with the transition to Kevin. He bridged the gap in a great way. And Kevin also worked hard to keep expanding our repertoire—especially into Broadway music and classical pieces."

The Thing That Transcends

Rochelle Calhoun, who joined In Unison shortly after McBeth took over as director, also witnessed the transition in leadership, from her self-professed status as a “newbie” in the chorus.

“I’m originally from Vienna in northern Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C.,” explains Calhoun. “I sang growing up and was classically trained in school. I last sang when I attended Hampton University, but started again after a 15-year hiatus when I moved here in 2005, and joined the choir at St. Nicholas Church.

“I loved In Unison, and people told me I should audition, so I gave it a try after I sang for Joyce Hicks, a longtime member of the chorus. She got me to come to a rehearsal, and then I auditioned. Kevin asked me to join, and I started right away—just a week before a community concert happening the next week!”

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As a newcomer herself, Calhoun was impressed with the manner in which McBeth managed to navigate the transition, from Ray’s approach to communicating his own concepts, to the veteran members of the chorus.

“Kevin seemed to instinctively know how to work with older members who told him that they used to sing a piece in a certain way,” she says. “And as a result, he brought everyone together to think about new possibilities.”

For both Williams and Calhoun, being part of In Unison has offered many rewards. “I remember two years ago, my parents traveled to hear me sing because I had a solo,” explains Calhoun. “And everyone in the chorus wanted to meet my parents. Two seasons later, I still get asked, ‘How’s your mom and dad?’ It’s more than just singing music. It’s like being part of a 170-member family—and every rehearsal is like a weekly family reunion!”

“It really is a family,” adds Williams. “There are so many people in the chorus with diverse backgrounds—but they all love music. That’s the thing that transcends.”

“In Unison is such a part of my life,” concludes Calhoun. “it reminds me of a quote by St. Augustine. He said, ‘When you sing, you pray twice.’ Singing in this chorus truly is like praying twice. Your spirit is so fed by it, and it gives you a sense of wholeness. There are very few things in this world that can top that!”

Terry Perkins is a St. Louis-based freelance writer.