

Walden Moore (photo: Graham Hebel Photography)

Walden Moore

In Conversation with Alex Hodgkinson

This month sees the retirement of Walden Moore after a remarkable 40-year tenure as director of music at Trinity on the Green, New Haven, Connecticut. In March, I was privileged to have a long and fascinating discussion with the legendary “Mr. Moore.” He was animated, jovial, and warmhearted as he talked about his life, his long service at Trinity, and the future. Walden is as passionate about the work and mission of the choir today as he was in 1984, and it was very easy to see why he is loved and respected by so many.

ALEX HODGKINSON

Beginnings

I grew up in the proverbial small town in southwest Virginia. From the time I was three or four years old, whenever we visited my grandmother I would make a beeline for the piano, picking out tunes. A little later, my parents, who were always very supportive of my musical ambition, enrolled me in piano lessons.

Fortunately, we belonged to a church where music was valued. The church had a small seven-rank Möller, and when I was about 14 years old I started organ lessons with a local teacher, Mrs. Hankla. I was also at a good public high school that had a very strong choral program. I sang with the more select choir, known as the Green T Singers, and soon became the accompanist, which was great training. I was very lucky in my early years to be supported from all sides: school, church, teachers, and family.

Mrs. Hankla often told me stories of her daughter, who was with City Opera in New York and sang at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church with Robert Baker (who was also head of the School of Sacred Music at Union Seminary). I thought it sounded like a fascinating world.

Having decided to major in organ, I went to the University of Kentucky, Lexington. The organ professor, Arnold Blackburn, was a magnificent teacher, just the right teacher for me. He understood where I had come from. He understood my small-town roots.

In 1976, my freshman year, I started playing at Christ Church Parish (now Cathedral), Lexington. The church had an extensive choral program, led at that time by Robert Burton. The following year, the church asked if I would be the interim director during the search for a successor to Mr. Burton. I thought to myself: I’m 20, 21. What do I know? Would I be able to balance it all with my studies? I did it, and it was a hugely valuable experience.

The Constitution State

For graduate studies, I decided to apply to the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale, because Robert Baker was the senior organ professor. I got in, and I studied with him in the first year.

He was a really inspiring teacher, in a different way than Arnold Blackburn. He particularly loved Franck. I studied the E-major Choral with him, and he completely transformed the piece for me. At the end, there's a big cadence and then a coda. He played it for me, and he never slowed down into the coda. Everyone tries to be majestic about it, but it was like he crashed into the end.

It sent an electric shock through me, because I had never heard it played like that. That was typical Dr. Baker: thinking of other ways it might be done, always with solid musical reasons and often with accompanying anecdotes!

Dr. Baker was the consummate church musician. He was still at First Pres [NYC] at the time, and he kindly allowed me to observe on some Sunday mornings. He was old school, had no assistant, conducted everything from the organ. We would drive up from New Haven. He had been a cab driver when he was at Union, and he knew all the quick ways in and out of the city. And he drove like a New Yorker—a real New Yorker! I would have to hang on to my seat!

In my second year, I studied with Gerre Hancock, and he allowed me to observe rehearsals at St. Thomas Fifth Avenue when I went to New York for lessons with him every two weeks. His choir was always so expressive. His hymn playing was thrilling, and his improvisation legendary. He was just brilliant, just like his successors, all in different ways. In many ways, Gerre was a musical father to me. As was Arnold. As was Dr. Baker. Playing at Mrs. Baker's funeral and then at Dr. Baker's funeral were great privileges of my life.

Before I'd even started at Yale, I applied to be organ scholar at Trinity New Haven, at the recommendation of Nancy Shearer Ludwig, who had recently moved to Christ Church, Lexington, to work with her husband, Robert.

I knew Trinity was special from the moment I first walked through the door, when I heard that full Swell, saw those purple walls, met the wonderful people. There's something about that corner of downtown New Haven that's different.

For two years, I assisted Stephen Loher [organist, 1971–81] with the organ playing and training the choir of men and boys. After graduating, I was appointed organist at St. James's, West Hartford, succeeding Murray Somerville. For me, it was a perfect first job, but I knew I would only stay a few years, and I told them that at my interview. I had four happy years there before New Haven called once again.

Back to the Green

Trinity is a remarkable church. It is a church that cares as much about high-quality choral music as it does about the homeless folk of downtown New Haven. We have traditional services—we are one of the few places to still have occasional Choral Morning Prayer—but we also have a Taizé service. There's "Chapel on the Green" every Sunday afternoon, an outdoor service for those who might not feel so comfortable within the four walls of a church.

My first day as organist and choirmaster at Trinity was April 1, 1984. The choir of Southwark Cathedral, U.K., was giving a concert conducted by Harry Bramma, with John Scott at the organ. The last piece in the program was Parry's "Hear My Words," and John was knocking the socks off Sister Soosie [the nickname of Trinity's 1935 Aeolian-Skinner]. And I was just undone. My first day, and this is what I have to live up to?! I never let John forget that, and we would always laugh about it.

The first year was a busy one, with a tour of the U.K., planned before I arrived, an LP recording, and a performance of Britten's *War Requiem* with Robert Shaw and the Yale Glee Club. It's a good thing I was 28, not 68! I met with Shaw in advance, and we went over the score. Oh my gosh, talk about rigorous! He was the real deal.


I felt a lot of pressure in those first years. At that stage, you have the impostor syndrome, right? How did I get this job? Am I really going to be able to make it a success? And of course you have to wait five years even to find out the beginnings of that. Fortunately, for whatever reason, it did work out.

A large part of how it has worked out is thanks to my wonderful colleagues. In 40 years, I have worked for just two rectors [Rev. Andrew Fiddler and Rev. Luk De Volder], both of whom have been very supportive of the music and very supportive of me. In that time, I have applied for only two other jobs. One turned me down, and the other I turned down. I've never regretted it, and I've never since thought about looking at another job.

I have worked with outstanding associates and organ scholars here, many of whom have gone on to great careers in great places: Trinity Church, Copley Square; Washington National Cathedral; Grace Cathedral, San Francisco; St. Thomas Fifth Avenue and Heavenly Rest, New York City; St. James Cathedral and Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago; Westminster Abbey; and more. I have also been blessed in always being able to recruit accomplished adult singers for the choirs.

One of the biggest changes has been the way we recruit boy and girl choristers. In 1985 the local schools would open their doors and welcome me in to audition their students. They could see the benefits for the kids. For

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understandable reasons, schools are now less willing to have those who are not parents come in, and they're also careful about showing any preference to a single religious group.

Many people in this region now are not part of any organized religion. There has been a shift in the public view of some of what the church represents, and that's partly to do with a change in political climate.

I cannot go into the schools in the way I used to, although I still talk to the teachers, and we are still on friendly terms of course. Previously, I'd go into a school, audition 30 kids, invite 20 to a final round at church, and end up with five new boys and five new girls. Kids were never too busy to do that. It has changed in the last 20 years.

But there are things we can try, and new ways to do it. What we must never forget is that this type of education can have a huge effect on the development of children—both as musicians and people—and, in some cases, it can turn lives around. Musically, it gives them something they can't get in school, because they can't be this focused in larger classes. Nor do they get the experience of tours, recordings, and other excitements.

Some of our most memorable trips were to the White House, arranged through one of the choir parents. We made about five visits, under George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. We would usually be in the East Room, occasionally on the Grand Staircase, and sing Christmas music, both carols and secular stuff like "Sleigh Ride." They were unforgettable experiences.

We have performed concerts with what is now the American Classical Orchestra, under Thomas Crawford. We sang a

lot in New York: various churches, St. John the Divine, Alice Tully Hall. Bach Magnificat, Fauré Requiem, Mozart Requiem, Beethoven Nine.

Yale has this wonderful collection of historic instruments, but in the '80s, few were playing them publicly, so they were essentially museum pieces. In 1988 we did *Messiah*, the first performance with a choir of men and boys and period instruments outside of New York or Boston. We had 2,200 people show up [to Woolsey Hall] for that concert.

Trinity Girls' Choir

I think if I've had any success in keeping things going, it's because I have reinvented the program according to the times. Many years before we started the girls' choir [in 2003], Andy [Fiddler], the Vestry, and I had been talking about the fact that we were only addressing half the population. We have this wonderful road for boys; we need to be doing something for girls. But we shouldn't begin a girls' choir until the church is ready to fully support it in such a way that, right out of the starting gate, the choirs are equal.

I auditioned again in all the schools, and there were many younger sisters of boy choristers who had been waiting years for their turn. We started off with about 24 girls, and at least eight of them were siblings. They knew the drill, as did the parents.

The parents—of both boy and girl choristers—buy into it because they can see the quality and see the effect it has on their children. They bring the kids in three times a week. That alone is a huge thing, just the carpooling. And they do so much more besides. I just could not do it without the support of the chorister parents.

Even before the girls' choir sang their first service, we set up goals. One of them was to do an England tour within four years. Any choir comes back so much stronger after a tour like that, and it attracts more people to join.

We gradually ramped up the number of services with the intention that, by the end of the year, both choirs would sing an equal number of services. That happened, and we've never looked back.

We didn't have any outright opposition to setting up the girls' choir, but there were concerns about it having a negative impact on the boys' choir. The key was that the boys didn't sing any less. If the boys' services had been cut in half, that would have been problematic. But nothing was being diminished. It was just growth.

In addition to developing the opportunities available, we have worked hard to broaden our repertoire. Back in the '80s and '90s, we didn't talk much about underserved composers. I wish I had been awake to this sooner. I've really tried to make up for it, especially in the last few years.

There's plenty of Stanford and Byrd and Howells in the Trinity library, so I'm trying to bring in other things. If it isn't heard, no one's going to know about it! It's our duty as the church to show the rich diversity in God's people.

One of the great American female church musicians and composers was a Connecticut resident, Roberta Bitgood [1908–2007, also the first woman to serve as national president of the AGO]. I met Roberta when I came to Yale.

One summer, I was helping a friend do a roofing job. I was not very good at it, but I did what I was told! I had to lift a bundle of shingles and climb a ladder. It was in Roberta's neighborhood. I was head-to-toe filthy, but I decided to go over and see her.

I'll never forget the look on her face when she opened the door. I literally looked like a chimney sweep, wearing shorts and boots. She invited me in, and I said, "If you don't mind, can we put a towel down here before I sit down on your furniture?" It was a lovely meeting. What a tremendous influence she was on our business.



With the Trinity boys' choir, ca. 1985



Conducting Trinity's choir of men and boys at Washington Cathedral, ca. 1985

What have been the toughest challenges of your tenure?

COVID, of course, stands out as the time it was most difficult to run the program. Thanks to Zoom, we kept people together, musically and socially. As the restrictions eased, we were able to get together outside, singing in backyards and in Edgerton Park.



The 20th-anniversary Evensong commemorating the foundation of the girls' choir

Like many choirs, we are still rebuilding post-COVID. For now, the girls' and boys' treble choirs have one rehearsal together and one rehearsal separately, and they sing together at services. They are still two distinct groups, but the numbers need to be built up before they sing separately again. Our Parish Choir of volunteer adults is as large and active as ever.

Sadly, we have lost members of our choir family over the years, including choir trebles. One treble died of leukemia, and it rocked us to our very foundation. The choir family came together, and we all supported the child's family. That was many years ago, and I am still in touch with the family, as are many choir alums.

How is your time here being celebrated, and what is next for you?

We had a special Evensong to mark the 20th anniversary of the foundation of the girls' choir last November. We are doing the *War Requiem* again, as well as a concert with Sweet Honey in the Rock. There's a special dinner, and for my final Evensong on June 2 we will welcome back choir alumni.

In the last six months, I have finally come around to realizing just how much I really do have to let go. And I'm now comfortable with that. It's been a privilege to do this job for 40 years. The best way I can show the place that I love it is by moving on now. When I came here, I was younger than the parents. All of a sudden, I was old enough to be a parent, and now I'm the grandfather. It's time to go before I get to great-grandfather!

But I haven't yet written all of the chapters of my book. I am currently in talks with a church about acting as an interim. I need a church in my life still in which I'm involved in making music, but on a weekly basis, not six days of the week! And I will continue teaching and lecturing at the ISM.

What advice do you have for a church musician at the beginning of a 40-plus-year career?

Don't listen to the naysayers! There might be reasons to feel discouraged, especially if you look at the numbers as compared to post-World War II. But I remind people all the time about great awakenings, and the English cathedrals that fell into ruin in the 19th century and are active again.

Trinity Church was packed to the gills on Good Friday in the old days. Nowadays we have a decent number of people, but we're not packed. And people say, "What are we doing wrong?"

I don't think we're doing anything wrong. I think what we are doing right is serving the people who are here, keeping the message going. In the old days, people went to church for different reasons. I think, now, the people who do go to church really want to go.

Society was also different back then. There was very little open on a Sunday. Now, everything's going. And where I grew up, almost everyone identified as Christian. New Haven in 2024 is much more diverse.

And despite the packed churches, there was a lot of stuff in those post-World War II years that was just plain wrong, especially the treatment of women and minority groups. So when people give us a hard time about how the church has gone in the wrong direction, I sometimes feel they don't see the whole picture. I'm happy to say that Trinity is progressive but not political. You're not going to hear politics preached from the pulpit, but you are going to hear morality.

Finally, how would you sum up your philosophy as a church musician?

It took me decades to figure this out, how to actually say it. But it's very simple. What we sing from the choir stalls is the same as what we hear from the lectern and the pulpit. It can be condensed to one word: love.

That's it. Love. If our mission and our behavior don't come back to that word, we are falling short. The reason for the existence of the choir is to broadcast Christ's love.

And I always tell the kids, "Will there be conflict sometimes? Of course!" There will be occasional spats and times when we get mad at each other, like any family. But we resolve it.

I hope I have enabled singers to develop new skills and grow in confidence. I hope I have given them a lifelong appreciation of music. I hope they are better able to sight-read Palestrina. But above all, I hope that my tenure at Trinity Church will be remembered as one of love.

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