

May, 2002

Maurice Skones passes away

Former Director of Choral Activities at Pacific Lutheran University



Maurice Skones (1926-2002)

Maurice Skones, who directed PLU's *Choir of the West* from 1964-1983 before accepting a job at the University of Arizona, died at his home in Tucson. Maurice was born on July 24, 1926 and died this past May 2.

Maurice had battled cancer for several years but had weakened recently. Paul Skones, his son, said that Maurice was hoping to participate in the Heritage Festival in Salt Lake City this month, but canceled a few weeks ago, knowing that he would be unable to go.

His last conducting was done at Easter when he led his choir at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Tucson in Handel's "Worthy is the Lamb," and "The Hallelujah Chorus."

He is survived by his wife, Patricia, in Tucson, a son, Paul, who lives in Hillsboro, Oregon, daughter Karen Denmark from Kent, Washington, and daughter, Janet Hitt, who teaches music in Everett, Washington.

Maurice Skones taught at the University of Arizona from 1983 until 1993. He then retired, but came back to teach another three years from 1997 to 2000.

He was active as a conductor of honor choirs for MENC and for ACDA events.

Dr. Skones set a standard of excellence for choral musicians that served to inspire all who came in contact with him. His was a gentle demeanor but with an intense passion for artistry. He was especially known for his emphasis on phrasing and clarity of communication.

Richard Sparks, who followed Maurice Skones as director of the Choir of the West at Pacific Lutheran University, said:

Maurice Skones' death is a great blow to the choral profession. His personal warmth and unending quest for perfection were hallmarks of his work.

Certainly, following Dr. Skones at PLU was a daunting task! I grew up in Seattle and from the time I was mid-way through high school, knew of the excellence of the Choir of the West. I heard the choir most years from the time I was in High School when they gave their Seattle concert (usually at Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church), and also occasionally when they sang for an ACDA or MENC convention in the area.

In addition to the choir's reputation for excellence, there were also a couple other things strongly associated with Dr. Skones: the use of quartets and the two-row, single-step riser configuration. I'd used quartets on and off before I came to PLU and, though I use a sectional formation for some repertoire, still use a quartet formation much of the time. I've come to love the two-row, single riser formation, and still use it with other choirs I conduct, whenever possible.

However, the central qualities of any of Maury's choirs were their incredible commitment and passion, Maury's amazing detail of phrasing, and their vibrant sound.

On a personal level, Maury was always tremendously supportive of me at PLU. I was lucky enough to have him come as a clinician to the PLU Summer Workshop two times and see him, as his many students did, from the other side of the podium. Twice, when the choir toured to Arizona, we were sponsored by his church for our concerts in Tucson, and both times he consented to conduct "Beautiful Savior" at the end of the concert--a moving experience for both my students and me.

Maury leaves an enormous legacy, not just of his own performances, but of the large numbers of students he's influenced who make their own contributions to the choral art. From Cut Bank, Montana to PLU to the University of Arizona, he taught several generations of outstanding choral musicians. He was an extraordinary man. He will not be forgotten.

Geoffrey Boers, choral director at the University of Washington, graduated from PLU. Geoffrey said, "He was a man of great faith, great music, and great compassion. He loved his family, and his choirs. At PLU we were his family in music."

Boers went on to say that some of the highlights of Skones' career were performances of the *Choir of the West* at the national ACDA convention in Nashville, the many international tours, and premiers of works by Miklos Rosza.