





# Predominating to the choir

EIGHTY-THREE VOCALISTS, TEN MUSICIANS, AND ONE MAN: MAESTRO KENNETH KILGORE BRINGS HIS EVER-DEEPENING BRAND OF SPIRITUALITY AND MUSICAL EXCELLENCE TO THE AMBASSADORS' CONCERT CHOIR, NOW CELEBRATING ITS TWENTY-FIFTH YEAR UNDER HIS DIRECTION.



VEN BEFORE HE STARTED SCHOOL, KENNETH Kilgore began most Sundays sitting on a wooden pew next to his grandfather, a church deacon and minister of music. Up front in beautiful, flowing robes stood a group of people from whose mouths poured jubilant songs of praise that mesmerized the boy. She who laid strongest claim to his imagination, however, was the all-powerful woman in front of the choir: Minnie Vera Anderson.

As she sat at her piano, her arms would shoot up, jabbing and swooping and pointing. With those movements, she controlled the wash of sound that trickled, then roared over the worshipers swaying, clapping, singing out, and lifting their arms as if to trail their outspread fingers through the notes flowing by overhead.

Once home, Kilgore ran to his father's closet and pulled out a large, long-sleeved shirt. Thus robed, he hastened to the dinner table, but not to eat. He pulled two chairs together, seat to seat. The first became the piano bench. As the second transformed itself into the ivory and ebony keys of his imaginary piano, Kilgore began to act

out a behavior that decades later still defines his days.

"I did what she did," he says in his *dulce* and pianissimo voice. "I would play the piano with one hand and direct the choir with the other. I would just sing and sing. Even today when I teach a song, I am more comfortable sitting at the piano than standing. I have even reached the point that I'm not that interested in directing alone. I would rather play and direct from the instrument. That's the way I started. I never swayed from that."

As artistic director of Oklahoma City's Ambassadors' Concert Choir—celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary during the 2004-2005 season—and minister of fine arts and music at Saint John Missionary Baptist Church, this imposing man with a sharp vision lives in a world of grace notes. The ways in which sacred music enriches religious and cultural realms have emerged as the lasting focus of his life's work.

With the exception of four years in Dallas at Bishop College earning a bachelor's degree in elementary education with emphases in music and history, Kilgore has spent no extended time away from his church or its music department. He joined, he says, "the first Sunday of February when I was six years old," in 1953. The church celebrates its eighty-fifth anniversary this year.

Kilgore's desire to bring classic religious music into the black community and to take powerful spirituals and gospel music out into the white community led to the Ambassadors, an about ninety-voice, all-volunteer choir whose members invest personally and financially in their noteworthy passion.

**Kenneth Kilgore, artistic director of the Ambassadors' Concert Choir in Oklahoma City, is a lifelong member of Saint John Missionary Baptist Church, where he spends most of his time with church and choir 'families.' 'I have many, many godchildren. Many of the adults have keys to my house,' says Kilgore.**

By Kathryn Jenson White  
Photography by John Jernigan



'If we are **in harmony**, the singing will come.'

He says that in addition to at least one weekly rehearsal during the September to May concert season, the choir presents six to ten concerts. Choir robes cost \$250 and tuxedos at wholesale about \$100. Gowns cost \$80 or so. Annual dues are \$35.

"For couples, everything doubles," Kilgore says. "We work out payments if we need to. For high school and college students, we try to subsidize. We say, 'Don't decide not to participate because of finances.' There's always someone out there willing to help someone else."

This dedicated group has impacted and entertained many with its healing and inspiring music: It has performed for the survivors and families of victims of the Alfred P. Murrah building bombing at the first anniversary and the later dedication of the Memorial, at the dedication of the Capitol Dome, for the last two governors' inaugural activities, in Mexico with the Minería Symphony Orchestra and at the Morelia Music Festival, at Oklahoma City's Opening Night and Festival of the Arts, in churches and concert venues around the region, and alongside the Canterbury Choral Society and Oklahoma City Philharmonic Orchestra.

"The experience of working with the choir is wonderful," says Joel Levine, Philharmonic music director. "They tend to sing the kinds of works that are dramatic and call for a kind of dramatic presentation."

Concert programs have included classics like Verdi's *Te Deum*, Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy*, and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. They also have included gospel songs and spirituals like *With His Stripes We Are Healed*, *Abide with Me*, *Give Me That Old-Time Religion*, and *Soon Ah Will Be Done*.

Oklahoma composer and musician Glenn Edward Burleigh wrote *Alpha Mass*, Opus No. 30 and *Fantasy Dance Suite* specifically for the Ambassadors choir. "When I write for them," he says, "I write big. They make me live up to my composing potential."

Adds Levine, "Their specialty has been the gospel rep, and they're just unsurpassed. We're very lucky to have them here."

Sandra D. Thompson, director of choral studies at the University of Central Oklahoma and a longtime member, musician, and assistant director of the Ambassadors, says Kilgore has always envisioned something more than an accomplished choral group.

"We have the ability as musicians to sing for presidents and governors and then for our next-door neighbors," says Thompson. "We have the ability to uplift those who are down for whatever reason."

With a master's of education from Langston, Kilgore is more than halfway through a doctorate in educational administration at Oklahoma State University, where one of his research focuses

is the successful administration of musical groups.

Kilgore's artistic philosophy becomes evident when he talks about the individuals in the choir.

"I'm more concerned with our getting along harmoniously. If we are in harmony, the singing will come. What excites me more is that everyone who joins discovers quickly the family-like atmosphere. For some reason, God sends people who, in a short time, will need the family we are. Soon after one man joined—he was always able to fix everything—his mother was diagnosed with cancer. He couldn't fix that. He was a bass, and when she died, all the basses took off their jobs, and we went to him. He cried and cried and said we were more than a family to him. A lady came in knowing she was dying of cancer. She said she'd come when she could. She said, 'I believe I'm living longer because of





my excitement about singing.' There are so many stories like that. Certainly, there are musical challenges, but the challenges that come with just participating in living have been the greatest part of my life with this group."

Assistant city manager and former Oklahoma City police chief M.T. Berry first played with the choir as a bass guitarist in 1990, when the regular bassist couldn't travel to Mexico City for a concert. Berry's substitute status was short lived.

"I had heard of the choir before but had never heard them sing," he says. "They were awesome, and I became attracted to them both musically and spiritually. I have been a member since then."

Berry says the choir specializes in music that has historical significance in the African American community, particularly spirituals and religious anthems.

"More importantly," he says, "the choir provides a message through music that proclaims God's goodness, his grace and mercy and his love for all of us. Kenneth, or 'Maestro' as we fondly refer to him, is a child of God and puts God first in all he does. He is blessed with the marvelous gift of music."

Thompson adds that Kilgore's many gifts explain the group's success, both musically and culturally.

"He has the ability to shape and mold people from all walks of life into one unit so that we all work together for the greater good,"



The choir in the early 1980s

she says. "As musicians and directors, we all bring something different to the table. Kenneth has pulled us together."

Kilgore has united a diverse lot. The choir roster lists eighty-three vocalists, ten musicians, and six directors; ten equipment techs and officers; and thirty active and honorary board members. Denominations represented include Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, and a wide variety of Baptist offshoots, among others. Kilgore says about 10 percent of the members are white. Ages range, he says, from sixteen to eighty.



KILGORE'S VISION OF THIS RAINBOW CHORALITION began to take shape in 1979, the year Saint John moved to its current home on North Kelley. He had been music minister at the church since 1970 and was planning the church choir's inaugural Christmas concert.

"I wanted to do something truly wonderful, and I thought about *The Messiah*," he says. "I knew the choir members did not all read music and would not all have been interested in an evening of that type of music. They tolerated a more structured, classical type of music, but their love was more gospel-oriented. There was a type of sacred music our choir wasn't musically equipped to handle, and yet many of our choir members could read music and were interested in classical music. They became charter members of the Ambassadors and remain members today."

With forty voices, Kilgore began a second choral group within Saint John's music department: the Ambassadors of Faith Concert Choir.

"On December 24, 1979, we started our first concert at 10 p.m.," he says. "We had it timed so that at midnight we were singing the Hallelujah chorus. It came out perfectly. As we continued to perform, people from other churches joined us. They loved that type of music and didn't get it in their churches."

The choir at the Myriad Botanical Gardens in the early 1990s



'Kenneth wanted to show the **black voice** was not just a gospel voice.'

Because church policy said all members of a church-funded organization also had to be church members, then-Pastor W.K. Jackson and Kilgore decided to evolve the group into a community choir. Olen Nalley, an early director of the Black Liberated Arts Center, and many others helped Kilgore seek funding. Nalley suggested changing the group's name because the "of faith" portion might limit funding opportunities.

"We voted to become the Ambassadors' Concert Choir," Kilgore says. "We put the apostrophe there to leave the connotation up to the listener. You may take it to mean we are Christ's ambassadors. We could also be ambassadors of Oklahoma City. Some people argue with me about the name, but we've left it as we began."

Although the group ceased to be a church choir in order to become an independent organization incorporated as a 501(c)(3), Saint John still provides its home. The group practices, stores its music, and often performs in church facilities. However, because of a strong board led by president Don Bown, retired Oklahoma City manager, and the support of major arts benefactors like Oklahoma City businessman Richard Sias, the choir truly has become a community choir as well as a choir community.

Bown says the group—which now includes the Ambassadors' Children/Youth Choir directed by Ora Marvienne Keeton—has gained exposure through sales of its CDs and concert videos as well as through performance, but that the board's work continues as Kilgore strives to expand boundaries each season.

"They are still a surprise to a lot of people," Bown says. "Kenneth wanted to show the black voice was not just a gospel voice. They love to sing, and you can see that in what they do."

The group has presented a Broadway musical, *The Amen Corner*, and a play with music called *Just Across the Tracks*. The play, written by Oklahoma City writer Benton Jones for the group, set the Christmas story in Oklahoma City's black community in the twentieth century. During a Valentine's Day dinner show called *Dearly Beloved*, a member actually got married. (Those attending thought it was a fake wedding, Kilgore says.)

When someone expressed amusement that a black choir would sing "Come, Come, You Saints," closely identified with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Kilgore was taken aback. "I had never thought about it," he says. "I just liked the song." Kilgore says that while

"we say we're gutsy enough to try anything," the song he most loves and that best represents the Ambassadors is that most traditional of gospel songs, "How Great Thou Art." Still, his musical selections have shaped the choir's body of work just as clearly as his open-arms approach has shaped its heart.

"Kenneth likes to use the phrase 'the music of the common man,' but I believe we appeal to all audiences, not just the common man and not just the learned musician," says Sandra Thompson. "We do gospel; we do spirituals. The spiritual tells a story of the struggle of mankind. We bring a great empathy to that genre."

Patrick Alexander, director of planned giving at the Children's Center in Bethany and former executive director of both the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra and Allied Arts Foundation, has served on the Ambassadors' board and worked with the group on fundraising for many years. He became involved during the only time when the choir's survival seemed in doubt.

With little advertising, Kilgore says, attendance was dropping at concerts, and the variety of venues and audiences wasn't ideal. In 1983, he says, he told choir members they should take seven days to consider disbanding.

Alexander says that Rubye Hibler Hall, a board member of what was then the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra, wanted to increase attendance from the black community at orchestra concerts. Hall's daughter, Carole Hall Hardeman, associate dean of graduate studies at Langston University and the first president of the Ambassadors' board, says her mother had for many years sought to draw people of color to the arts in Oklahoma City. Involving professional mu-



**'If I met you for the first time and I spoke Swahili and you spoke French, we would have a communication problem,' says the fifty-seven-year-old Kilgore. 'But if I could get to a piano and play for you, your face would light up.'**



'The spiritual tells a story **of the struggle** of mankind.'

sicians from the African American community was one strategy. Alexander says Hall's efforts were necessary.

"We had started to see that while everyone could buy tickets and everyone was welcome, perceived barriers existed," Alexander says of the orchestra. "Our association with black musicians helped break those down."

During those seven days when the choir was pondering its fate, Kilgore says, Alexander, Sias, and Hall contacted renowned Oklahoma vocalists Thomas Carey and Carol Brice Carey, who recommended involving the Ambassadors in what was to become a February 1985 Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra concert titled *An American Salute*.

The success of the concert was bittersweet, given that Carol died a few days before the event—it became a tribute concert as well as one building a bridge between communities. The exposure helped the Ambassadors stop worrying about survival. Members refocused on singing their souls out with the emotional exuberance that still defines the group today.

"The only word I can use to describe them is joy," Alexander says. "As they sing, the compatibility among the membership is clear. They deliver the gospel and the hymns of praise with such sincere joy. Almost every concert I've attended may start as just a concert, but it turns out to be a celebration. It's a ministry for Kenneth and for many of the people involved, and they never forget who has provided them with their wonderful talent. They're a great treasure for Oklahoma."

**U**PON A CHURCH CHOIR FOUNDATION, KILGORE and friends have built a community cathedral of music more all-encompassing and far-reaching than any single denominational group could be. Given his and the choir's early days, what each has become seems inevitable.

"Shortly after I began school, my mother started me with piano lessons, and I went from piano to piano and organ," Kilgore says. "When I was young, I would just rejoice when my aunt came by the house on the way to choir rehearsal and let me go. My parents had no car, but on Friday nights—rehearsal night—when I was in the choir, I would walk to our church. I'd pass all my friends going

to the football game. They'd say, 'There goes that little church boy.' I didn't have any problem with it. I was going to sing."

Sing he has, but not primarily as a vocalist. He has sung as teacher, director, and founder of the Ambassadors.

"Kenneth Kilgore is perhaps the most talented musician in all of Oklahoma," Carole Hall Hardeman says. "His vision, his ability to select talent, to select music, and his insistence on having the choir sing classical music, read music, and exhibit discipline and dignity are unsurpassed."

With each performance, the Ambassadors make clear that a good choir is many things. For this, musicians and music lovers sing Kenneth Kilgore's praises and those of the choir: How great that is; how great they are.

*The Ambassadors' Concert Choir will celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary season with several evening concerts in the Oklahoma City area, including the following free performances: December 24, 2004 (Saint John Missionary Baptist Church, featuring Leona Mitchell); January 18, 2005 (First Presbyterian Church of Edmond); February 27, 2005 (First Baptist Church of Newcastle); March 25, 2005 (Saint John Missionary Baptist Church); April 10, 2005 (Mayflower Congregational Church in Oklahoma City); and May 15, 2005 (Saint John Missionary Baptist Church). (405) 478-3344 or [ambassadorchoir.org](http://ambassadorchoir.org).*

**'It excites me to see the group growing,' says Kilgore, who started the choir in 1979 with 42 members. Now, it has nearly 90 voices.**  
**Right: Maria Gore and Maxine Bennett, background, at a September choir rehearsal.**

