

St. Paul's Singers to offer Gaelic airs at Hibernian benefit

By JULIA MARTIN

"The human voice is the most versatile of all instruments," says the director of St. Paul's Singers, a group of children who will demonstrate that versatility as part of an Irish concert next Sunday in West Brighton.

The director of the young singers is the Rev. Charles P. Coen, assistant pastor at St. Paul's R. C. Church, New Brighton. The concert at 3 p.m. in Blessed Sacrament R. C. Church auditorium is being sponsored by Division 1, Ancient Order of Hibernians, for the benefit of its charities and missions.

As a matter of fact, the versatility of the children's voices

as brought out by Father Coen won for some of them individual awards in Gaelic and English singing at the Fleadh Cheoil (Gaelic for "Music Festival") held at Manhattan College this spring and open to contestants from all over the Eastern Seaboard.

Besides the singing laurels, individual awards were earned by three youngsters for their instrumental renditions of "slow airs," traditional old Irish melodies usually ornamented profusely with grace notes. The instruments the children played are the flute, and the tin whistle, a characteristically Irish instrument smaller than a flute and sometimes referred to as a penny whistle.

The St. Paul's Singers, with a total of 30 boys and girls ages 10 to 15, had no formal or planned beginning, says Father Coen, "just a group of volunteers to sing some songs at the parish's annual St. Patrick's dance two years ago. The children liked it, and so it grew."

Quite literally an Irish tenor, Father Coen is a native of Woodford in County Galway, Ireland. One of nine children, he came from a musical family and a musical culture, and taught himself to play the flute, tin whistle and concertina.

After arriving in this country at age 21, he worked as a bellhop at Grossinger's resort in the Catskill Mountains for

five years before beginning his studies for the priesthood. As part of his preparation for the religious life, he says he received a lot of musical training in the seminary at Dunwoodie, Yonkers. He came to St. Paul's as an assistant in 1968.

Father Coen says, "While Irish dancing and dance music enjoyed a reasonably happy existence in America, Irish song was allowed to die a very lonely death. 'Danny Boy,' 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling,' 'McNamara's Band' and such have come to exemplify Irish song. And this is sad, since there are literally thousands of very beautiful old Gaelic airs—never written down but passed on traditionally. I hope to see a revival of some of these songs."

Continues Father Coen, "Many of the old Gaelic airs are beautifully haunting, or perhaps best described by the Irish as 'lonesome.' They are, in large part, songs set to the rolling of the waves, the trotting of the pony, or just the stillness of the long twilight, ornamented by a mother's lullaby.

"These songs carry an air of relaxation and peace almost impossible to compose today. Music is the sound of the spirit of man, and today the spirit of man finds little peace—witness the turmoil in our modern pop songs."

Perhaps even more disconcerting to Father Coen today is "the reluctance to sing at all. When was the last time you met a teenager on the street singing? Carrying a portable blaring away, yes—but singing, no.

"People are not ashamed to have you hear them shout, swear, or scratch a melody on a guitar or organ. But make a sweet sounding note with their vocal chords—heaven forbid you should hear them, they'd die. Singing anywhere, except into a mike with unbearable amplification, carries a stigma worse than smallpox."

However, there's no reluctance or self-consciousness about singing on the part of the youngsters in Father



St. Paul's Singers follow the guidance of their director, the Rev. Charles P. Coen, right. The four vocalists in the foreground, left to right, Caroline Linwood, 11, Glenn Klanes, 14, Maritza Olmeda, 15, and William O'Brien, 13, were prize winners this spring among contestants from all over the Eastern Seaboard at the Fleadh Cheoil (Gaelic for "Music Festival")



Relaxing during a break at a practice session of St. Paul's Singers are, left to right, flutist Bronwynn Wood, 14, Patricia Buttle, 14, who plays the tin whistle, flutist Vincent Paone, 13, and the director, the Rev. Charles P. Coen, with his concertina. The three youngsters were winners at the 1976 Fleadh Cheoil.

S.I. Advance Photos by Frank J. Johns

Coen's group. A gentle beckoning gesture and a suggested song title from him are all it takes for one of the boys or girls to sing a solo, often without accompaniment. As Father Coen explains, "Irish folk songs are almost impossible to accompany because the notes are such that you are supposed to ornament them yourself, and it's up to the individual singer."

Although the group's repertoire of 30 to 40 songs includes mainly Gaelic airs or Irish songs with English words, Father Coen says the object has never been to restrict their practices or performances to Irish music.

"As a matter of fact, we sing the Israeli song, 'Hava Nagila,' in Hebrew," Father

Coen says. "And at Christmas time, we render the Gregorian chant in Latin."

He adds, "We do intend to learn German, Italian and Spanish songs. And we've started to learn American folk songs, which I'd like them to know because of their rich heritage."

The program for next Sunday's concert, in addition to St. Paul's Singers, will also include two performers born in Dublin, Ireland—ballad singer Jesse Owens, and accordionist James Keane, former all-Ireland accordion champion.

Other participants will be the Staten "Ireland" Dancers, plus vocalists Betty Reilly of West Brighton, and the Garroven Singers. Father Coen

will act as master of ceremonies.

John Donoghue of 542 Bard Ave. is chairman of the fund-raising concert. Tickets at \$5

for adults and \$1 for children may be obtained from Father Coen at St. Paul's rectory, 148 Cassidy Pl., or from Mr. Donoghue.

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