

# BASILICA

THE BASILICA OF SAINT MARY

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SERVICE AND JUSTICE

At the heart of The Basilica

# A Treasure of Inestimable Value

## *Commitment and dedication to The Basilica*

*Teri Larson and Walter Tambor*

BY MELISSA STREIT

SACRED and liturgical music play an important role in the life of the Church, speaking eloquently of the mystery of faith and celebrating the vibrant musical diversity of our global Church. The Second Vatican Council was quite emphatic about the importance of sacred music in the Church's liturgical worship: "The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 112).

Two long-serving music directors at The Basilica have brought their ministry to our community to a close. Teri Larson, Director of Music, and Walter Tambor, Director of Contemporary and World Music, took time to reflect on their ministry.

Larson joined the Basilica staff in 1995 and directed the 80-member Cathedral Choir, the Cathedral Choristers, and several ensembles including the Schola Cantorum. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a music concentration and a religion major from St. Olaf, and received a Masters degree in music from St. Cloud State University. Larson's vocation and mission was "to inspire and bring the singer and listener closer to an experience of the Divine."

Walter Tambor started as our first Director of Contemporary and World Music in 2004. Originally an architecture major, Tambor returned to school for a degree in collaborative piano from DePaul University. "Our mission was to bring the music of the world Church to our local church, sharing the diverse cultural expressions of sacred worship music. We have sung music from around 25 different countries of the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia."



Both Tambor and Larson struggled to choose just a few top memories from so many years of music ministry

“One of my very, very top, most profound memories was the 500th anniversary of the Reformation concert,” Larson shared. Raised in a music-filled Lutheran family where children received hymnals at their confirmation, she always worked “to bring Protestants and Catholics together.” In 2017, The Basilica hosted the *My Soul Cries Out* concert with both Bishop Ann Svennungsen of the Minneapolis Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and Archbishop Bernard Hebda of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis in attendance. “The Basilica was packed and I watched my Cathedral Choir and the St. Olaf choir singing *Beautiful Savior* with tears streaming down my face,” Larson recalled. “Coming together as Lutherans and Catholics and celebrating this Reformation together was so profound to me. I thought: this is what I’ve lived for, to see this happen.”

Larson also cited *To Be Certain of the Dawn: The Basilica Holocaust Memorial Oratorio* as a significant memory. “I can’t even go into how profound that was,” she declared. Premiered in 2005, *To Be Certain*



Oratorio composer Stephen Paulus, left, and librettist Michael Dennis Browne, right, with Larson at Orchestra Hall in 2008.

of the Dawn was commissioned by The Basilica of Saint Mary under Michael J. O’Connell as a gift to Temple Israel and the entire Jewish community, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the freeing of Holocaust survivors and the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (Latin for “In Our Times”), the Papal encyclical condemning anti-Semitism. Larson vividly recalled the Choristers and Cathedral Choir on stage at The Basilica (2005) and then at Orchestra Hall (2008) — “all that was just amazing.”

Larson also cites being profoundly moved when *StreetSong* performed with the award-winning vocal ensemble *Cantus* at the Ordway Center for the Performing

Arts in 2016. She established the *StreetSong* choir, comprising persons who are currently or were formerly homeless and those who care about them, to unite voices for harmony, personal fulfillment, and the development of community. Walter Tambor was a partner in this ministry as well. This choral collaborative continues as an enterprise of *Align Minneapolis*, formerly the *Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness*.

“I think what filled my heart with the greatest joy was standing on the steps looking out into The Basilica nave and hearing the assembly raising their voice in the song. They’re actually singing!” Larson enthused. “When I first came to The Basilica, there was a book entitled *Why Catholics Can’t Sing*, and of course I took that as a huge challenge. I thought, ‘They too can sing!’ I’ve always tried to support the assembly in song, bringing the choir out into the archways or the nave to help all the people sing.”

Walter Tambor’s memorable highlights also included expanding our repertoire of global liturgical music and working with outside partners. He cited a memory from 2008 “when our *Mundus* choir partnered with the cantor and choir from the [Jewish]



*My Soul Cries Out* at The Basilica of Saint Mary in 2017.



*StreetSong* at the Ordway in 2016.

congregation Shir Tikvah when the Vatican Splendors exhibit was at the Minnesota History Museum.” Tambor specifically recalled “working together to find repertoire that was significant to both of our worship traditions, rehearsing in both our worship spaces, and then singing together in a public non-worship experience at the History Museum” as particularly fulfilling and moving.

Another gratifying memory for Tambor was when The Basilica hosted both the Cathedral Ministry Conference (CMC) and the Conference of Roman Catholic Cathedral Musicians (CRCCM) in 2015.



Juventus youth choir in 2019.

“It was quite validating and, I hope, eye-opening for the other cathedral musicians attending from around the country to see the way The Basilica partnered and worked as a music team. It showed that contemporary and world music can live at the same level that the traditional cathedral choir operates. At The Basilica, global music is not ‘the other thing that happens.’” Tambor specifically remembered bringing all our music ensembles together for the closing Mass, which highlighted The Basilica’s vision for worship and how a variety of liturgical styles can work in tandem in a diverse parish community.

“Teri always encouraged me to be more active with CRCCM,” Tambor recalled, but previously he didn’t see a strong focus on contemporary and world music within the conference. After the Roman Catholic Cathedral Musicians attended the conference hosted at The Basilica in 2015, “it started becoming more of a part of what the conference offered on the national level,” he shared proudly.

Ever the encouraging teacher, Tambor also fondly recalled when Larson and he led the high school singers for the National Association of Pastoral Musicians (NPM) conference in Louisville, KY, in 2022. “There is a track of this national conference that invites high school participants with their own specific programming. We did our ‘greatest hit things’ that we loved to do with our youth choirs, and in five short days taught them to these high school kids. It was super fun, though kind of stressful because of the limited hours to rehearse. You know Teri is not one to shy away from

challenging programs! I think the kids really got a lot out of it; they were challenged to sing Vietnamese, Spanish, and some contemporary pieces. It was really fun to bring what we do all the time here at The Basilica to the people who never had that as part of how they worship, pray, and sing.”

Both Tambor and Larson cited their colleagues, staff leadership, and volunteers as integral parts of their success in music ministry. “The hiring of Walter really ‘upped the game’ into the high end,” Larson enthused warmly. “Walter is a classically trained musician with a finesse that was just fantastic.” She also noted the support of Dr. Johan van Parys, Director of Liturgy and Sacred Arts, for allowing people to play and sing to their fullest level. “We strived to prepare and present the music at the best it could be, so other musicians who joined us were inspired by the high level of our ensembles. People were always surprised to learn that 90% of what happens within our music programs is volunteer-based.”

Larson viewed both Tambor and herself as pastoral spiritual leaders as well; “We didn’t just leave it at the music. I think the choir members knew we really cared about them. It really was caring for the whole person, knowing their strengths, how to shepherd them in so that they felt validated in their talent and skills. It was important to make every person feel

## Choir reflections



Teri Larson’s work at The Basilica of Saint Mary has been transcendent and I can confidently say that, having been a student and admirer of Teri’s work for the past 22 years, since joining the choirs as a mere 8-year-old. Teri’s persistence for musical excellence can’t be adequately summed up in words, because what she is able to bring out in her choirs every Sunday can often leave a person speechless or in tears or both. Her conducting skills are the finest I’ve ever sung under and how she manages to spiritually convey the messages of the music through her gestures is inspiring. I am lucky to have learned to love music from Teri Larson. Without her I would not be who I am today, teaching music to elementary students. Thank you, Teri.

— Ellen Christensen,  
Cathedral Choir and former  
Children’s Choir member

In Minnesota, we have many fine collegiate choir programs with a broad reputation of choral excellence. As an adult singer, it’s not easy to find a program to sing in that offers the same caliber of repertoire and performance level. I am grateful to Teri for her commitment to building a program here at The Basilica of Saint Mary that offers the challenge and reward of a great choral program to all levels, especially to experienced adult singers.

— Sister Chris Ludwig, Cathedral Choir

## Choir reflections



“Hello Everybody!” Walter always began our practices with that welcoming phrase. Always positive, extremely talented, and very mindful of building a Basilica singing family in Mundus, Walter created and honed a very special group of adults whom I call family. While we have lost Walter at the helm, we are forever grateful for his commitment to teaching us so many different language songs and enhancing our spiritual kinship. His legacy will never be forgotten.

— Rosemary Wentzell Ewing, *Mundus*

Walter has a great respect for every musician he encounters, and with that respect he uplifts and encourages them to strive for excellence. He is a thoughtful and nuanced musician and that comes through in his leadership as well. Anyone who has had an opportunity to work with Walter experiences the expansive journey music, and in particular liturgical music, can take us on.

— Mackenzie Kloempken,  
*Contemporary Ensemble*

equally valid and valued.” The singers, she added, “are really passionate and participative members of the Catholic faith, or whatever their faith tradition might be.”

Larson pondered being a pastor upon graduation, “but what my heart really wanted to do at the time was collegiate choir—that was my drive and passion. Then I was asked to audition for this position [at The Basilica] and I remember driving there thinking, ‘Wow, God! Be with me in this one!’ Coming from a strong Lutheran background, I had never set foot in The Basilica, even having grown up just 20 minutes south. I came into the building and felt like I’d been there before. I had the most comfortable audition; I really found a home and felt led to The Basilica. I felt like God knew that this would feed who I am. God gave me a real gift to lead a volunteer choir, as it’s my passion to help volunteer singers create beauty and use their talents for worship. I could also serve somewhat as a pastor to them. I just love the liturgy and have not regretted one day of coming to The Basilica.”

Tambor, too, saw his music ministry as a vocation. “I first studied architecture at the University of Notre Dame and music was an avocation. Outside of my professional architecture role, I volunteered in church music. I started wanting to return to music, as doing music became more important to me than doing architecture. At Notre Dame, the value of service was embedded and instilled in everything—whatever you do with your family or your professional career, service and work for your community was part of your value-based system. So when I had the opportunity

to do something that was of service that also was in line with my career goals, it was a magical fit. Church music and working with volunteers was what I was called to do.”

Larson concluded, saying, “I am simply in deep gratitude to The Basilica for providing a spiritual home that cares about the quality of music. It is a community of, for lack of a better word, like-minded people who are enveloping with love and nurturing with each other. It has been a wonderful, wonderful thing for myself, for my spouse (Basilica musician and composer-in-residence Dr. Donald Krubsack), and our family.



The Cathedral Choristers and Mundus at Palm Sunday 2019.

I could grow and learn and explore and push the edge a little bit on what we may use as part of our worship and prayer tools. Our community was open to receiving these things and accepting of new and different styles of music. I’m just very grateful for that opportunity of a lifetime.” ✚

*Melissa Streit is the Director of Engagement and Safe Environment Coordinator at The Basilica and has been an active volunteer and parish member since 1996.*