

# The Syd Birrell Legacy Fund

————— A CASE FOR SUPPORT





### FROM THE BOARD CHAIR

— The Peterborough Singers is a phenomenal choir. One of the best in Canada. But, as anyone who comes to our concerts, or who sings in the choir, also knows, it's much more than a great choir.

Many soloists who have sung with us describe returning to sing again as the feeling of returning *home*.

There's a deep heart in this choir. This is largely thanks to Syd, who has poured into the Singers not just his musical gifts, but also his heart for people. Because of this, the lives of thousands of people have been enriched.

The Singers' board of directors decided to create Syd's Legacy Fund after hearing from so many of you about how much you love and appreciate this choir. How much you need this choir. And how you are just as eager as we are to keep Syd's vision alive.

No arts group survives entirely off ticket sales. For 35 years, the Singers has thrived thanks to the generous donations of hundreds of music lovers like you. But now, as we transition to a new artistic director, is the time to plan boldly for the future.

That's what Syd's Legacy Fund is all about. It's about ensuring that the incredible choir Syd built, with **your** help, is still here, 35 years from now, making great music.

Syd will be missed. More than words can say. But, thanks to you, his legacy will go on. The music will go on.

*Today, I invite you to join this vital mission. With your generous support for the Syd Birrell Legacy Fund, you are helping the fun-loving, people-focused, excellence-pursuing spirit Syd infused into the Peterborough Singers flourish, for another 35 years.*

CAREY GIBSON, BOARD CHAIR

# Our Mission

THE PETERBOROUGH SINGERS is an auditioned choir committed to enriching and transforming lives through the learning, singing and sharing of choral music of the highest possible standard in our community.

Additionally, the Peterborough Singers is committed to the recruitment and training of youth, regularly commissioning music from Canadian composers, and partnering with other local arts and non-profit groups to create transformative artistic experiences.



*For our family music has never been just about the performance. It's about connection and community and the legacy that it brings. This gift wasn't just about remembering our Dad, it's about carrying forward what he stood for. Nurturing young voices, creating moments of wonder, and helping the arts to thrive for generations to come."*

SUSAN DUNKLEY, SINGERS MEMBER & LEGACY FUND CONTRIBUTOR





# Our Story

**IN THE LATE 1970s, A GROUP OF SINGERS FROM** the Peterborough community began annually performing Handel's *Messiah* with the Peterborough Symphony Orchestra (PSO). Internationally-trained organist and choral director Syd Birrell was tasked with rehearsing the choir.

By 1990, however, Syd and his wife Pamela were growing frustrated with the difficulties involved in rehearsing an ever-changing roster of singers for the challenging oratorio. So, they created the Peterborough Singers.

From the beginning, Syd and Pam agreed that the Singers would commit itself to the pursuit of the highest possible musical standards. As such, they decided to make the Singers an auditioned choir. Of the 70 original singers who sang with the PSO, only 17 passed their audition. However, over time the choir grew into the current powerhouse that it is. Currently it boasts over 130 choristers, willing and able to tackle even the most challenging choral music.

Each year, the choir performs four concerts. *Yuletide Cheer* is the choir's holiday-themed concert, and features sing-along carols, Christmas-themed motets, and the virtuosic, world-class Venebrass ensemble. The annual Handel's *Messiah* concert, in December, has become a core ingredient of the choir's repertoire, and a much-beloved Peterborough tradition.

In February, the choir performs a concert featuring popular music, including the music of The Beatles, Elton John, and Abba, as well as Broadway, Celtic, blues, and gospel favourites.

Finally, in May, the Singers performs one of the great classical oratorios. This has included Mozart's *Requiem*, Bach's *B-Minor Mass* and *St. Matthew Passion*, Verdi's *Requiem*, Mendelsohn's *Elijah*, Haydn's *Creation*, and many more.



“

THE PETERBOROUGH SINGERS  
ISN'T MY CHOIR.

**It's yours.**

THAT'S WHY I FEEL CONFIDENT ASKING  
FOR YOUR SUPPORT TODAY FOR **SYD'S  
LEGACY FUND**, KNOWING YOU WILL  
TAKE AS GOOD CARE OF IT AS YOU  
HAVE THESE PAST 35 YEARS.

”

MESSAGE FROM

# Syd Birrell

One bitterly cold evening in December, 2001, I stood at the podium and conducted Handel's *Messiah*. I had done so many times before. But this time was different. On this particular night, my eight-year-old son, James, lay dying at home.

I will never forget hearing the tenor, Eric Shaw, singing the first notes of the "Comfort Ye." As I wrote in an e-mail to friends and family when I got home that night, "How was it possible to have performed this work so many times before and missed so much of the message?" Hours later, James passed away.

Looking back, I don't know how my family and I could have survived that terrible time without the Peterborough Singers. How could we have carried on, without the compassionate care of so many choir members and audience members, and the beauty of the music to help us heal?

Over the past 35 years, countless people have shared similar stories with me. Stories about how the Singers helped them find hope in a time of difficulty; beauty when the world seemed to have lost colour; community when they were feeling isolated; and healing after loss.

Stories like that of the young woman who told me, some years ago, that before joining the choir she was in a very dark place. In fact, she was suicidal. But after singing with us, she said, she regained her love for life.

This is the power of great music, and a caring community. And that's why the music must go on...long after I'm gone!

For 35 years you, and thousands of people like **you**, have made all this possible. You have attended our concerts, sung with us, spread the word, volunteered your time, and donated. And in the process, you have helped make our city a more beautiful, music-filled, compassionate, and connected place.

The Peterborough Singers is not my choir. It never was. It's yours. That's why I feel confident asking for your generous support today for Syd's Legacy Fund.

This fund is not a monument, but rather a toolkit. It will help the choir with things like supporting emerging young artists, hiring world-class soloists who lift the roof, and maintaining all the invisible gears that keep the machine running

Above all, the success of this campaign for the Legacy Fund will help ensure that the music will go on...for the next 35 years!

Thank you for 35 glorious years of music, laughter, friendship and fun. From the bottom of my heart. Here's to the next 35!



SYD BIRRELL,  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

# Melody's Story

MELODY THOMAS, FORMER  
PETERBOROUGH SINGERS CHOIR MEMBER

“When I unexpectedly found myself without a home at the age of 17, it was Syd and the Peterborough Singers who came to my rescue.

As I like to tell people, overnight I went from having no parents, to having over 100!

Choir members found me a place to live. They provided me with food, clothing, furniture and more. And they encouraged me to dream.

With Syd and Pam’s help, and the help of so many choir members, I eventually obtained admission to the prestigious University of Toronto vocal music program...with a full scholarship!

I now run a music-teaching business in Peterborough, with a team of three teachers. I am so grateful that I can now give back to the community.

I hate to think where I would be, were it not for the generosity and care of Syd, and the hundreds of people, like you, who have supported the Peterborough Singers over the years.”







CAMPAIGN GOAL  
WE AIM TO RAISE

**\$250,000**

BY JUNE 30, 2026

We will aim for an initial goal of \$100,000  
by December 31, 2025.

## WHAT IS SYD'S LEGACY FUND?

The Singers board of directors created Syd's Legacy Fund to celebrate and honour Syd Birrell's achievements as Artistic Director of the Peterborough Singers for 35 years. The purpose of the fund is to preserve, with financial support, Syd's legacy and the Peterborough Singers' vision of enriching our community through choral music. **In other words, the Legacy Fund is a bold, forward-thinking investment in the future of the Peterborough Singers, ensuring that the music will go on in Peterborough for decades to come.**

# Campaign Priorities

## 1 — TRANSITION TO NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The Singers' Transition Committee is currently conducting a strategic search for our new artistic director. The results of that search will be announced early in 2026. The financial stability created by the success of this campaign for Syd's Legacy Fund will ensure that the choir can transition smoothly to a new artistic director. Or, as Syd likes to put it, it will ensure that the new director "walks into a room full of possibility."

## 2 — FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Every year, as budget permits, a certain amount will be moved from the Legacy Fund into long-term investments. These investments, and the interest on them, will secure the financial health and stability of the choir, ensuring that the choir thrives for the next 35 years. This is the primary long-term goal of the Legacy Fund.

## 3 — EMERGING TALENT

Over the past 35 years, the Peterborough Singers has played a key role in jump-starting the careers of numerous emerging Canadian artists by recruiting them as soloists. The Singers will be able to use up to \$5k/year from the Legacy Fund to hire exceptional emerging Canadian artists.

## 4 — WORLD-CLASS SOLOISTS

Great music requires great soloists. The Singers will be able to use up to \$10k/year from the Legacy Fund to help provide Peterborough residents with world-class musical experiences by hiring some of Canada's leading soloists and/or instrumentalists.

## 5 — COMMISSION CANADIAN COMPOSERS

The Singers will be able to use up to \$5k/year from the Fund to commission original works by Canadian composers. In this way, the choir will continue to do its part in nurturing a uniquely Canadian culture of choral creativity and excellence.





THE LEGACY OF

# James Birrell

In 1998, James Birrell, the son of the Singers' artistic director, Syd Birrell, was diagnosed with neuroblastoma, an unusually lethal form of cancer. He was just five years old.

James was treated, and went into remission. However, in 2000, the cancer returned. After a devastating battle, James passed away in the early morning of Dec. 17, 2001. He was only eight years old. Just hours before James' death, Syd had conducted that year's *Messiah* concert.

Throughout the Birrells' cancer journey, the choir and its audience members stood by them, providing them with community, compassion and practical support. When James passed away, the choir members and audience members who had journeyed with the Birrells mourned along with them.

And when the Birrells founded The James Fund, to raise money for neuroblastoma research, the choir performed a benefit concert and recorded a CD of a specially commissioned piece, with proceeds going to the James Fund.

As Syd explains, the experience with James changed the choir. The annual *Messiah* performance took on new, and deeper meaning. And the ties that bound the choristers and audience members alike to the choir became that much deeper.

The Peterborough Singers is committed to remembering James and preserving his legacy, by nurturing the same people- and community-focused spirit that Syd has continually brought to his role as artistic director.



THE STORY OF

# Adam Bishop

“I remember the first moment, as a young teen, that I realized I wanted to become a professional musician. I was singing *Messiah* with the Peterborough Singers. As I listened to tenor David Lee sing the first notes of the ‘Comfort Ye,’ I thought to myself, ‘Oh, wow, I want to do that!’

From that moment on, Syd and the Singers couldn’t have been more supportive. Throughout my music education at Queen’s, the Glenn Gould School, and the University of Toronto, I was fortunate to have the Singers hire me for several solo parts.

I cannot thank Syd enough for helping me fulfil my dream, and giving me so many opportunities to grow. I couldn’t be more thrilled that a focus on emerging artists is a centrepiece of this campaign for Syd’s Legacy Fund.

Young artists need our support now more than ever, so let’s do our part!”



*Dear Syd,*

*We want to express our heartfelt thanks for the impact you’ve had on our son’s musical journey. Your encouragement, guidance, and belief in his potential truly inspired him and helped him grow, not just as a musician, but as a person. It has meant so much to see you share not only your career and talent, but also your time, energy, and even your family with all of us.*



**KIM AND BRIAN BISHOP,  
PARENTS OF TENOR ADAM BISHOP**

**ADAM BISHOP, FORMER PETERBOROUGH  
SINGERS CHOIR MEMBER**



# singing levels

## HOW CAN YOU CONTRIBUTE?

### **'Prelude' Patrons**

\$100+

### **Sonata Society**

\$500+

### **Concerto Club**

\$1000+

### **Symphony Supporters**

\$5000+

### **Grand Finale Givers**

\$10,000+

### **'Encores' Enthusiasts**

\$50/month

### **'Legacy' Sustainer**

Anyone who has added The Peterborough Singers to their estate planning documents.



# How to give

## ONLINE

[peterboroughsingers.com/legacyfund](http://peterboroughsingers.com/legacyfund)

## CREDIT CARD

Fill out and return the enclosed form.

## CHEQUE

Please make cheques payable to *The Peterborough Singers* and include "*Syd Birrell Legacy Fund*" in the memo line.

### MAILING ADDRESS

211-171A Rink St.  
Peterborough, Ontario  
K9J 2J6

## PHONE

705.745.1820

## E-TRANSFER

Send to [singers@peterboroughsingers.com](mailto:singers@peterboroughsingers.com).

All donations to the Peterborough Singers are tax-deductible.

Scan here to  
donate now!



"Almost twenty-five years ago, Syd took a chance on a young tenor, bringing me in for *Messiah* in 2002. Thanks, Syd, for believing in me all those years ago and congratulations on 35 years of music making!"

**MICHAEL COLVIN,  
PROFESSIONAL TENOR**



# Your gift ch

"When I moved here from Toronto, I wondered how I would fill the gap of the choir I sang with in Toronto. When I attended the choir's presentation of *Carmina Burana* I know that the Peterborough Singers was the place for me... if only I was good enough to pass the audition!"

**GUY HANCHET,  
CHOIR MEMBER**

"We have looked forward to attending the Peterborough Singers performance of the *Messiah* for a few years now, since we moved to Peterborough from Toronto. The performance has been outstanding, every bit as good as Toronto, for much less, and with free parking!"

**MARY G., SINGERS FAN**





"The Peterborough Singers are incredible. You can feel the sense of community and care that Syd has built over the years. He's created something truly special."

**IAN SABOURIN,  
PROFESSIONAL  
COUNTER-TENOR**

# anges lives



"My wife Irene & myself come up from Cobourg each Christmas. It isn't Christmas until we have heard your wonderful rendition of Handel's *Messiah*. Thank you!"

**LAURENCE F.,  
SINGERS FAN**



"When I left Peterborough, I felt a great void in my life where the Peterborough Singers had once been. I have since found other musical outlets and other communities, but nothing will compare to the impact the Singers had on my life."

**NATASHA R.,  
FORMER CHOIR MEMBER**



## THE *music* MUST GO ON!

**Leave the legacy of music. Consider including  
The Peterborough Singers in your will.**

Contact the office for more details:

The Peterborough Singers  
[singers@peterboroughsingers.com](mailto:singers@peterboroughsingers.com)  
705.745.1820

Bussey Ainsworth Barristers  
Free and no-commitment consultations  
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