

Bill Rea ? It's the music of the season

There are many things that symbolize the holiday season, be it the crowds doing their shopping, community groups holding their celebrations or the music.

That's something that has always made the season special for me, among other things.

The music is special for many people. I know Christmas is coming when my wife sets her clock radio to the station that goes through December playing nothing but music appropriate for the season, and she has me tune into that station on my car radio when we travel together (I'm usually able to get permission to change stations for the hourly news).

But like I said, the music of this time of year means a lot to me too. It's part of the fondness I have for music that dates back to my high school days. It's also part of the enjoyment so many people, myself included, get from singing the tunes of the season. It's part of the tradition for me.

And speaking of tradition, I took part in what has been an annual event for several years now, namely traversing streets carolling. Having been in choirs in my high school days, it was not uncommon some 40 years ago for groups of classmates get together and tour the streets of various neighbourhoods. But I eventually graduated and turned my attention to other things.

But the attraction to the singing never left me.

Then some 30 years ago, I got involved with an organization that has a rather large membership. In time, one of the members with a certain amount of seniority, named Brian, became a good friend of mine. I eventually learned about the tradition he had started of leading a bunch of people through an Etobicoke neighbourhood singing the carols of the season. I joined the group one year and had a great time as we trooped up to the front doors of various homes. It had been many years since I had sung in a choir, so my voice was way out of practice. But that mattered very little, since the whole exercise involved a group of people interested in celebrating the season. And who cares if each carol represented a variety of keys?

This event takes place every year, usually the second Saturday of December, but I have not always taken part in it. There have times when I had to work, and other distractions. On the other hand, there have been lots of times when I have joined the group, and Beth has accompanied me for the last several years.

The latest edition of this tradition took place this past Saturday night. It came at an end of what had been a very busy and tiring day (a typical Saturday this time of year), and Beth had accompanied me the whole day, as is her normal Saturday routine.

I will admit the thought of giving the carolling a miss did occur to me. But I knew there were going to be friends involved, and I was anxious to touch some bases. Besides, I wanted to take part in the activity.

Again, harkening back to my high school days, I am convinced the most beautiful musical instrument on this planet is the human voice, and while there has been absolutely wonderful and splendid music composed over the centuries that involved no singing at all, it is voices that have made the great music. Perhaps my love of choral music slants my opinion, but multiple voices joined in song will seldom fail to result in something wonderful. And even if the quality of the singing is not quite up to concert-hall standards (I'm trying very hard not to be a critic), the simple enjoyment involved creates a sense of beauty all its own.

Which brings us to Saturday night.

The singing exercise was part of a much larger annual Christmas party. Only a relatively small percentage of those in attendance were ready to answer the call when our CEO Brian (he got that title because I personally conferred it on him) told his troops to saddle-up (fact is Beth and I hadn't even bothered removing our coats, knowing the call to action was not far away). About a dozen of us headed out, but the interesting thing is the numbers swelled during the roughly one hour we were out singing. True, there were a couple of party-goers who arrived late, but I'm sure a couple of total strangers joined us along the way. The more, the merrier. Brian had parcelled out carol sheets (almost 30 pages); the same one that we have sung from for years.

The routine involved walking up to houses that looked like the residents might be in residence. Brian would ring the bell, and we would all start singing. Once the occupant opened the door, he or she was handed a carol sheet, and once the singing had stopped, Brian would ask the resident to pick a favourite, and the assembly would comply.

That resulted in a couple of memorable moments.

One woman requested The First Noel (which I think was the first ?traditional? carol I learned in school), and we all suddenly realized that was one carol that was not on the sheet (all these years, and I hadn't noticed). We did the first two verses anyway, as I drew up memories from Grade 2 to get me through it.

More touching was one of the last stops we made. Brian, who is well familiar with the neighbourhood, led us in the singing of Silent Night as he rang the doorbell. The woman in the house opened the door, accompanied by her son, who was in arms and diapers when Brian and company first rang her doorbell some years ago. She responded to the rendition by singing the first verse of Silent

Night in Polish. Lovely!

Does the language really matter? In high school choirs, I sang many pieces in Latin, a language about which I know next to nothing. It's the music, and those who are singing it that really matters.

