

The Story of Con Brio – the first 25 years

The Goal

Con Brio today is the realization of a vision held by eight experienced choristers. Their goal was to achieve uncompromising musical excellence in an auditioned, amateur chamber choir.

Founding

After several weeks of discussions, the first formal meeting of the Founders took place at the home of Joan Matz at Chisholm Marina in Chester, Connecticut on September 6, 1997— the morning of Princess Diana's funeral. The founders were Peter Amos, Winnie Burnham, Anne Ferris, Joanne Godfrey, Ellie Grasso, Joan Matz, Kay Patch and Marcia Ryan.



The first photograph of Con Brio, taken at the First Congregational Church, Westbrook

On that day, Con Brio was launched, with each Founder pledging time, commitment and a personal financial contribution to provide the initial working capital. At that point Con Brio was still 'sine nomine' but by the same night, Joanne Godfrey had proposed the name Con Brio, which the Founders unanimously accepted — borrowing the Italian musical term meaning *with spirit*.

Events then moved rapidly and Con Brio's first concert took place just three months later, on December 2, 1997.

Mentors

The Founders consulted with two mentors: James Sinclair, the conductor of *Orchestra New England* and noted Ives scholar, and Dr. Peter Bagley of the *University of Connecticut*, then Professor of Choral Conducting. The discussions centered on setting appropriate musical goals and appointing a Music Director.

Music Director

By good fortune, well-known local author, friend, and musician, Ms. Caroline Cooney contacted the Founders to indicate that her brother Dr. Stephen Bruce might be available as a suitably qualified candidate, having recently moved to the shoreline. This was interesting, as many of the Founders had already met

Dr. Bruce when he conducted a performance of Haydn *Paukenmesse* at a *SummerSing*, a month or two earlier. On that occasion Dr. Bruce had created a very favorable impression.

Following a further meeting with Dr. Bruce, the Founders concluded that this would be a great match. Dr. Bruce came with an outstanding resume, including substantial choral conducting experience, and doctoral degree in music, plus great wit and personality.

Today, Con Brio owes much to Dr. Bruce, for his twenty-five years of musical leadership, his meticulously planned and executed rehearsals, his exceptional conducting skills, and his creative programming.

Associate Music Director

Ms. Donna Breen Stamm was appointed as Con Brio’s first Associate Music Director, a position she held until her retirement in 2009. Ms. Stamm was succeeded by Ms. Susan Saltus, who continues to hold the position.

Incorporation

Founding Member, the late Kay Patch, a retired attorney (the first woman to attend Georgetown Law School, and a former CIA operative), was instrumental in incorporating Con Brio Choral Society, Inc. in the State of Connecticut. She drafted the first set of By-Laws and obtained the chorus’s 501(c)3 not for profit status with the Internal Revenue Service.

Presidents

The past Presidents of Con Brio are listed below, the years indicating the start of each term.

1997 <i>Peter Amos</i>	2008 <i>Peter Amos</i>	2018 <i>Barbara Quinn</i>
2000 <i>Marcia Ryan</i>	2010 <i>Susan Rahr</i>	2020 <i>Rebecca Coffey</i>
2003 <i>Anthony Carrano</i>	2012 <i>Robert Sjogren</i>	2022 <i>Peter Amos</i>
2004 <i>Alan Head</i>	2014 <i>John van Epps</i>	
2006 <i>Sheldon Baker</i>	2016 <i>Peter Amos</i>	

In Memoriam

Con Brio mourns the passing of Members who worked so tirelessly to create and build Con Brio, and who loved to sing and to enjoy the company of fellow choristers. They would be so proud of Con Brio today. Con Brio is truly indebted to them. Their memory and their legacy live on in Con Brio’s music and in its true “Con Brio” spirit.

Con Brio has recognized the passing of its Members and of their close relatives, by singing at many of their Memorial Services. In 2011, the choir gave a special

performance of the incomparable Mozart *Requiem*, in remembrance of the life and service of past Con Brio President Marcia Ryan. The 2021 Christmas Concerts were dedicated to the fond memory of Sheldon Baker, President of Con Brio from 2006-2008.

Musical Homes

Con Brio initially performed at the First Congregation Church, Westbrook, Connecticut from 1997 to 2000, but outgrowing the space, moved to Old Saybrook Congregational Church in 2001. During 2002-2004 period, Con Brio's Christmas Concerts were presented in the Old Lyme Congregational Church, and Spring Concerts at the Andrews Memorial Hall in Clinton, Connecticut.

With the construction and dedication of the magnificent new Christ the King church in Old Lyme, Connecticut, Con Brio found a wonderful musical home, and has performed there consistently from 2006 onwards.

Con Brio is grateful to Monsignor Thomas R. Bride and the Reverend Joseph C. Ashe, for permission to sing in Christ the King church, with special thanks to William J. Thomas, Director of Music Ministries, and to all the church staff, who have been so welcoming and accommodating.

Musical Highlights

Highlights in the musical history of Con Brio include in Con Brio's first season (1997-8), joint performances of Beethoven *Mass in C* with the *Eastern Connecticut Symphony Chorus*, conducted by Dr. Peter Bagley, in New London, Connecticut — as well as in Carnegie Hall, New York, conducted by Jonathan Willcocks — which possibly may be a unique accomplishment for any newly-formed chorus.

In 1998 and 1999, Con Brio performed with *Orchestra New England* at its well-known *New England Colonial Concert*, in New Haven, Connecticut. In 1999, Con Brio also took part in the *George Flynn Classical Concert Series* with *Orchestra New England*, in Clinton, Connecticut. All these performances were conducted by Con Brio Mentor James Sinclair.

In 2006 Con Brio gave joint performances with the *Mystic River Chorale* of Vaughan Williams' powerful and moving *Dona Nobis Pacem* and in the Spring of 2010 further joint performances with the *Mystic River Chorale*, featuring a premier of the newly published concert version of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*.

The chorus also performed two notable premiers: *Didn't it Rain!* by University of Connecticut scholar Dr. Peter Bagley, commissioned by Con Brio to mark in 2007 its tenth anniversary, and the newly discovered Vivaldi masterpiece *Dixit Dominus* RV807. Con Brio also presented in 2011 and 2012, *Rejoice*, and *Alpha and Omega*, two very recent American works, by Connecticut composer Gwyneth Walker, both performances attended by the composer.

Since its founding, and with increasing confidence and with growing resources, Con Brio has transitioned from in-house amateur and semi-professional soloists, to exclusively professional soloists, to world-class professional soloists. Audience and chorus alike were enthralled by Mihae Lee's electrifying piano performance in the Beethoven *Choral Fantasia* in 2016. Continuing this tradition of excellence, Con Brio welcomed back internationally acclaimed soprano Patricia Schuman for its 20th Anniversary Gala Concert on April 23, 2017, performing Beethoven *Mass in C*, and the magnificent *Easter Hymn* from *Cavalleria Rusticana*.



Mihae Lee

Highlights of 2018 were Haydn *Lord Nelson Mass*, a perennial favorite, and the adoption of a new tradition in the making – a lively brass fanfare as the chorus processes onto its risers.

In 2019 Con Brio welcomed acclaimed concert pianist Randal Hodkinson, in performance of Gershwin *Rhapsody in Blue* for piano, orchestra, and chorus.



Patricia Schuman

Covid-19

With great disappointment to choristers and audience alike, four concerts in 2020-2021 were cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions, as well as the 2020 Concert Tour to Italy, and the 2020 and 2021 *SummerSings* Festivals. The chorus did however create several virtual performances on video during this exceptionally challenging time.

25th Anniversary Season

Con Brio is resilient, and its members love to sing! In September 2021 the chorus joyously returned in preparation for its 25th Season, including its 2021 Christmas Concerts, and culminating in a Gala Spring Concert (April 10, 2022) featuring the first piece that the Founders of Con Brio ever performed under the baton of Dr. Stephen Bruce – Haydn, *Missa in tempore belli (Paukenmesse)*, in C major, with special guest soloists.

European Tours

Con Brio has enjoyed eight European Concert Tours, with the ninth being considered for 2025. As well as singers, Con Brio invites non-singers to join these memorable trips. Con Brio trips are fully paid for by the touring members them-selves, and are not supported in any way through the general budget.

Con Brio has made the following concert tours:

2005: *Northern Italy*

2014: *Catalonia and France*

2008: *Germany, Czech Republic*

2016: *Portugal and Western Spain*

2010: *Southern Italy and Sicily*

2018: *Croatia and Slovenia*

2012: *Southern Spain*

2023: *Italy and Southern France*

Each of these tours has had very special moments and memories for Con Brio.

In **Northern Italy** in 2005, the chorus remembers hearing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, played in his own church in **Venice**, Chiesa di Santa Maria della Pietà, and singing in the Basilica Cattedrale Patriarcale di San Marco (St. Mark's Basilica). Later in the same trip Con Brio sang in Brunelleschi's extraordinary Santa Maria del Fiore (the Duomo) in **Florence**, with its monumental seven second echo.

Con Brio also greatly enjoyed participating in a joint concert with the *Coro Alpino* of Saint Vincent, in the **Valle D'Aosta**, where the whole town turned out for the performance. This was a very special event that Con Brio's late and wonderful friend and supporter Gino Origlia had thoughtfully arranged.

In **Germany** in 2008, Con Brio took a very special "pilgrimage" to Johann Sebastian Bach's two famous churches in **Leipzig** — the Thomaskirche, which houses Bach's simple, understated tomb, and the Nicolaikirche, where Con Brio had the privilege to sing.

The chorus also took part in the **Dresden Music Festival**, joining with several German choruses on the Brühlsche Terrasse, also known as the "Balcony of Europe," performing outdoors, on the banks of the Elbe. The combined choirs, together with a full symphony orchestra, performed to a wildly enthusiastic audience of some 15,000 in the grand finale of the Festival: "*Dresden Singt.*"

Later, on the same tour, in **Prague**, Con Brio gave a joint concert with *Gaudium Praha* in the Klementinum, Mirror Chapel, a high baroque masterpiece. This truly beautiful and unique chapel was built in 1724, with



Dresden Singt



Con Brio at St. Peter's Basilica

extensive frescos and carvings. It houses two 18th century organs, one played by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart on his visits to the Klementinum.

On Con Brio's 2010 tour of **Southern Italy**, the first stop was **Rome** and the **Vatican**. Here Con Brio sang the Eve of the Ascension Mass, on May 12, 2010, in St. Peter's Basilica, (the largest church in the world), before three Cardinals, many Bishops, numerous other clergy, and a congregation estimated to number 3,000. Con Brio was seated in the choir stalls before the High Altar, and Assistant Music Director, Sue Saltus, played the magnificent 4-manual organ.

Con Brio's tour of **Southern Spain** in 2012 included many memorable concerts, as well as the opportunity to visit the incomparable Alhambra and the Cathedral of Seville, the third largest church in the world, and the burial place of Christopher Columbus.

Overseas concert tours never fail to surprise and delight. The "parish church" Santa Maria la Mayor Church in **Ronda**, was extraordinarily large and beautiful, combining Moorish, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture. Con Brio was seated in the magnificent and elaborately carved and gilded Choir. Following the concert, the church, the host choir, and town entertained Con Brio with a memorable dinner, many toasts, and much further singing.

In **France** in 2014, Con Brio performed a joint concert in conjunction with *Choeur Azalaïs of Thenon* at the Eglise de Notre Dame de l'Assomption, in **Domme**. This is one of the most beautiful fortified hilltop villages in France, founded in 1281, overlooking the Loire valley.

The ancient town gates were too narrow for the Con Brio tour bus, so the choir rode up, in full concert dress, in “Le Petit Train,” Disney-style. Possibly most noteworthy musically, was the juxtaposition of *Coney Island Baby*, a 1924 Barbershop Quartet piece sung by five Con Brio men, with *Sumer Is Icumen In*, an ancient English medieval round from the 13th century sung by the host chorus. It worked. Con Brio boldly claims that this was the first such programming combination in the entire history of music.

In **Toulouse**, Con Brio was honored by the Mayor and City of Toulouse with a formal civic reception, with champagne toasts, given in the magnificent Capitol in the main square.

In **Porto, Portugal** in 2016, Con Brio was invited to take part in the International Choral Festival sponsored by the University of Porto “II EICOUPI.” Choirs included:

Con Brio Choral Society, Coro Classico de Orfeão Universitário de Porto, Orfeon Académico de Coimbra and Coral de Letras da Universidade do Porto.

Yet despite all these grand and even ostentatious occasions, possibly the most spiritually moving experience for the Ladies and Gentlemen of Con Brio was performing in a humble backstreet church in **Madrid** in 2016. Con Brio was truly honored to present a free concert at San Antón Church, (also live-streamed on the internet), attended by Padre Ángel, Founder and President, Fundación Mensajeros de la Paz (Messengers for Peace).



Taking Le Petit Train



Civic reception at the Capitol in Toulouse



Concert at San Antón Church, Madrid

Padre Ángel has been internationally recognized for his tireless outreach to the poor, the homeless and the forgotten. It all started here. San Antón is open 24/7 to all faiths, and to those with no faith. Pets are welcome, there is coffee, food, showers, phone chargers, and a safe haven to find rest, counsel, and practical help.

In 2018 Con Brio toured **Croatia** and **Slovenia**, performing in Zagreb, Ljubljana, Opatija, Trogir and Dubrovnik.



Padre Ángel



Joint concert with chorus 'VNA' at the Church of the Annunciation, Opatija, Croatia

Con Brio Style

One of the defining characteristics of the group has been its eclectic mix of musical styles, from Bach, Beethoven, Handel, Haydn and Mozart to twentieth century composers such as Britten, Vaughan Williams, Kodaly, Rutter, and Bernstein, in addition to American spirituals, Christmas carols, and works by modern American composers.

Over its first quarter century, Con Brio has created and established this “Con Brio style,” with varied, exciting and challenging programming, but always in genres that its growing, loyal audience loves:

- 8 and 12-part renaissance pieces sung “in the round,” in the renaissance Venetian style
- A Cappella pieces
- Major works, scored for chorus, professional soloists and full professional orchestra
- Old fashioned Christmas Concerts exploring a wide range of Christmas repertoire
- Exciting new works by American composers
- Long-lost, but recently discovered music, such as Vivaldi Dixit Dominus RV807
- Powerfully moving pieces that speak to us of peace, including Jenkins L’Homme Armé (A Mass for Peace), which included Muslim chanting in the Call to Prayer, and Vaughan Williams setting of Walt Whitman’s poems, Dona Nobis Pacem.

Con Brio’s annual Christmas Concerts (extended to two performances since 2010, to meet popular demand) explore the richness of musical creativity that the Christmas story has evoked throughout the centuries. Although Con Brio is not affiliated with any church or faith, virtually all of the greatest choral music of all time has been inspired by the Roman Liturgy, in particular the Tridentine Mass, as well as the Gospels and the Books of the Old Testament. The great composers have left an extraordinary legacy in such musical settings, but possibly the greatest master of all time was Johann Sebastian Bach. Con Brio was proud to present a part of Bach’s mighty *Christmas Oratorio* in December 2016.

In addition to mastering a wide repertoire of music over the last quarter century, Con Brio has tackled the challenge of singing in many languages, including English, Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, Brazilian Portuguese, French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Czech, Hebrew, and Russian. Con Brio has also performed, sans language, in the “Swingle” style, presenting Bach *Fugue in G minor* and Rossini *William Tell Overture*.

With so much choral literature yet to explore, Con Brio looks forward eagerly with great anticipation to the next twenty five years. One of the chorus’s long-standing goals is to perform the monumental 40-part a cappella renaissance motet *Spem in Alium* by Elizabethan composer Thomas Tallis c. 1570. It is considered to be the finest example of early English music, scored for 8 choirs, each comprising 5 voices, to be sung antiphonally, in a great space.

Following performances of Bach’s exquisite motet *Jesu Meine Freude* in 2008, and the Bach *Magnificat*, in 2000 and 2011, Con Brio’s musical goals would surely be incomplete without exploring Bach’s greatest and most profound major works, without doubt the pinnacle of choral music. Could there be a place for the *Mass in B minor* and the *St. Matthew Passion* in Con Brio’s future? Each is widely hailed as one of the greatest compositions in all musical history.

Outreach

Con Brio has established outreach to a broader audience with an emphasis on children and families and the community at large.

- Con Brio developed a special interactive program for children in 2009 and 2010, which included the chorus and orchestra and featured *ffortissimo* the Clown (Matt Saltus). One of the features of these concerts was to disperse the orchestra throughout the audience, so the children could sit together with the instrumentalists. Con Brio remembers these occasions with great



ffortissimo the Clown with Brenda Baker

pleasure and is very grateful to artist Brenda Baker, the late wife of late past President of Con Brio Sheldon Baker, for her gift of charming original illustrations for posters and programs, for her indefatigable support, and for her wonderful flower arrangements.

- In 2010 Con Brio was selected by the Essex Elementary School to perform in its Cultural Arts Program presenting a series of mini concerts to the young students.
- In 2013 Con Brio, in a joint effort with the Community Music School, Centerbrook, Connecticut established a Children's Choir. These singers, from grade four through eight, joined Con Brio to perform Rutter's *Mass of the Children*.
- Con Brio has given numerous benefit concerts: (*Key Crossings*, 2000 at St. Ann's Church, Old Lyme, Connecticut; *Connecticut River Arts Collective*, 2000 at St. Joseph's Church, Chester, Connecticut; *Friends of Harkness*, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007, at the Eolia Mansion, Harkness State Park, Waterford, Connecticut.)
- Con Brio, in collaboration with *Cappella Cantorum* sponsors the highly successful annual *SummerSings* program. This is a summer festival of choral music, *open to all comers*, taking place on Monday evenings in June and August. Special guest conductors are invited. The concept is to read through and perform a major choral work, all in one evening. Since the inception of *SummerSings*, singers have had the pleasure to perform under notable conductors such as Lyndon Woodside, Richard Coffey, James Sinclair, Peter Bagley, and many others.

Membership

Today Con Brio comprises over 60 highly motivated singers from New Haven, Connecticut, to Groton, Connecticut. Con Brio has attracted professional musicians, music teachers, and enthusiastic amateurs alike, many of whom sing or have sung with other choruses including Concora, Hartford Chorale, The New Haven Chorale, Pro Arte Festival Chorus, Oratorio Society of New York, Connecticut Gilbert and Sullivan Society, Eastern Connecticut Symphony Chorus, Mystic River Chorale, Shoreline Chorale, Cappella Cantorum, and numerous local church choirs.



Spring 2016 rehearsal in Christ the King Church, Old Lyme, Connecticut

Financial Stability

Con Brio is very much an organization of volunteers, committed singers who joyfully give of their time and talents to make the nuts and bolts of the organization work. This has enabled the chorus to achieve a degree of financial stability, putting Con Brio in a secure position to look ahead with confidence to the next 25 years.

Con Brio wishes to thank all who have so generously supported the chorus since its inception.

Supporting Con Brio

If you are reading this program you are already an enthusiastic supporter. Con Brio loves you, its appreciative audience. Thank you — there is no greater pleasure than performing wonderful music to a packed house.

Should you wish to do more, Con Brio welcomes your tax-deductible donations. Information on how to donate may be found in this program, or on the website **www.conbrio.org** where you can instantly and securely donate online, with any major credit card.