

The Story of Con Brio

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

The first formal meeting of the Founders took place on September 6, 1997. The founders were Peter Amos, Winnie Burnham, Anne Ferris, Joanne Godfrey, Ellie Grasso, Joan Matz, Kay Patch and Marcia Ryan.

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



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

First Music Director

Con Brio owes much to its first Music Director, Dr. Stephen Bruce, for over a quarter century of musical leadership. We owe Dr. Bruce so much for his meticulously planned rehearsals, exceptional conducting skills, and creative programming. Dr. Bruce retired in 2025.

First Associate Music Director

Ms. Donna Breen Stamm was 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 retired in 2025.

Music Director

In the summer of 2025 Con Brio was honored and delighted to welcome Chris Shepard as its new Music Director. Mr. Shepard brings a wealth of choral conducting and vocal coaching experience and is a noted Bach scholar. He is also serves as Artistic Director of *CONCORA*, Connecticut's widely-acclaimed premier professional chorus.

Associate Music Director

In a year of many changes, Con Brio also welcomed in 2025 Kathleen Bartkowski as its new Associate Music Director. Ms. Bartkowski is a highly accomplished artist, with extensive experience in working with both amateur and professional choirs.

Incorporation

Con Brio Choral Society, Inc. is incorporated in the State of Connecticut, with 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>	2024 <i>Rebecca Coffey</i>
2006 <i>Sheldon Baker</i>	2016 <i>Peter Amos</i>	2026 <i>Wendy Mill</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.

Musical Highlights

Highlights in the musical history of Con Brio include in Con Brio’s first season (1997-8), joint performances of Beethoven’s *Mass in C Minor* 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 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 2011and 2012, *Rejoice*, and *Alpha and Omega*, two very recent American works, by Connecticut composer Gwyneth Walker, both performances attended by the composer.

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's *Mass in C*, and the magnificent *Easter Hymn* from *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

25th Anniversary Season

After the COVID lock-down, the chorus joyously returned 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's *Missa in tempore belli (Paukenmesse)*, in C major.

European Tours

Con Brio has enjoyed eight European Concert Tours, with a tenth being planned for May/June 2027:

2005: *Northern Italy*

2008: *Germany, Czech Republic*

2010: *Southern Italy and Sicily*

2012: *Southern Spain*

2014: *Catalonia and France*

2016: *Portugal and Western Spain*

2018: *Croatia and Slovenia*

2023: *Italy and Provence*

2025: *Germany, France and Switzerland*



Mihae Lee



Patricia Schuman

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, including Dan Forrest.

Over its first two decades, Con Brio has created and established this “Con Brio style,” the 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.*

Financial Stability

Sound finances have been achieved over more than a quarter century of careful stewardship of resources, together with increasing ticket revenues from a loyal and growing audience. Additional support has come from businesses and stores in the local community, and significant donations from private and institutional Donors and Grantors, including the State of Connecticut.

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 our website, **www.conbrio.org**