



The New England Youth Ensemble and Columbia Union College Columbia Chorale perform under the direction of Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in a 2003 concert celebrating the college's centennial.

The New England Youth Ensemble

Since its founding forty years ago, the New England Youth Ensemble has become a household name in Adventist churches, an acclaimed ensemble both here and abroad. It has traveled more widely than any other Adventist music group, taking countless tours in the U.S. and throughout the world. Under its professional name, the New England Symphonic Ensemble, it is a resident orchestra at Carnegie Hall, where it has performed more frequently than any other orchestra in the country.

The ongoing story of the New England Youth Ensemble, now in existence for forty years, is a one of record-setting accomplishments and numerous

accolades. Its successes can be attributed to its director, Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse, accomplished violinist and pianist, an unstoppable woman with a dream and the determination to prevail, whatever the cost.

Hundreds of students have played

in the ensemble and sung in choirs assisting it, performing in dozens of countries around the world. Their work and that of Rittenhouse and the choirs' directors have inspired and uplifted numberless persons in enthusiastic and grateful audiences everywhere.

The NEYE began when Rittenhouse formed a small ensemble of her students in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, and started performing locally. Positive reactions to these appearances led to an expanded group and, in December 1969, participation in a Christmas program at the First Unitarian Church in nearby Northboro, Massachusetts. In that same month, they also played for a Kiwanis Luncheon in Worcester, at the request of that community's orchestra director. It was during this time that the group became known as the New England Youth Ensemble.

In 1970, they played at the General Conference Session in Atlantic City, New Jersey. This exposure led to an invitation for them to play at the All-European Youth Congress in Edinburgh, Scotland, in July 1973.

This was the first international trip for the ensemble, which now numbered 25 students, including the four children in the Taylor Family String quartet. After a five-day en-route stop in Iceland, where they played four concerts and did extensive sightseeing, they traveled on to Scotland.

The ensemble played an important role in the Congress, held in Edinburgh's famous Usher Hall. They opened the event with the *Trumpet Tune and Air*, a rousing prelude that was followed by the entry of Scottish bagpipers and flag-bearing delegates. They performed ten more times during the four-day event and closed it with a final concert.

The ensemble then had a brief two-day stop in London, where they played in the New Gallery Center, an Adventist

outreach center in that city, before crossing the channel into France.

They next traveled to the Ecoles d'Americaine de Fontainebleau outside Paris, where they gave a concert for world-famous composer and teacher Nadia Boulanger and other teachers and students at the music school. This discerning group's enthusiastic response during and after



The earliest known photograph of the NEYE (1970)

their performance was affirmation at the highest level, an exciting end to this first venture abroad.¹

Beginning in 1974, the ensemble enjoyed the sponsorship of Friendship Ambassadors², a cultural exchange program underwritten by the *Reader's Digest* and its former editor, Harry Morgan. Their first trip to Europe



President Gerald Ford publicly thanks the NEYE and choir at the end of its 1975 performance in Poland at the Vilanow Palace.

in this program was a tour to Poland that year. It began inauspiciously when during their first week there they were

quartered in a woefully inadequate hostel. During that time, their interpreter and tour guide, who had an antipathy towards Christians and a preference for jazz, prevented them from doing any performing.

At the end of the week, Rittenhouse courageously approached officials in what was at that time a communist country and requested a new tour guide.

Those associated with the program hastened to rectify the situation.

They arranged for vastly improved lodging and assigned two new interpreters and guides, who scheduled seventeen memorable concerts for the group in the remaining two weeks of the tour. By the time they left, they had had an enormous impact on thousands and were told that a request had already been lodged for them to return to Poland.

When they returned a year later, assisted by a choral group conducted by Francisco de Araujo, they were placed under the oversight of the two guides who had salvaged the previous year's trip. Midway through this tour, they spent four days in Vienna sightseeing and playing during the General Conference Session being held in that city.

They returned to Poland where, by coincidence, U.S. President Gerald Ford and his wife were visiting while attending the Helsinki Conference in Finland. Last minute arrangements were made for the ensemble and choir to perform following the

state dinner hosted by the president for the premier of Poland. The program was well received and as the final



number, *America the Beautiful* ended, the Americans, who had literally been moved to tears, and others in the audience responded with emotional and heartfelt applause.

Following the concert, President Ford on his own returned to the site of the performance, where breakdown of the setup was occurring, wanting to personally thank the members for their concert. Once the group had reassembled, he stood in its midst and praised them for their music and representation of America's youth, finally exiting with a farewell. They received a thank-you letter from him a few weeks later.

In the decade following

these initial forays into Europe, the Ensemble returned in 1976, one of the first two groups chosen to enter Russia under the sponsorship of Friendship Ambassadors.

Following five days in the Warsaw, Poland, area, they entered Russia, where they performed for twelve days. They ended the tour with a concert in historic Leningrad and then had an impromptu visit at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory of Music. The Associated Press spread the word about this groundbreaking trip and its successes; Radio Moscow released tapes of the group's concerts for broadcast across the country.

In those ten years, the ensemble toured to the Caribbean several times and to Canada, Austria, Romania, Israel, Hungary, France, and other countries in Europe, some of them multiple times.

On those tours they performed in world famous venues, including Notre Dame and Chartres cathedrals in France; the Dom in Salzburg and the Karlskirche in Vienna; San Marco in Venice; as well as St. Martin-in-the-Fields and cathedrals at York, Leeds, and St. Giles in Great Britain.

They also traveled extensively in the U.S., playing in such nationally noted places as the Riverside, St Patrick's, and St. Bartholomew's churches in New York City and the

countries in Europe including those in Scandinavia. They have also traveled to China and multiple times to South Africa and Australia and other islands in the Pacific.³ And the tradition of playing at the church's General Conference Sessions, begun in 1970, has continued without break to the present.

Rittenhouse, in an interview with Lincoln Steed in 2001, when asked about any incident that stood out in her memory after all her years of traveling, recalled a concert given in a stadium

at St. Petersburg in 1997. The response of the crowd of 15,000 during and following the concert, which was given as part of an evangelistic series, moved her deeply. While there, she and the ensemble witnessed the baptisms of hundreds of persons.⁴

Beginning in 1975, when

Araujo and the Takoma Chorale under his direction had joined the ensemble for its



A 1983 performance of the NEYE in St. Bartholomew's Church

Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. They have since performed numerous times in the latter's Sunday morning telecast of the Hour of Power.

The pace established in that first decade of travel that had started with the trip to Scotland in 1973 has continued now for over two more decades and into a new century. In that time, in addition to crisscrossing the U.S. numerous times and performing several times in Canada, the ensemble and assisting choirs have returned to the Middle East and Poland, Russia, England, and other

second tour to Poland, the NEYE began traveling with choirs on some of their tours. One of these in the 1970s included James Bingham's symphonic choir from Kingsway College. The directors enjoyed the many experiences of working together that followed in that decade, and in 1985, when Bingham became chair of the music program and choir director at Atlantic Union College, where Rittenhouse and the NEYE were based, they began performing and touring together on a regular basis.⁵

In 1988, when Bingham's Collegiate Choir was invited to perform in Carnegie Hall as part of the



Mid-America Productions program, Rittenhouse suggested they include the NEYE as the assisting orchestra. The reception for that concert in May 1988 led to an invitation for a return engagement in November.

The second concert featured violin soloist Lyndon Taylor and the choral music of noted English composer John Rutter, who prepared the choir and orchestra for the performance. The success of that venture led to an ongoing collaboration with the composer in subsequent concerts at Carnegie Hall and other venues as well as a concert tour in South Africa.⁶

In 1994, Rittenhouse and Bingham accepted positions at Columbia Union College in the Washington, D.C., area. Rittenhouse and the relocated NEYE now joined with Bingham's CUC choral groups to continue touring and performing concerts.⁷

In May 2003, they presented a gala concert at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts featuring Rutter and his music. In this program, which launched a two-year celebration of the school's centennial, Rittenhouse conducted Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte Overture* to open the concert and Bingham began the second half by conducting Vaughan William's *Serenade to Music*. Guest conductor Rutter conducted two of his well-known and popular works, the *Gloria* and *Requiem*, and closed the program with *Feel the Spirit*, a recently composed medley of African-American spirituals featuring the choir and orchestra and soloist mezzo-soprano Sylvia Twine. The concert ended with a three-minute standing ovation.⁸

The use of soloists with the NEYE is a longstanding tradition that started in its earliest concerts. Sylvia Twine is but one example of recent vocal soloists that included Alex Henderson, a tenor who appeared with the orchestra more than any other.

Instrumental soloists are most often students from within the group. Once they have demonstrated they are ready, they must be prepared to play on short notice at any time on a tour, called upon at random by Rittenhouse, sometimes even in the middle of a concert. Many well-known Adventist musicians have started or were given a boost in their career as soloists while associated with the ensemble.



Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse's *The Vision of the Apocalypse*, in its premier at Carnegie Hall in March 2004

Violinists Lyndon Taylor, Carla Trynchuk, Lynelle Smith, Dawn Harnes, Naomi Burns Delafield, and Preston Hawes have all served as both concertmaster and soloists. Other soloists have included violists Lucy Taylor and Laurie Redmer (Minner) and pianists Eileen Hutchins and Jacquie Schafer (Zuill), the latter also serving as principal player in the second violin section.⁹

It is a tradition in the Ensemble that members of the group support and affirm each other at all times,

especially when one of them is featured as a soloist. The constant touring and arduous schedules have led to rules and protocols of the road, one of which is that complaining is not an option.

There are worships on a regular basis, and prayer circles when they are faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges. Friday Night Prayer Fellowships, when possible, help create a spiritual and caring dynamic within the group.

Since some of the touring occurs in the school year and is in conflict with school schedules, study times are set aside on the bus as it travels between concerts. Members of the Ensemble have been able to do well in their studies in spite of absences from classes.

In March 2004, Bingham conducted the world premier of *The Vision of the Apocalypse*, an oratorio by Rittenhouse, in Carnegie Hall. She narrated the presentation, a dramatization of the Great Controversy between good and evil as portrayed in Adventist doctrine, assisted by the New England Symphonic Ensemble

(professional branch of the NEYE), the CUC Columbia Collegiate Chorale, conducted by Bingham, and the Atlantic Union College Pro-Arts International Choir, conducted by Araujo. The capacity audience responded with an enthusiastic and prolonged standing ovation at the end of this Mid-America Productions sponsored concert, the seventeenth to be given in Carnegie Hall that year by a CUC music group.¹⁰

Rittenhouse, born in Canada, spent her childhood in South Africa, where her father, George E.



Shankel, was president of Helderberg College. She was a performing and composing prodigy who, at age ten, debuted in a network broadcast, performing her own compositions. At age thirteen she won a scholarship for study at the University of South Africa on both piano and violin.

She started her career at Walla Walla College, now university, in the fall of 1945, a year after completing a music degree at the University of Washington. She taught for one year, before going to AUC, where she taught violin and piano until the early 1950s. During that time she completed an M.Mus. at Boston University and married Harvey Rittenhouse, a surgeon and musician. She completed a DMA at Peabody Conservatory in 1963.

The Rittenhouses then worked in Jamaica from 1954-56 and also in 1961, where he practiced medicine and she taught music. They returned to live in the community near AUC in 1964 and, five years later, she started the Ensemble.¹¹

The oratorio performed at Carnegie Hall was a refined and expanded version of a previous oratorio, *The Song of the Redeemed*, that she had premiered in 1946, at the end of her year at WWC. She had started writing portions of it at age twelve, inspired by reading the book of Revelation.¹² The destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, had inspired her to complete a final version of this evolving, lifelong work in progress.



Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse

Mid-America Productions. Preston Hawes, who serves as concertmaster and associate conductor, assists Rittenhouse in her work with that group.¹³ The NEYE under Rittenhouse and the Columbia Collegiate Chorale continue to tour internationally and in the U.S., taking two trips a year, with Bingham serving as the primary conductor.

Now that the NEYE is in its fortieth year, the question, "How much longer will the NEYE continue?" is heard with increasing frequency. The answer lies with Rittenhouse, who seemingly unfazed by the passage of time, would probably respond in amused wonderment with one of her own, "Why do you ask?"

Dan Shultz

¹ Factual information about the NEYE, its beginnings, travels in its first twenty years, and the dynamic and practices within the ensemble, is based on information provided in *Encore, The Story of the New England Youth Ensemble*, Dorothy Minchin-Comm and Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse, Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1988.

² This program, originally the Ambassadors for Friendship, now the Friendship Ambassadors Foundation, started in 1973. The NEYE was one of the first ensembles chosen to participate in a program, which in subsequent years has sent hundreds of ensembles overseas, including a number of SDA school groups.

³ Additional sources for this listing of countries include an article in *Dialogue* by Lincoln Steed, "Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse: Dialogue with a musician with an up-tempo vision for Adventist education," 14(3), 20, 21, 2002; Articles in 2003 and 2004 *IAMA Notes*, fully listed in endnotes 6 and 9.

⁴ Steed, article mentioned in endnote 3.

⁵ Dan Shultz, "Music at Atlantic Union College," *IAMA Notes*, Winter/Spring 2003, 16.

⁶ Steed, article mentioned in endnote 3; Music groups return from Carnegie Hall, CUC website, 19 April 2005; see also endnote 7.

⁷ Interviews: James Bingham and Virginia Gene Rittenhouse, September 2003 and an email exchange with Bingham in March 2009.

⁸ Dan Shultz, "Columbia Union College at Kennedy Center," *IAMA Notes*, Summer/Autumn 2003, 3-5.

⁹ Biographies for these persons available at www.iamaonline.com

¹⁰ News note in *IAMA Notes*, Summer/Autumn 2004, 20.

¹¹ Rittenhouse biography is provided at www.iamaonline.com.

¹² "Oratorio Choir, Orchestra, Premier *Song of the Redeemed*, *The Collegian*, Walla Walla campus newspaper, 2 May 1946; Billie Jean Fate, Musically Speaking column, *The Collegian*, 9 May 1945.

¹³ Email exchange with Preston Hawes in autumn 2008 and information in the resulting *IAMA* biography.

Columbia Union College Choral Program

James Bingham established the Columbia Collegiate Chorale, one of two choirs at Columbia Union College, when he became chair of the music department and director of choral activities at the school in 1994. Under his leadership, both the Chorale and Pro Musica, a choir founded in 1967 by the late Paul Hill, have gained national and international acclaim for the quality of their work. They have sung at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. and performed numerous times in Carnegie Hall and other notable venues across the country and around the world.

Both choirs have toured extensively in the U.S. and internationally on their own, as well as in partnership with the New England Youth Ensemble and its professional counterpart the New England Symphonic Ensemble. They have sung in famous concert halls and cathedrals in every region of the world, and on six continents, including Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America, and Australia, Bingham's native country.

Among the many events they have been invited to participate in was the 1995 Jerash International Festival in Jordan, where the Chorale and the NESE performed under the sponsorship of Queen Noor, as well as numerous concerts featuring the music of and conducted by noted composer John Rutter.

Bingham began recording his choirs while at Atlantic Union College and has continued this project at CUC. Recent recordings include the Louis Vierne *Messe Solennelle in c minor* and Bingham's *Requiem*.

Biographies for the following persons associated with the NEYE can be found at www.iamaonline.com

FRANCISCO J. de ARAUJO
JAMES BINGHAM
RACHELLE BERTELSEN DAVIS
NAOMI BURNS DELAFIELD
PRESTON HAWES

EILEEN HUTCHINS
JAIME JORGE
EARL RANEY
LAURIE REDMER MINNER
VIRGINIA-GENE RITTENHOUSE

JACQUIE SCHAFER ZUILL
WIN OSBORN SHANKEL
ELAINE MYERS TAYLOR
LEONARD MORRIS TAYLOR
LYNDON JOHNSTON TAYLOR

LUCILLE TAYLOR
MORRIS TAYLOR
CARLA TRYNCHUK
JASON WELLS

The New England Symphonic Ensemble is now the official orchestra-in-residence at Carnegie Hall for