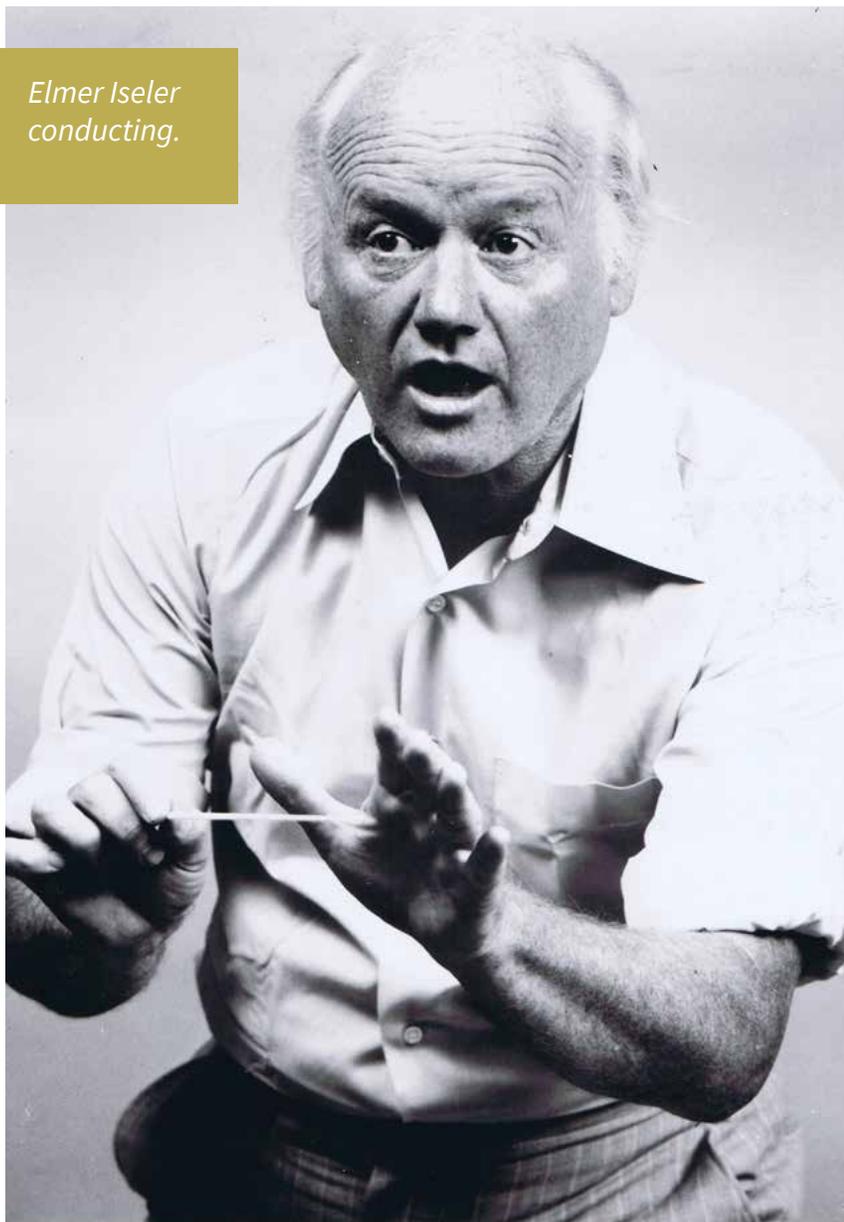


*Elmer Iseler
conducting.*



REMEMBERING **ELMER ISELER:**

*Canadian
Choral Visionary*

by Robert Missen

*I*t seems difficult to believe that Elmer Iseler, the Dean of Canadian Choral Conductors, passed away twenty years ago this spring. In so many ways he is still with us.

Incredible as it seems, the immense legacy that Elmer built and bequeathed to us began less than fifty years earlier. In 1954 he founded the Festival Singers of Toronto, our country's first professional choir. The choir's beginnings were very auspicious – it was an integral component of the newly launched Stratford Festival, which at that time had a musical program on an equal footing with the theatre. No less a personage than Glenn Gould was Co-Artistic Director.

The Festival Singers quickly established itself as a musical ensemble of international stature. None other than Igor Stravinsky invited Elmer to record a large proportion of his choral works for Columbia Masterworks. The choir, in addition to its flagship Toronto concert series, recorded, toured, broadcast and telecast throughout the world during the twenty-five years of its existence.

In the early sixties Elmer was invited to conduct the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, the city's venerable symphonic choir. His masterstroke was to integrate the Festival Singers as the professional core of the choir, which established it as an ensemble that was second to none in the country. He led that choir for thirty-three years, an unbroken record.

Deeply committed to nurturing a Canadian choral culture, he championed, commissioned and performed scores of works by our country's composers, thus creating a national choral oeuvre by such composers as Harry Somers, Harry Freedman, R. Murray Schafer and Srul Irving Glick. Equally engaged with Canada's musical history, he frequently performed the music of Healey Willan, in whose St. Mary Magdalen choir he had sung for a number of years; and the great pops composer Howard Cable, for whom he had performed as a chorus boy in the fifties grandstand shows at the Canadian National Exhibition.



Elmer Iseler, Jessie Iseler, and Lydia Adams before a performance of the Elmer Iseler Singers at International Choral Kathaumixw, Powell River, BC circa 1996. Photo credit: Maura McGroarty.

Another masterstroke was to invite the Canadian Brass, a quintet within the Hamilton Philharmonic, to accompany his choirs on tours around the globe, thus helping to launch another of our country's illustrious musical ensembles.

I had the privilege to join the Mendelssohn Choir in 1972 and the Festival Singers in 1973. I had been singing with the Ontario Youth Choir, an important program of the Ontario Choral Federation, now Choirs Ontario, an organization which Elmer had a large hand in creating. Elmer heard me sing at the Federation's annual Choirs in Contact and invited me to join him. I spent four years with the Festival Singers, four years with the Elmer Iseler Singers, his second professional choir, which he founded in 1979. In 1986, I commenced a salubrious association as the Iseler Singers'

artist representative which continues to this day.

What made Elmer a choral genius? Well, he was a highly authoritative and charismatic conductor, who could galvanize any choral assemblage he stood in front of. He had broad and eclectic musical tastes, which ranged from Renaissance polyphony through the masterworks of Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn and Mahler to contemporary works by Penderecki, Bernstein and Ligeti. We often marveled at how he could get to the essence of newly commissioned works so quickly and effectively.

His rehearsal techniques were second to none, his ear unerring. On the road he would nimbly make adjustments to turn unfamiliar venues into as congenial a choral acoustic as possible. A consummate showman, he created pro-

grams that appealed to a broad range of audiences. He would always include a huge proportion of Canadian works, including popular folksong arrangements such as *Song for the Mira*.

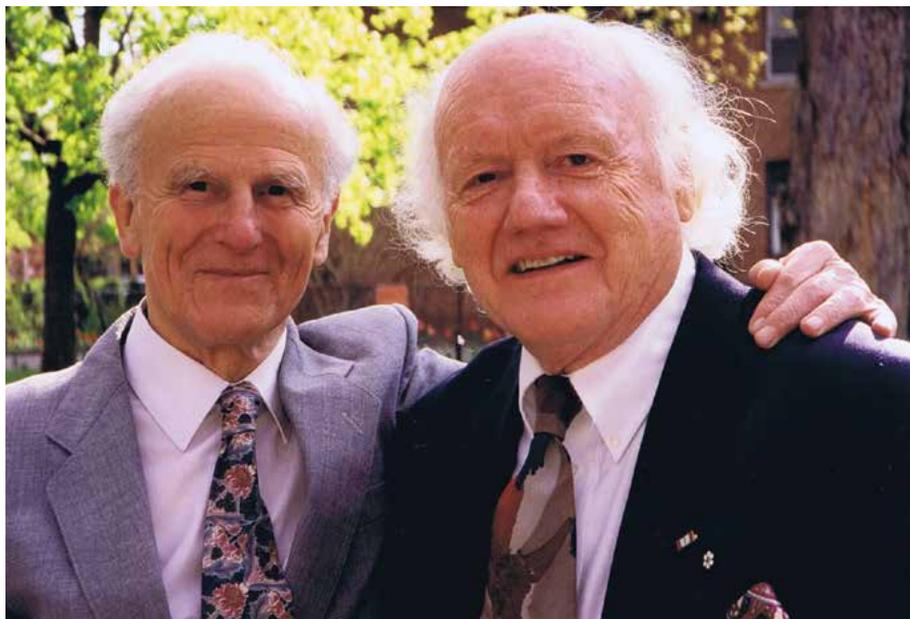
By the time of his untimely death in 1998, he had garnered high praise from the world's most distinguished choral eminences, including Britain's Sir David Willcocks, Estonia's Tonu Kaljuste and America's Robert Shaw and Margaret Hillis. Following his death, and with the support of The Heinrichs Foundation, the University of Toronto Faculty of Music established the Elmer Iseler Chair in Choral Conducting.

Elmer's legacy lives on through the Elmer Iseler Singers, now led by his long time colleague Lydia Adams and his indefatigable widow Jessie Iseler, as well as his nu-

merous recordings and the large catalogue of Canadian choral works he commissioned. Then there are the legions of professional, community, religious and children's choirs that have emerged in Canada inspired by his powerful vision.

Canada is a major force on the contemporary international choral scene thanks in no small part to Elmer Iseler.

In keeping with the tradition of commissioning new work, Lydia Adams and the Elmer Iseler Singers will honour Elmer's career with the premiere of a major new work by Imant Raminsh at Eglinton St. George's United Church in Toronto on Saturday, April 14 at 7:30 p.m. This eight movement work for choir and instruments sets poetry by eight different Canadian poets, and was commissioned through a donation by Elizabeth DeBoer and Ross Redfern.



"Best Friends" – Elmer Iseler and Sir David Wilcocks celebrate at a reception at the Heinrichs' residence in Toronto.



Hamilton-born tenor Robert Missen has been a performer, artist manager, agent, producer and promoter in the Canadian performing arts world for almost fifty years. A member of the Festival Singers of Canada, Elmer Iseler Singers, Toronto Mendelssohn Choir and Canadian Opera Company, he was a Founding Member of Tapestry Singers, now Tapestry Opera.



DYNAMIC

March 2018 · Volume 46 · Issue 2

