Paul Koch

Choirmaster; organist and devotee of liturgical music

By Rebecca Soderberg
Post Gazette Staff Writer

When Paul Koch's choir at St. Paul Cathedral in Oakland was preparing to perform Mozart's Requiem, he "probably spent six months rehersing it until we had it perfectly," Louis Tarantino of Highland Park, a choir member, said. "It was a beautiful piece, and he wanted it to be done beautifully. That's the kind of man he was."

Mr. Koch, who was the choirmaster and organist at St. Paul from 1919 until his retirement in 1989, died Sunday at UPMC Shadyside of congestive heart failure. He was 89.

After graduating from Carnegie Institute of Technology — now Carnegie Mellon University — in 1935, Mr. Koch spent three years studying in Europe, two in Bach's hometown of Leipzig, Germany, and one in Paris.

Mr. Koch followed in the footsteps of his father, Caspar, who taught organ at Carnegie Tech and was the city's Pittsburgh organist. Following his father's retirement as city organist in 1954, Mr. Koch took over and continued in the post until 1974, playing a free organ recital in Carnegie Hall on the North Side every Sunday afternoon until the building was closed and then at the Carnegie Music Hall in Oakland. When Mr. Koch retired, the post of city organist was not filled.

During its heyday at St. Paul in the 1950s and '60s, Mr. Koch directed as many as 80 children in the boys' choir and 40 men in the men's choir, and, when the boys' choir ceased to exist, he directed the adult choir, which began accepting women in 1970.

While at the cathedral, Mr. Koch was instrumental in getting the famed Decatur organ installed at a cost of $100,000, then inviting organists from around the world to play recitals on it.

He also served as dean of the American Guild of Organists and taught workshops around the country.

While Mr. Koch was the choirmaster, the group traveled to Ireland, Austria, Italy, Germany and Spain. A highlight was the group's 1975 tour in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on Thanksgiving Day.

Betty and Louis Tarantino, 30-year choir members, remember Mr. Koch fondly, recounting how he used to tell "humorous little stories" during rehearsals.

Yet he was also "a perfectionist," Louis Tarantino said. "He wouldn't have us sing anything in public until we really knew it."

He insisted on sacred classical music during church services; Betty Tarantino remembered he used to have the group sing Mozart, Bach, Beethoven — "the real classics." But at fund-raisers for their overseas trips, Mr. Koch sometimes had the choir sing tunes from Broadway revues in concert at Synod Hall in Oakland.

"He was very emotional about music — he loved it. It was his life," Betty Tarantino said. "When we sang something he loved, he would even cry."

Mr. Koch's daughter, Carol Koch of Vienna, Austria, echoed the sentiment that music was her father's life.

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