

The 30-year History of the *Alliance des Chorales du Québec* and Its Impact on Choral Singing in the Province

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The year 2004 marked the 30th anniversary of Quebec's choral federation, the *Alliance des chorales du Québec* (ACQ). Over the years it has grown from a membership of some 50 choirs to more than 200 (204 at the end of the 2004-2005 season). Its member choirs represent a wide range of repertoire, skill levels and age groups. Although there are other choral organizations in Quebec,¹ it is the only one officially recognized by the provincial government as the voice for the collective interests of choirs.

This paper explores the federation's 30-year history, the growth and evolution of its mandate and programs and its impact on choral music in Quebec. The organization's publications and annual reports served as a major source of information.

The Choral Landscape in French Canada Before 1974

Choral music has long been an integral part of French Canadian cultural activity. References to choral music written and arranged in Canada date back to the French colony at Port-Royal in 1606. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the performance of choral music imported from Europe, as well as a growing body of Canadian compositions, primarily for liturgical use. By the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, singing in a choral society was a very popular activity in Canada, and Quebec was no exception. Quebec musicians who led multifaceted careers as organists, teachers and composers, such as Jean-Chrysostome Brauneis II, Ernest Gagnon, Antoine Dessane and later Guillaume Couture, Alexis Contant and Claude Champagne composed major choral works, performed by choirs in Montreal and Quebec City.

Church choirs abounded in pre-Vatican II Quebec, as did choirs in educational institutions. A reflection of the French Canadian penchant for singing as a family and social activity, choirs were established to perform masses, oratorios and cantatas in concert settings and in broadcasts, many of which included folksongs, opera choruses and other secular music in their repertoire. The history and performances of groups such as *La Société musicale des montagnards canadiens* (established 1861), *Les Disciples de*

Massenet (established 1928 and still active), *le Choeur Pie X* (1936 to 1965) and *la Chorale Bach de Montréal* (1951 to 1966) are well-documented.

By the 1960s, as many church choirs were being disbanded and as Quebec society became more secularized (coinciding with reform in the Catholic Church further to Vatican II and Quebec's Quiet Revolution), numerous community choirs had been established in the francophone milieu. Amateur singers were attracted to groups such as *le Choeur Les Variétés canadiennes* (St-Hyacinthe, 1945), *le Choeur V'la l'bon vent* (Quebec City, 1958), *l'Ensemble vocal Musica Viva* (Montreal, 1961) and *le Choeur Kattialine* (Montreal, 1962), to name but a few.² There was, however, no association to favour exchanges between conductors, no specific choral training available for beginner conductors and no way to circulate information of interest to choirs.

Inspired by the *A Coeur Joie* choral movement founded in 1940 in Lyon, France by César Geoffray, its humanistic approach to choral music and especially its mandate to make choral singing a cultural activity accessible to all, Quebec City-area conductors Yvon Préfontaine and François Provencher founded the *Alliance chorale canadienne* (ACC) in 1961, which obtained federal incorporation status in 1966. Within a few years, its membership included some 300 francophone choirs in six Canadian provinces.

An Association Is Born

In order to adjust to the government funding structure of the early 1970s (federal funding for francophone minorities outside Quebec and provincial funding for associations within Quebec) and to allow the francophone choirs of each province to better define their musical priorities and adapt these to their cultural reality, the ACC³ felt it would serve its membership more adequately by establishing francophone choral federations in each province while remaining in place as an umbrella organization for its provincial partners. Thus it was that three active members of the ACC—Christiane Hardy, Guy Saint-Jean and Camille Therreault—officially applied for Letters Patent for a new provincial association from the Quebec government on May 17, 1974. The founding general meeting was held on September 28 and 29, 1974 on l'Île aux Coudres with representatives from 37 choirs and nine regions attending. The newly formed board of directors met for the first time on December 14, 1974 in Montreal. The ACQ received its Letters Patent on February 24, 1975 and was finally registered as a not-for-profit association on April 25, 1975.

In the application for its Letters Patent, the new association called itself the *Alliance des chorales du Québec Inc.* and listed as its goals:

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1. to bring together choirs
2. to promote musical education and training of choirs and choristers
3. to group the members of the association into administrative divisions to be known as regions⁴

With a founding grant of \$30,000 from the Quebec government's *Haut-Commissariat à la Jeunesse, au Loisir et au Sport* (High Commission for Youth, Leisure and Sport), the new association was invited to set up offices at 1415 Jarry Street East in Montreal as a member federation of the *Sécrétariat des organismes de loisir du Québec*.⁵ The new association employed André Beaumier as executive director and Lise Londéi as secretary and quickly set about to accomplish its goals through a variety of programs, publications and activities, most of which are still viable 30 years later, albeit with changes and transformations along the way to accommodate the evolution of choral singing.

To oversee its musical evolution, the ACQ created a committee called the *Commission musicale*⁶ (Musical Commission) in 1978. Active until the mid 1990s, this committee set policies with regard to workshop content, choral works to be published, the hiring of instructors, and so forth. Its work was taken over by several different volunteer committees as the association grew.

Repertoire and Music Publication

Early on, the ACQ recognized that bringing new Quebec choral repertoire to francophone choirs and providing a publishing forum for composers and arrangers was an inherent part of its mandate. Thanks to another grant from the *Haut Commissariat*, the ACQ was able to hold a composition competition in the first year and establish its role as a publisher of Quebec choral music. The competition yielded 14 winning titles that became the association's first catalogue. Among the winning titles were Lionel Daunais' *Figures de danse*, which has since become a Quebec choral classic, as well as Michel Longtin's *Pays de neige*, Maurice Dela's *Vaisseau d'or* (a setting of the poem by Émile Nelligan), arrangements by Pierre Gouin and Richard Ducas of songs by Gilles Vigneault and Félix Leclerc, as well as folksongs arranged by Daunais, André Saint-Cyr, François Brassard and Pierre Régner. Another grant in 1980 from the *Ministère des Affaires Culturelles* (Department of Cultural Affairs) paved the way for the publication of six additional pieces for mixed voices, the recording of the songs for children's voices

published in the collections *Turlurette* 2 and 3 and the publication of a collection of folksongs arranged by François Brassard.

In its 30 years, ACQ has published some 600 titles and has made French-language music from outside Canada more accessible to its membership and beyond through its partnerships with *A Coeur Joie* (it remains an affiliated member of the international movement) and with French-language publishers. Among its day-to-day services is a consultation library and music sales department for members housed in its Olympic Stadium offices.

Defining moments

Another special grant from the *Haut Commissariat* led to one of the ACQ's defining moments as a choral federation. To mark its fifth anniversary, the ACQ commissioned a new Quebec work from composer Marie Bernard. The result, a suite in six movements that artfully weaves together the melodies of 14 French-Canadian folksongs and 15 songs by the most prominent Quebec *chansonniers*⁷ of the time has since become one of the most frequently performed choral works in Quebec. *La Petite suite québécoise* was premiered at the international *A Coeur Joie* gathering (*les Ve Choralies Internationales du Canada*) in Moncton, New Brunswick, in August 1979 under the direction of Jean-Paul Desjardins and recorded in 1980 by 185 Quebec choristers and 20 instrumentalists. It has been performed by francophone choirs all over Canada as well as in France, Belgium and Switzerland. It helped define the ACQ's identity as a choral federation and established solidarity among members that continues to this day.⁸

As part of its 10th anniversary celebrations, ACQ members were able to participate in another defining moment for the association, that of a chartered cruise on the St. Lawrence to the French islands of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, coinciding with the 450th anniversary of Jacques Cartier's first trip to North America. More than 750 passengers, of whom 550 were amateur choristers, sailed on the Polish ship, the *Stefan Batory*, from July 21 to 28, 1984, giving several concerts both on board and at stops along the way. The suite *Mouettes et fous de bassan* by Rimouski composer Paul-Émile Paré was commissioned for the occasion, once again enriching the catalogue of Quebec repertoire.

Exploring new repertoire

As an adjunct activity to the publication of new repertoire, the Alliance began to hold an annual weekend workshop each fall in a different city to launch its new repertoire. In the 1970s, these were simply known as *lesancements de répertoire nouveau* during which choir members and conductors were invited to sing through new mixed- and equal-voice repertoire under the direction of more experienced conductors. By 1982, the annual repertoire launch took on a new name-*Automnie*-and a favourite annual activity for ACQ members was born. Over the years, this gathering for adult choristers (some 250 to 300 every year) has evolved to include not only new music published by the ACQ, but music from all over the world, giving choral musicians in Quebec a much-appreciated opportunity to explore choral classics and music of different styles and from different countries. Each year, four or five workshops of different types of music are offered under the leadership of guest conductors (from Quebec, Canada and abroad) as well as several massed choir pieces so that all participants can have a taste of different types of repertoire. Especially in the days before the Internet, this event was instrumental in introducing Quebec singers and conductors to a wide variety of repertoire and new rehearsal techniques through the world with guest conductors.

A similar event, launched in 1978 as the *Grand Rassemblement pour le secteur Jeunesse* (Great Youth Sector Gathering) and now held on a biennial basis, takes place for young singers under the banner of *Chantons le mai*, giving choristers and their conductors a chance to explore new and diverse repertoire.⁹

In recent years, the ACQ has also sponsored a festival of sacred music in Montreal's stunning Notre-Dame Basilica. An increasingly popular event, choirs can apply to sing several selections in a concert that brings together a dozen choirs in individual performances capped by a massed choir performing some of the great sacred masterworks.

Regional Activities and Special Events

The annual provincial gathering known as *Automnie* is not by any means the only event at which choristers and conductors have a chance to exchange and sing together. Since its early days, the ACQ has encouraged its member regions¹⁰ to organize training sessions, festivals and gatherings on a more local basis. Throughout the years, and with the impetus of the association, choristers from Montreal to Gaspé, and from

Rouyn-Noranda to Sherbrooke were able to participate in events such as massed choir Christmas concerts (*Chantons Noël*), adjudicated choral festivals (*Festival choral de Montréal*) and new repertoire sessions (*Rallyes chorales*). Although the annual spring ritual of the *Semaine de chant choral* (government-endorsed choral music week) in the early 1980s lasted only a few years, there are events in each corner of the province that bring choirs and choristers together for exchange, exploration and the sheer pleasure of singing with others.

Choral Music Education

If bringing new Quebec repertoire to its members was seen as a priority, such was also the case with choral music education for choristers and professional development for conductors. Making use of instructors already accredited by the *Alliance chorale canadienne* and the *A Coeur Joie* movement in France, the ACQ soon began to organize weekend and summer workshops for choristers, music teachers in the public school system and, most importantly, for beginner and intermediate choral conductors.

Recognizing that many of the province's new community choirs were under the direction of people who, despite great enthusiasm and some musical training, did not necessarily have access to specific choral training, the ACQ sought to fill the void by developing workshops and programs that would cater to the needs of its members. This, in turn, brought more members to its doors, as beginner conductors began to view the ACQ as a source of training and professional development and not just as an association of choirs. Among the pioneer instructors for the ACQ were André Beaumier, Gaby Billette, Jean-Paul Desjardins, Richard Ducas, Jean-Pierre Guindon, Louis Laviguer, Chantal Masson-Bourque and Jean-François Sénart. As highly trained musicians, pedagogues and experienced choral conductors, they helped pave the way for a new generation of conductors that became the next wave of choral leadership in Quebec.

Over the years, these training programs were defined and refined to best meet the needs of those seeking choral training. From the outset, special attention was paid to those conductors working with young voices, with many workshops geared towards public school music teachers at the request of school boards in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When funds permitted, the ACQ also helped sponsor workshops for individual choirs.

The ACQ has experimented with different ways of packaging its training for conductors, including a series of related weekend workshops and week-long summer

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courses (held since the early 1990s), in which participants work on conducting gesture, vocal technique, rehearsal techniques, score preparation and performance practice. It has also offered sessions on the music of different eras (e.g., Renaissance, Romantic), styles and countries (e.g., spirituals and Russian Orthodox music), as well as training for section leaders, singers who lead congregational singing and one-on-one mentoring possibilities. As recently as the fall of 2004, it polled its conductor members to find out what kind of professional development training they would like the association to organize in the coming years.

In addition to these workshops and sessions, ACQ has regularly organized conducting symposia for its members since 1980 featuring masterclasses, reading sessions, discussion panels and concerts. These are now held in odd-numbered years, with members encouraged to attend the national conductors' conference, the Association of Canadian Choral Conductors' Podium, in even-numbered years.¹¹ The association also fostered partnerships with other musical organizations, such as Canadian Amateur Musicians/Musiciens Amateur du Canada (CAMMAC),¹² to offer conductor training. Also offered are sessions on stage management and other technical considerations for choirs. Since its foundation, the association has also often coupled its annual general meetings with yet another opportunity to offer interest sessions and workshops for choristers and conductors alike.

Publications and Information for Members

One of the most important tools that the ACQ has to inform and educate its members is its magazine, *Chanter*. First published in September, 1976 as a newsletter called *À l'Écoute*, it has received numerous makeovers throughout the course of its publishing history, ever dependant on association finances and volunteer editors during its formative years. From 1991 to 1996, a separate publication for young singers, called *Enchantons-nous*, was also published.

Refashioning itself as a magazine, rather than a newsletter in 1986, *À l'Écoute* became *Chanter* in September, 1992 and soon after gained the services of a part-time paid editor.¹³ This practice has continued and with a few more facelifts in recent years, the magazine, published four times a year and now available by subscription, seeks to inform and educate its readers on choral music history, techniques, logistical information and news in an attractive format.

Refining its mandate

In 1995, the ACQ refined its original goals to better express the values and needs of its member choirs. Further to the redefinition of its mandate, the ACQ now describes itself as:

Choirs of all styles and of levels who have associated themselves—

1. to provide themselves with the means to sing better
2. to share the pleasure of singing
3. to promote and develop choral music in Quebec

ACQ continues to seek the advice of its membership to plan for the future and in order to best meet the needs of its membership. Training, repertoire and information remain at the heart of members' needs.

Conclusions

As a professional chorister, conductor, instructor, committee member and sound engineer who has recorded hundreds of choral concerts and events, Jean-Paul Desjardins has been a privileged witness to ACQ's 30-year history. When interviewed about the impact of the ACQ on choral singing in Quebec, he contends that while individual effort on the part of conductors and choristers is what increases the quality of choral music in the long run, the association has given conductors access to resources, repertoire and training they would not have had otherwise, exposed members to a higher level of music-making and set the stage for the emergence of new choral groups. Through its projects and initiatives, says Desjardins, the ACQ helped to raise the level of choral music in the province (personal communication, May 30, 2005).

The ACQ has had a profound influence on choral music-making in the province in a number of ways. Where once a majority of choirs were affiliated with churches and educational institutions, it provides a meeting ground for choirs that are increasingly community-based. As a meeting place for francophone choral conductors and choristers, it is unparalleled in Quebec. Since its founding, its organization of choral gatherings and singing workshops for adults and children has exposed choristers and conductors to new repertoire and to outstanding conductors from within Quebec, from other Canadian provinces, Europe and South America. It has offered Quebec composers and arrangers a publishing forum. Its conductor-training courses have given beginner

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and intermediate conductors a chance to hone their skills and perfect their art, and encouraged them to seek further training.

The ACQ recognizes the work of the hundreds of volunteers and professionals who have helped the association fulfill its prime objectives and who have been instrumental in guiding its growth and evolution. Since 1979, it has awarded the *Ordre du mérite choral* to individuals for their outstanding contribution to the movement's growth.¹⁴ Like all associations and organizations with limited resources and dependant on a strong volunteer base, it has had its financial and administrative ups and downs, but it has never veered from its prime mission of encouraging more Quebecers to sing and helping them to sing better.

Author's Note

The paper presentation at the symposium was accompanied by some historical visual materials. At the end, the 1980 recording of the opening movement of the *Petite suite québécoise* by Marie Bernard under the direction of Jean-Paul Desjardins was played (*Alliance des chorales du Québec*).

Appendix

Here is a listing of office locations, presidents, executive directors, publication editors and major choral gatherings throughout ACQ's 30-history:

Office locations:

1974-1985	1415 Jarry St. East, Montréal, QC H2E 2Z7
1985-	4545 Pierre-de-Coubertin, C.P. 1000, Succ. M., Montréal, QC H1V 3R2

Alliance des chorales du Québec Presidents:

1974-1978	Christiane Hardy
1978-1983	Maurice Élie
1983-1985	Gilles Noël
1985-1986	Jean-Maurice Pinel
1986-1991	Cécilienne Lavoie
1991-1995	Paul Belzile
1995-2000	Ginette Forest
2000-2004	Luc Locat
2004-	Suzanne Lacoursière

Alliance des chorales du Québec Executive Directors:

1974-1981	André Beaumier
1981-1985	Lise Petitpas Barrette
1985-1990	Alain Lanctôt

1990-1998	Christine Dumas
1999	Maryse Chasle
1999-2004	Ginette Forest
2004-	Fannie Guilmain

Editors and Coordinators of *À l'Écoute* and *Chanter* (the official newsletter and magazine of the *Alliance des chorales du Québec*, first published as *À l'Écoute* in September 1976. The name was changed to *Chanter* in September 1992):

1976-1979	Publication coordinated by staff members
1979-1981	Christiane Hardy, editor
1981-1985	Publication coordinated by staff members
1985	Roland Alarie, editor
1985-1991	Editorial team: Patricia Abbott, Denise Cloutier (1986-1988), Christine Dumas, Ginette Forest, Monique Gallant
1991	Christine Dumas, interim editor
1991-1994	Alain Fortier, editor
1994-1996	Daniel Gauvreau, editor
1996	Christine Dumas, interim editor
1996-1998	Pierre Turcotte, editor
1998-1999	Pierre Tremblay, editor
1999-2001	Yves Garand, editor
2001	David Rhains, editor
2001-	Françoise Grenier, editor

Recipients of the *Ordre du mérite choral* (awarded since 1979 for outstanding contribution to the development and support of choral music in the province. Recipient, city or region, field of contribution and year awarded):

2004-Abbott, Patricia (Montréal), conductor and administrator
2004-Dumas, Christine (Montréal), arts administrator
2004-Matteau, Murielle (Montréal), conductor and teacher
2001-Pettigrew, Gisèle (Québec), conductor
1998-Drapeau, Suzette (Gaspé), conductor
1997-Rancourt, Roger (Saint-Georges), conductor
1995-Lavigneur, Louis (Québec, Montréal), conductor
1994-Masson-Bourque, Chantal (Québec), conductor and teacher
1993-Lanctôt, Alain (Montréal), conductor and administrator
1993-Poulin-Parizeau, Alice (Lanaudière, Montréal), conductor
1992-Desjardins, Jean-Paul (Montréal, Laval), conductor and recording engineer
1992-Gaudette, Laurier (Montérégie), volunteer, administrator
1991-Billette, Gaby (Montréal), conductor
1990-Guindon, Jean-Pierre (Ste-Thérèse), conductor
1990-Lindsay, Père Fernand (Joliette), conductor
1989-Thompson, Abbé Claude (Trois-Rivières), conductor

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1988-Lauzier, Claudette (Rimouski, Régionale de l'Est), volunteer, administrator
1987-Leboeuf, Joan (Trois-Rivières, Régionale Laviolette), volunteer, administrator
1987-Pagé, Soeur Thérèse (Abitibi), conductor
1986-Chatelle, Louis-Pierre (Ste-Thérèse, Montréal), conductor and administrator
1986-Kelly, Georges (Montréal), volunteer, administrator
1985-Élie, Maurice (Trois-Rivières), conductor and administrator
1984-Provencher, François (Québec), conductor, administrator, editor
1983-Élie, Marguerite (Mauricie), conductor
1983-Gagnon, Jean-Pierre (Trois-Pistoles), conductor
1982-Dubois, Monique (Montréal), administrator
1982-Laforge, Raymond (Côte Nord, Montérégie, Saguenay), conductor
1981-Brière, Anilda (Mauricie), conductor
1981-Poirier, Gilles (Montréal), radio producer, Radio-Canada
1980-Beaumier, André (Montréal), conductor and administrator
1980-Beaumier, Jean-Marc (Montréal), administrator
1980-Bernard, Marie (Montréal), composer
1980-Bernier, Marc (Montréal), conductor and administrator
1980-Daunais, Lionel (Montréal), composer
1980-Ducas, Richard (Montréal), conductor and administrator (declined)
1980-Hardy, Christiane (Montréal), administrator
1980-Morin, Fleur-Ange (Sherbrooke), conductor
1980-Paré, Paul-Émile (Rimouski), conductor and composer
1980-Saint-Jean, Guy (Montréal), administrator
1980-Sénart, Jean-François (Montréal), conductor
1980-Tanguay, Germaine (Montérégie), administrator
1980-Villemure, Soeur Édith (Mauricie), conductor

Automnie (Annual gathering held in the fall for adult choristers with guest conductors featuring an exploration of different types of repertoire through workshops followed by a public concert), year and location given:

2005, Rimouski
2004, Trois-Rivières
2003, Trois-Rivières
2002, Sherbrooke
2001, Chicoutimi
2000, Mascouche
1999, Saint-Eustache
1998, Montréal
1997, Saint-Georges de Beauce
1996, Saint-Irénée (Domaine Forget)
1995, not held in order to prepare for the co-hosting of the national conference, Podium 96
1994, Saint-Hyacinthe

1993, L'Assomption
1992, Charlesbourg
1991, Sainte-Marie de Beauce
1990, Rimouski
1989, Longueuil
1988, Victoriaville
1987, Baie Comeau
1986, Thetford Mines
1985, Montréal
1984, Nicolet
1983, Sainte-Foy
1982, Sainte-Thérèse

Chantons le mai (A biennial gathering held in the spring for children and youth with guest conductors featuring an exploration of different types of repertoire through workshops followed by a public concert. Originally held annually. From 1990 to 1996, the ACQ experimented with a series of workshops for young singers. Although not called *Chantons le mai*, they were held in the same spirit. As of 1998, the gathering resumed the name *Chantons le mai.*), year and location given:

2006 Boucherville
2004 Saint-Sauveur
2002 Victoriaville
2000 Saint-Eustache
1998 Granby
1996 Tracy (*Printemps chanté*)
1993 Montréal (*En voix*)
1991 Longueuil (*Chants-boule la Terre*)
1990 Montréal (*Retour vers le futur*)
1989 Charlesbourg
1988 Shipshaw
1987 Laval
1986 Saint-Georges de Beauce
1985 Saint-Omer de Gaspésie
1984 Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines
1983 Longueuil
1982 L'Épiphanie
1981 Tracy

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Endnotes

1. There are other choral organizations that serve specific interest groups, such as *Chanson nouvelle*, which caters to the needs of choirs performing only pop repertoire.
2. The first three choirs cited are still active. *Kattialine* ceased its activities in 1974.
3. *The Alliance chorale canadienne* ceased operations in 1982 and was replaced in 1983 by *A Coeur Joie Canada*.
4. The original goals and redefined mandate (1995) were translated from the French by the author.
5. The SOLQ was absorbed by the *Regroupement Loisir Québec* and moved its offices to the Olympic Stadium in Montreal in 1985. The ACQ is still a member and has had its office in the stadium since then.
6. Its first members were Marc Bernier, Gilbert Patenaude, Alfred Marin, Louis-Pierre Chatelle, Christine Dumas and Jean-Paul Desjardins.
7. The group *Beau Domnage*, Robert Charlebois, Jean-Pierre Ferland, Claude Gauthier, the group *Harmonium*, Jean Lapointe, Félix Leclerc, Claude Léveillé and Gilles Vigneault.
8. A 25th anniversary performance of the PSQ in Quebec City in June 2004, under the direction of Jean-Paul Desjardins and with the composer in attendance attracted hundreds of volunteer choristers and a sold-out audience.
9. A list of the year and location of these annual and biennial gatherings appears in the Appendix.
10. In 2004-2005, the regional organization represented on the board of directors were the Régionale de Québec, Régionale de Montréal, Régionale des Seigneuries (south shore of Montréal), Régionale de Lanaudière, Régionale de l'Est du Québec (lower St. Lawrence and Gaspé peninsula) and the Régionale la Gaillarde (Saguenay and Lac St-Jean area). There were member choirs from the 15 official geographical regions of Quebec as well as three choirs from outside Quebec.
11. The ACQ co-hosted Podium 1996 in Quebec City.
12. *Canadian Amateur Musicians/Musiciens amateurs du Canada*. In 1987 and 1988, the ACQ collaborated with CAMMAC to offer choral music weeks at the annual summer music camps at Lake MacDonal, in the Quebec Laurentians.
13. A list of the publication's coordinators and editors appears in the Appendix.
14. A list of the recipients of the *Ordre du mérite choral* is included in the Appendix.