In 1985, J. Reilly Lewis was appointed Music Director of the Cathedral Choral Society. Under his leadership, the chorus delivered notable performances at the Cathedral, the Kennedy Center, Strathmore, and Wolf Trap, as well as nine recordings. Lewis was committed to developing the careers of young soloists and composers. He commissioned over twenty-one new works for chorus from composers including Nico Muhly, Libby Larsen, John Rutter, Dominick Argento, and John Tavener.

One of the world’s leading Bach specialists, Lewis founded the internationally acclaimed Washington Bach Consort in 1977. Under his direction as Artistic Director, the ensemble became one of the nation’s most critically acclaimed and widely recognized period ensembles, appearing at numerous festivals both in the United States and throughout Europe.

As a keyboard artist, Lewis performed at the Aspen Music Festival, the International Handel and Bach festivals held in Halle and Leipzig, the Cologne New Music Festival, and in Washington, DC, with the Smithsonian Chamber Players, the Folger Consort, and the National Symphony Orchestra. Lewis served as Organist and Choirmaster at Clarendon United Methodist Church for 45 years and he delighted in conducting Messiah sing-alongs there.

Among Lewis’ many honors are Washingtonian Magazine’s Music Hall of Fame and Washingtonian of the Year, the University Club of Washington’s Distinguished Washingtonian Award for the Arts, Special Recognition Mayor’s Arts Award, Yale University’s Cultural Leadership Citation, and the Choralis GRACIE Award for Outstanding Contributions to Choral Music. In 2014, he received an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from the Virginia Theological Seminary.

Born in 1944, Lewis began his musical career at the age of eight as a member of the Junior Boys Choir at Washington National Cathedral. He received his bachelor’s degree from Oberlin Conservatory and master’s and doctoral degrees from The Juilliard School.

Lewis died unexpectedly on Thursday, June 9, in Arlington, VA at his home. He was 71. Reilly was beloved in the Washington, DC music community. He was known for his generosity of spirit and joyful soul by his many friends, family, and everyone with whom he came into contact.

Lewis dedicated his life to music and to transforming the lives of others through music. In his own words: “I believe in the power of music to create community - to touch, and to heal, and to transform. I’ve seen people with the most diverse backgrounds come together in one place and be touched by the hand of God through the inspiration - the genius - of Bach or Brahms or Verdi or Mozart. That power to bring people together isn't restricted to music, but music is my language.”