

Notre Dame de Paris Reopening Resource.

Choir formed from the ashes of the Notre-Dame cathedral helps mark reopening.

Dozens of people who helped rebuild Paris' historic Notre-Dame after it was devastated by a fire five years ago will gather next month to perform a song celebrating its reopening.

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By Chantal Da Silva

PARIS — Most have on jeans, some wear rough work boots, and one sings with a white construction helmet tucked under his arm. Gathered in the church hall before the altar, their song begins low and soft, surges and then sweeps through the Gothic-style church and up to its soaring stone ceiling.

The 80-strong choir has come together to do more than sing, though — the crew of architects, stonemasons, archaeologists, art historians, art conservators and others have helped rebuild Paris' Notre-Dame cathedral after a fire ripped through the iconic French Gothic masterpiece nearly five years ago.

With hundreds of people working to rebuild a structure so intimately tied to French art, history and culture, it felt natural to start a choir, said Stephanie Duchêne, a conservation scientist and chemical engineer who helped form the Notre-Dame Compagnons Choir, or Notre Dame Companions, nearly two years ago.

Much like the building and rebuilding of a cathedral, a small army of individuals needs to work in unison to create extraordinary music.

“Everyone has to do his part to make the music sound good,” said Duchêne, the chief archaeologist and conservation scientist for the Laboratory of Research for Historical Monuments.

Five years after the blaze that destroyed much of the cathedral's roof and brought down its iconic spire, long one of the city skyline's most recognizable sights, the Notre-Dame Compagnons Choir is preparing to perform in the building they helped save. It will be part of a weekslong celebration marking the long-awaited reopening.

On Dec. 11, the choir will perform a rendition of French composer Gabriel Fauré's "Cantique de Jean Racine," or "Chant by Jean Racine."

Like many others, Duchêne remembers exactly where she was when she heard about the blaze.

"My brother sent me a picture of the fire," Duchêne, 46, told NBC News ahead of rehearsal in the Saint-Séverin Church, which is known for its musical performances and is the oldest church in Paris' Left Bank. Just weeks before, she and her husband had taken their children to visit the cathedral — and now it was at risk of being reduced to rubble and ashes, she remembers.

"Everyone was very sad and very anxious about the potential collapse of the cathedral overnight," she said. "We were very relieved in the morning when we saw that it was — that she was — still standing."

Agnes Poirier, a French author who published the book "Notre-Dame: The Soul of France," in the aftermath of the fire, echoes the pervasive feeling that the cathedral is much more than simply a building.

Notre Dame Cathedral Restoration.

On April 15, 2019, a huge fire swept through Notre-Dame's roof and brought down its famed spire.

"She's been here for 850 years, and you think she will never disappear, so the very idea of her demise and possible disappearance was just inconceivable — unbearable and inconceivable," she said while looking out at the cathedral across the Seine.

While part of the cathedral, which was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991, was undamaged by the fire, much of the building's roof and its signature spire were destroyed.

The damage was so severe that when French President Emmanuel Macron vowed the following day to rebuild and see the cathedral reopened to the public by 2024, he was met with ridicule. In the end, he looks set to make good on his promise, with Notre-Dame

opening its doors to the public for the first time on Dec. 7, though restoration efforts will continue for years.

This is not Notre-Dame's first reconstructive surgery.

Since the cathedral's first stone was laid in the 12th century, "she" has undergone frequent revivals. Notre-Dame, or Our Lady in English, has meanwhile become a constant figure in French history and culture. The cathedral was the site of the coronation of Napoleon I and his wife, Empress Joséphine, in 1804. Its massive bells rang out on Aug. 24, 1944, to celebrate the liberation of Paris from German occupiers.

Notre Dame Choir in Paris.

Members of the choir rehearse in Saint-Séverin church, which is known for its musical performances.

The religious relics it housed — including for a time Jesus' Crown of Thorns — drew flocks of pilgrims for centuries. The stone gargoyles have populated novels, Hollywood movies and countless tourist photo albums. Victor Hugo's 1831 novel "Notre-Dame de Paris," known to many as "The Hunchback of Notre-Dame," not only immortalized the cathedral's story, but inspired a major restoration of the site.

'Test' for France.

Philippe Giraud, 57, first worked in Notre-Dame as a teenager. By day, he's a soft-spoken sculptor. Under the pointed arches of the Church of Saint-Séverin, he becomes a booming baritone. His voice echoes throughout the Gothic church, which was constructed in the 13th century before taking on its current form after the Hundred Years' War.

Giraud said he was other devastated when he heard about the blaze. But in the days after, he recognized the disaster as a "test" for France.

"We all think what happened in the five years after the fire was a beautiful experience — so, there is not really a regret of what happened," he said, dressed in a white coat and trousers with an eggshell hard hat in his lap.

Bound by a unique shared experience, lifelong friendships have also been forged within the community of those who have helped restore Notre-Dame. Giraud formed an unlikely bond with Raphael Vialle, a spinal surgeon working at a hospital in Paris, after noticing the parallels in their work.

Brought together by mutual friends, Giraud invited Vialle, 48, to try his hand at stone carving — his test subject being a stone at the entrance of Notre-Dame after he spent months training in the craft.

“He was fascinated by my job, and I was fascinated by his,” said Vialle, who, with a similar passion for singing, was quickly welcomed into the choir and community of those who have helped restore the cathedral.

While Vialle said his contribution to Notre-Dame’s revival was “very, very small,” it was still “very important for me” — and being able to point out the stone that he worked on to his loved ones when the cathedral reopens next month, he said, is an achievement that will stay with him.

“My stone, you know. I know where it is,” he said, with a gleeful smile.

Whether the choir will carry on or disband once the Notre-Dame reopens has yet to be decided, Duchêne said — but for now, the group is looking forward to performing in the sacred space it helped restore to its former glory.

“I think it will be very emotional,” she said. “We all feel very privileged to have been able to work on this.”