

# Rising Up

BY JOHN SPARKS

## Urban Youth Choruses

Inner-city choruses are fostering greater diversity in recruitment and repertoire.

**T**he scene in the rehearsal space at the 92nd Street Y in New York City is repeated daily in rehearsal rooms across the country: singers, milling around, talking loudly, going through bags, checking their cell phones, swigging from water bottles, laughing, and catching up with friends. Then everyone gets very quiet and there is intense focus on their purpose for being there: To sing together.

This ritual is the same, whether it's an adult or youth chorus. In the case of the Young People's Chorus of New York City, busy rehearsing at 92nd Street Y for an upcoming Martin Luther King Day event (see page 20), founder and artistic director Francisco Núñez thinks the young people in

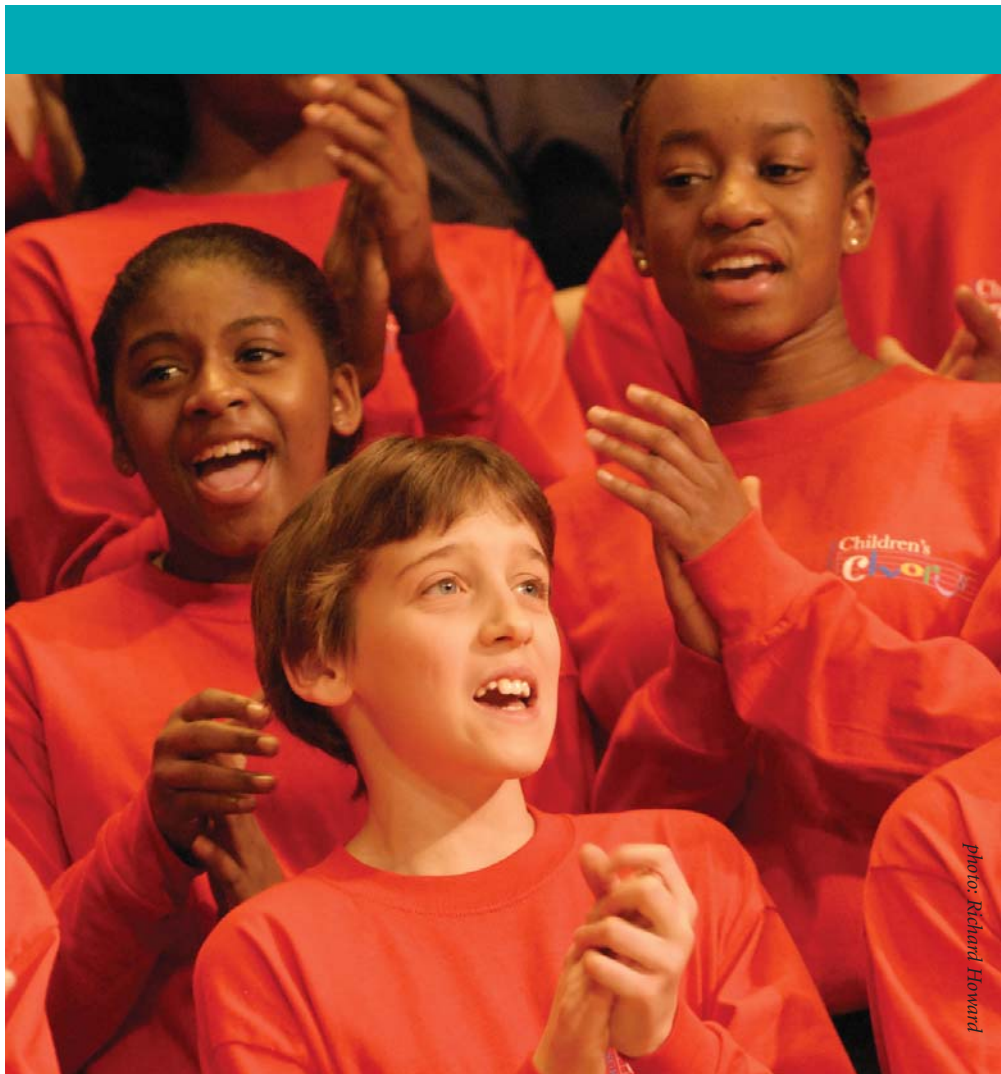


photo: Richard Howard

Members of the Boston Children's Chorus

his chorus are different from those nearly 20 years ago, when he first began working with youth choruses.

“Today they take it all more seriously,” says Núñez. “They know that investing the time produces important results,” he contends, adding that in earlier years, there was less inclination to learn difficult music or to explore different styles of singing. According to Núñez, the change may have something to do with their immersion in all kinds of music and its availability anywhere at anytime.

“I call it the iPod shuffle,” he says. “Before, people owned records, and that tended to restrict their listening” to certain kinds of music. The advent of the compact disc helped to broaden the possibilities, but with iPods, MP3s, and downloadable music from a seemingly endless variety of sources, it has become easier for people to store and carry around vast libraries of sound. In that process, Núñez believes exposure to variety, even accidentally, happens. Young people are omnivores of technology, and even if an individual is inclined to listen only to rap most of the time, the expansion and blurring of genres, the instant access, and the ease of sampling may combine to create a different kind of musical literacy.

Still, we have a society, at least in the United States, where a generation was basically lost in terms of music education. “Out of the decline of quality music education in the schools in the 1970s came the growth of independent children’s choruses,” says Barbara Tagg, founder and artistic director of the Syracuse Children’s Chorus and one of the leaders in the children and youth chorus movement for more than 25 years now.

Tagg thinks that the wave of budget cuts in public education – starting in the 1970s and continuing through the 1980s and early 1990s – created a climate where alternatives began to bubble up. While nothing really replaces formal, direct classroom instruction in music, she notes, freestanding children and youth choruses started to develop partly in response to the decline in classroom teaching.

There had been, of course, some well-known children and youth choruses before that, among them the Boys Choir of Harlem, the Chicago Children’s Choir,



*Francisco Núñez in concert with the Young People’s Chorus of New York City*

the San Francisco Girls Choir, and the Glen Ellyn Children’s Chorus. For the most part, however, children’s choruses were limited to churches and schools. That is no longer the case, as evidenced by the fact that children and youth choruses make up the fastest growing segment of Chorus America’s membership.

## A New Model Emerges

As with adult choruses, there is no one model for children and youth choruses – be it in repertoire, recruitment, audience development, or collaborations. But as the independent children’s chorus movement has matured, one recent phenomenon is the emergence of urban youth choruses – ensembles formed to serve diverse populations in large urban areas where kids often do not have access or the means to participate in quality musicmaking.

A common purpose of today’s urban youth choruses is to promote personal growth and multi-cultural awareness and cooperation among participants. Núñez founded the YPC in 1988 “to foster personal and artistic growth and cross-cultural understanding, as well as to provide a safe haven where young people from many different backgrounds could come

together with the common goal of learning and creating beautiful music.” The program now serves 250 young singers from age 8 to 18 from all ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds. In addition, the YPC choral program is available to 400 more students as part of YPC’s Satellite Schools program in five New York City schools.

Core to the Chicago Children’s Choir mission is a belief that “music would help the singers to understand themselves and to understand the world,” says artistic director Josephine Lee. And by drawing the kids into the diversity of repertoire, Lee believes the experience helps them “to become better citizens of their country and the world.” Although first established in 1956 as a church choir on the south side of Chicago, the CCC has grown to nearly 3,200 students and now oversees 75 in-school choruses in 52 Chicago schools, including school-day instruction, six after-school neighborhood choirs, a 100-voice concert choir, and The Choir Academy, an arts-based charter school.

The exposure to diverse American communities and music from other parts of the world has had a real impact on the students who have gone through the CCC program. An example cited by ►

Lee was the Choir's trip to South Africa in 1996, shortly after the end of apartheid. They learned first-hand how music played an important role in the anti-apartheid movement – one student, in fact, became so inspired by what she saw and heard that she went back to South Africa to study and work with musicians there.

Newer on the scene is the Boston Children's Chorus, formed in 2004. The multi-racial, multi-ethnic Chorus brings together kids ranging in age from 7 to 15 from diverse backgrounds, representing most of Boston's urban neighborhoods as well as many of the suburbs. Using music as a tool for social change, BCC unites children and families across differences of race, religion, ethnicity, and economic status to inspire and energize audiences with its message of hope and healing. The children discover the power of singing together and also the importance of community by serving as ambassadors for their city.

The goals of the Trenton Children's Chorus in Trenton, New Jersey, are another example of the mission-oriented focus of many urban youth choirs: Give children a chance to sing a wide range of choral literature, especially children who might not otherwise have an opportunity to do so, and provide a way for children from different backgrounds to get to know one another through artistic endeavor. The TCC, directed by Victor Shen, serves approximately 70 children in four divisions and meets two days a week after school. Transportation is provided for many of the children since public transportation in Trenton is not very convenient and most of the parents are working and unable to provide it themselves.

"A significant difference in this organization is that it has chosen not to be a highly auditioned choir," says Sue Ellen Page, the group's founding director. "In the Training Choir division, you pass the audition when you walk through the door. Children are admitted to the Intermediate Choir on the basis of willingness to participate and behave in a manner of mutual respect. Ability to match pitch is the only other requirement for membership in this or the Young People's division [high school and late teens/early twenties]." Page thinks the educational scholarships the TCC gives to families are another defining feature.

Members in good standing are eligible for funds towards music lessons, summer educational camps, and college tuition.

## It's About Values

Putting a premium on values is at the core of most of the urban youth choruses. In Washington, D.C., Joyce Garrett, the tireless long-time leader of the famed Eastern High School Choir, emphatically echoes other children's chorus leaders in saying, "Choral music is a vehicle to teach values and to prepare students for college."

Eastern High School is a public high school in the D.C. school system, not an arts magnet school. Drawing from its largely African-American urban neighborhood, the Choir managed to raise performance standards to the degree that earned it national attention over the years, with appearances on national television and at many high-profile Washington events, and top honors at choral festivals and international competitions. Averaging about 60 singers, the Choir focused on a broad repertoire, from classical to pop standards to spirituals.

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The artistic growth of the Choir inspired the formation of the Eastern Choral Society in 1995, a 501(c)(3) organization with the mission of supporting the Choir (which struggled for adequate support because of the financial hardships facing the District's school system) and the Society's Excellence Without Excuses program.

"Excellence Without Excuses was designed to address obstacles that kept arising in my work with these at-risk students and to talk up college as something they should aspire to," says Garrett. She found that her students' goals often didn't match their preparation, many were passive in the face of any obstacles to achieving their goals, very few had a sense of loyalty to the Choir, and most faced a daunting array of problems outside of school and at home, including an environment that didn't place value on achievement. "Most of my students were afraid to step out of the pack, afraid to have bigger dreams for themselves," she says.



*Members of the Young People's Chorus of New York City*

These issues helped Garrett formulate the primary components of her Excellence Without Excuses program: World-class choral singing, values training, college preparation, and college scholarships. Armed with her Choir's artistic success and her ambitious agenda for changing lives over the long run, Garrett was able to galvanize greater community support, and over the years the Society has handed out nearly \$1 million in college scholarships to inner-city youth through this program.

In 2005, Garrett and the board of directors of the Society decided to take the program citywide by forming an independent youth chorus, the Washington Youth Choir. Even though she retired in 1999 after a 27-year career as a public school teacher at Eastern High School, Garrett is now fully engaged as a volunteer in the new Choir. A new music director, Johnathan Dunn, has been appointed and rehearsals began in January. Garrett and Dunn will lead a session at Chorus America's 29th Annual Conference June 7-11, on their experience in founding a new urban youth chorus.

The students are an inspiration with their energy and commitment, Garrett acknowledges, but they present more of a challenge today than 15 to 20 years ago, in at least one respect. "Students today are just busier, they have many more things demanding their time," she says. "We require a serious commitment."

## With and Without School Support

Clear across the country, another inner-city youth choir faces the same time challenges. At the Oakland Youth Chorus for Music Education, artistic and education director Rachele Rogers-Ard agrees that competing activities for students make concentration on chorus more difficult. While others cite an overall increase in the quality of children's choruses nationally, Rogers-Ard says that in Oakland, she finds fewer students come to the Chorus with much musical train-

## Choruses Bring Inner-City Youths Together in Song

Youth choruses from three U.S. cities recently served as models for an exemplary collaboration between urban choruses.

**The Chicago Children's Choir** and the **Young People's Chorus of New York City** joined the **Boston Children's Chorus** and artistic director Darren Dailey to present BCC's third annual Martin Luther King Holiday concert in January. The sold-out event featured the world premiere performance of *A Trilogy of Dreams*, three commissioned works based on Langston Hughes' poetry (*The Dream Keeper, Dreams, and I Dream a World*), set to music by composer Rollo A. Dilworth. Boston's ABC Channel 5 telecast the concert live, and WGN rebroadcast the performance nationally in early February.

All three choruses strive to bring together children of diverse backgrounds to further their personal and artistic growth through music. The messages of unity and cooperation were evident in the concert's themes. "The joining together of these three multi-cultural choruses

truly symbolizes Dr. King's dream of all God's children united in brotherhood," said Francisco Núñez, founder and artistic director of the Young People's Chorus of New York City. "The children's voices soaring in an inspired musical response to Dr. King's words is testament to the vitality of his dream," added Josephine Lee, artistic director of the Chicago Children's Choir.

The concert was organized by the Boston Children's Chorus, which made its initial concert debut on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2004. The Boston Children's Chorus is continuing to add programs in communities throughout the city, with the goal of serving 600 children by 2008.



*Pictured after the Boston Children's Chorus Martin Luther King Holiday concert, from left to right: Annette Rubin, executive director of the Boston Children's Chorus; Francisco Núñez, artistic director of the Young People's Chorus of New York City; Josephine Lee, artistic director of the Chicago Children's Choir; Robin Roberts, concert host and Good Morning America anchor; Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts; Darren Dailey, artistic director of the Boston Children's Chorus; and Hubie Jones, founder and president of the Boston Children's Chorus.*

ing. In the 1970s and 1980s, applicants were required to have had some musical training before joining; today, most do not, and the OYC is teaching them many basic musical skills such as sight-reading.

Rogers-Ard sees the source of this problem the same way as other youth choral leaders – the decimation of music programs in public schools during the last generation. The OYC began giving the musical training they were missing, but this was only for the 500 students participating in their various choral programs, not the entire school population, hardly a substitute for regular classroom instruction.

The OYC has a partnership with the Oakland school system providing service to 17 schools, coordinating the citywide after-school program in collaboration with other nonprofit organizations. For its singers in various schools, the OYC has four full-time administrators and up to 20 part-time music teachers throughout the year. Unlike many youth choruses, the OYC does not charge tuition, other than an annual \$100 administrative fee.

Rather than working within a school system, a few urban youth choruses are actually schools themselves. The Newark Boys Chorus School offers a full academic program for grades 4 through 8 as an ►

accredited private school. “There is actually very little singing in the elementary schools from which we recruit,” says Newark director Donald Morris. “Parents come to us looking for an alternative to public education, and we do have a very strong academic program. They see our boys as mannerly, disciplined, and having a sense of direction.”

The school operates two choruses – a concert choir for grades 6 through 8, and an apprentice choir for grades 4 through 5. In a typical day, a student spends two to three hours on music, with instruction in theory, instruments,

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– Donald Morris, Newark Boys Chorus School

voice, and program rehearsal – the remainder of the school day is spent in other academic studies.

Most of the students come from Newark, an economically challenged city in northern New Jersey that has had its share of bad press over the years. The Chorus is mainly African-American and Hispanic, and many are second-generation Americans from Caribbean parents, Morris says. The parents feel that the Newark Boys Chorus School provides the structure and goals that lead to academic achievement. “Our aim is to get them ready for the best high schools possible,” Morris adds. “We want to nurture their souls, help them to develop their sense of community – this rubs off on their academic performance.”

The boys can also mature significantly through the school’s regular touring program. The concert choir makes three to five local tours each year and tours internationally every two to three years. They have performed in Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and China.

## Old Tradition, New Players

Frank Cimino founded the Maryland State Boychoir to preserve the sound of a boychoir and to keep the opportunity alive in Maryland, after witnessing a dramatic decline in the number of boychoirs in churches and schools alike. Cimino, who has been working with choirs in the Baltimore area for 37 years, estimates there were as many as 20 boychoirs in his region, but that now the number has dwindled to one.

Beginning with 14 boys in 1987, the group has grown to 150 singers. Cimino aims to make it as racially and socially diverse as possible and to promote boychoir singing across the state, not just in the Baltimore area. Many boys come to the MSB through references from school music teachers, and Cimino tries to recruit statewide. The singers now come from Baltimore and nine other counties, plus a few from out of state.

About half of the boys also sing in other choirs (church, school, community). Like most children’s choirs, a wide range of repertoire is offered. “We want to give the boys a chance to sing it all,” says Cimino, adding that the tour choir seems to prefer Renaissance music. “They don’t balk at singing other pieces, but they have shown their preference.”



Donald Morris, in class with the Newark Boys Chorus School



Members of the Newark Boys Chorus School

One reason to open up the repertoire is to allow boys to continue singing as their voices change. Cimino wants to keep his accomplished singers involved, noting that many of them developed a sound characterized as “adolescent sound with body . . . You can get that ‘boychoir timbre’ spread over a large spectrum of sounds.”

“Many parents come to us and say they are intrigued by the racial mix, by the mix of music,” says Cimino. “They are attracted to the opportunity to teach their sons acceptance of others and to identify with people who are different.”

Teaching tolerance for differences, celebrating diversity within our communities and in our music, and engaging youth in meaningful artistic expression all speak to values – and all are at the heart of the urban youth chorus movement. ■

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