

Q&A

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Taking kids' voices seriously

The Boston Children's Chorus director has big ambitions for his group

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff | June 8, 2008

Since its founding in 2003, the Boston Children's Chorus has grown from a 20-singer pilot program to a group that serves almost 300 kids, ages seven to 18 years old, singing in nine different choirs. It was founded by the Boston education activist Hubie Jones with the hope of bridging racial divides through its multi-ethnic makeup. These days, the chorus actively recruits in the Boston schools and also draws kids from over 50 towns and cities across greater Boston, with half of the children coming from families making \$50,000 or less. Auditions are ongoing throughout the summer.

But BCC aspires to be more than a feel-good, bridge-building project, according to Anthony Trecek-King, the dynamic 32-year-old conductor who is completing his second year as the chorus's artistic director. He takes the chorus's musical ambitions at least as seriously as its social mission. This week he has been leading rehearsals for the group's season-closing concert but on Monday afternoon he could be found in his South End office, where contemporary Baltic choral music was pouring out of the stereo. He lowered the volume and spoke with a visitor.

Q. How are the social and artistic missions of this group integrated?

A. At the outset, many people said you can't do this. You can't make the organization more open - socially, economically, racially, religiously - and still be really good artistically. But I don't see it as a choice. The choir has to be good in order to achieve some of the social outcomes. We also want to start locally and see if we can get this movement to go beyond just Boston to be kind of a national thing, where everyone is constantly thinking about providing greater access to the arts.

Q. How does the chorus's mission play itself out in practice?

A. We have kids whose parents make well over six figures, and kids who are living below the poverty line, but when we're in rehearsal, you can't tell who's who. They become friends and they hang out on weekends. And when they're drawn together, then their parents are forced to interact too. You actually see this thing happening on a daily basis.

Q. Does singing in a chorus make this possible in a way that's different than, say, playing in an orchestra?

A. Yes. It's easier to break down barriers because you're using your voice and communicating at such a primitive level. So choirs can form communities very quickly, in a different way than with instrumentalists. Plus, all cultures sing - but not all cultures play the violin. So you can sing a piece from Africa, Asia, or South America - and then use those as jumping-off points. But what I love and adore is when I eventually pick out "Lift Thine Eyes" from Mendelssohn's "Elijah" - or something from Mozart's Requiem, or a Bach cantata - and the kids just love it. To me this is when you've had some success. A few years earlier, many of the kids never would have touched this stuff.

Q. Is your goal to produce future professional singers?

A. My hope is that by the time they're finished with us and they graduate, they are capable of going into music, but that's not our point. To me, you should only pursue a career in music if you have to do it, and not because you want to do it. A lot of kids choose it because they want to, and that's when they fizzle out.

Q. How did you choose to go into music?

A. At University of Nebraska [at] Omaha, I wanted to be an engineer but I also took some music classes and the chair of the department called me and said, 'Have you ever seen anyone like you conduct?' I said, 'No, I haven't. In all my days, I've never seen an African-American conductor.' He told me I had some talent in the area and I should consider it. That planted the seed, and I eventually explored it further. I kept trying not to do it, but it pulled me back in!

Q. The lack of diversity in orchestras and their audiences continues to be a tremendous problem in classical music. Do you see enough being done to address this?

A. I think it's very important that we figure out some way to break through that barrier. We do need to do more, but I don't have that answer. I think it's about building deep relationships with the communities we're trying to reach. The chorus plays a part in that.

Q. How do you recruit, and do you find the kids to be responsive?

A. We go into the schools. . . . When I walk into a classroom in Dorchester or Roxbury, and the kids look at me, there's an instant connection. I don't have to break down some sort of resistance to it. It makes it a bit easier to bridge gaps and so on, but there's also a certain danger in becoming known as 'that guy who bridges gaps.' I'm a musician first.

Q. What in your opinion has been lost by taking music out of the public schools to the extent that we have?

A. We've lost a ton. The Boston Children's Chorus shouldn't exist. There shouldn't be a reason for us. Every public school should have arts. You need academics, athletics, and arts to create a complete human being. When you start taking out one or two of those things, we lose something tremendous. I think this lack of creativity and this lack of completeness is going to be a real problem that will show up once these kids are graduating and becoming part of the workforce. . . . I believe in music's ability to transform lives. It transformed my life. And when I go to a school where there is very little music, or no music, I just wonder - why would a student want to go to school if there's nothing extra to hang onto?

Q. The chorus has also been involved in commissioning composers to write new works for the kids. Are young people more open to challenging contemporary music than adults?

A. Yes, absolutely. When I work with kids, if I love the piece and I come with conviction, then they buy into it. Even if they don't quite get it, they're willing to try. And often if you're working with adults, that's not necessarily the case - there can be a lot of push-back. Kids don't really see limitations in the same way. It's very inspiring. I look at what the older kids can do as the equivalent of what adults can do, and even beyond that. Ultimately, I want the group to be looked upon as one of the great choruses of the United States, not one of the great children's choruses of the United States.

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