

The Singer

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Clare Stevens takes a trip across the pond to meet the Young People's Chorus of New York City

‘Come to the Manhattan Church of Christ, on East 80th Street, between Madison and Park,’ said my instructions for finding the Intermezzo division of the Young People’s Chorus of New York City. Round the corner from the designer fashion stores of Madison Avenue, it seemed a strange place to find a choir that prides itself on attracting kids from the roughest, toughest districts of the city. But the location has the advantage of being relatively central, accessible by subway from the five boroughs of New York from which the Young People’s Chorus (YPC) draws its members. A more important point, perhaps, is that when YPC describes itself as crossing cultural boundaries, these include class as well as race – it makes a genuine effort to recruit from the private schools of mid-town Manhattan as well as from the public (ie, state-run) schools of the Bronx and Harlem.

YPC is remarkably similar in its ethos to El Sistema, the orchestral training scheme that has been transforming the lives of children from the slums of Venezuela through music for the past 30 years. The chorus does not yet have a national reach – though some exciting plans are in the pipeline – but for the past 20 years it has been breaking new ground in music education in New York.

Like so many revolutionary initiatives, YPC represents the vision of one man, founder and artistic director Francisco Núñez. He is a first-generation New Yorker, born of Dominican parents. Brought up in an area where it was dangerous to play outside, he spent hours

indoors playing a piano purchased by his mother from the local Salvation Army. Another safe place was the local church, where Núñez became choir director and organist at the age of 14. At school he found it difficult to get on with his classmates, who did not share his desire to work hard or his interest in music, but his life changed when he became firm friends with another pianist, a girl who came from a wealthy Jewish family. ‘She lived in a doorman building, something I always dreamed about. It was then that I realised that music would be my way into a new world.’

When he graduated from New York University, Núñez knew he wanted to continue to play the piano and compose, but he also wanted to conduct and create a choir for children from diverse parts of the city. ‘I took on an administrative assistant’s job at the Children’s Aid Society (CAS), one of the city’s oldest and most prestigious children’s charities, with the option to start a chorus that would bring the children from various CAS programmes together for the first time. The charity loved the idea. It was serving at the time over 100,000 children in need, but had never had a music programme. Most of the programmes were in very challenging neighbourhoods, but two were in very affluent areas, Greenwich Village and the Upper East Side. I ordered five buses, hired local teenagers to assist me in picking up children and began the chorus. I went to each location and met with hundreds of children in after-school programmes, trying to convince them to take a bus and join me in this new effort.’

The first rehearsal attracted 70 children; the second was down to 40. But gradually the numbers began to climb again, and today YPC serves a total of 1,100 children a year, in its own choirs and through outreach programmes within eight New York City schools. In 1997 it became an independent charity, separate from the CAS. It has been resident at the 92nd Street Y for 11 years, and at New York Public Radio since 2003, and this year was appointed as the first ever Chorus in Residence at Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Frederick P Rose Hall.

The core of YPC’s activity is the after-school programme, catering for around 300 singers in five divisions: Prelude (7–10-year-olds); Intermezzo (10–15-year-olds); Cantare (advanced 11–16-year-olds); Concert Chorus (12–18-year-olds); and Young Men (13–18-year-olds whose voices have changed). My visit began with an hour at an Intermezzo rehearsal led by Núñez’s wife Elizabeth, who is a co-director with him of the organisation, and associate conductor Amy Kotsonis. They started fairly gently with a sequence of physical and vocal warm-ups, then switched to *solfège* exercises using Kodály hand signs, first in unison and then in two parts. The group worked from scores on an African song with Kotsonis, then Elizabeth Núñez



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took over for some rhythm notation work on dotted and tied notes, using 'ta, te, tiri' note names, clapping, singing and a whiteboard. They worked impressively quickly on some complex rhythms, with speedy responses from the children and lots of hands going up to answer questions.

It was noticeable when they moved from exercises to repertoire that even these fairly young children were able to switch from one vocal style to another, singing quite strongly with a lot of resonance and a hint of vibrato in the African song that began the session, then producing a completely different, lighter and clearer sound for 'Stars' by Larysa Kuzmenko. Although girls were in the majority, there was a strong cohort of boys, and the variety of skin tones and styles of dress confirmed the organisation's boast that it attracts young singers from the widest possible spectrum of race and class. The atmosphere was good-humoured but serious, with talking firmly discouraged. On the other side of a set of glass doors, siblings were quietly getting on with homework and parents and carers were patiently waiting to be let in to watch the last half-hour of the session. 'It's too distracting to have parents in all the time,' explained Kotsonis, 'but we run an open house session once a term so that they can see what the children are doing.'

Meanwhile, across town at the Clinton Studios, YPC's Concert Chorus was involved in a recording session for a CD of unfamiliar arrangements of Christmas carols, directed by Francisco Núñez. As he insisted on retake after retake to correct minor tuning imperfections or achieve the specific tone quality that he had in mind for a particular phrase his high standards were immediately apparent. 'You've got to take enough breath – it's rushing because you don't have enough breath to finish the phrase, so you're pushing me.' 'It sounds like white chocolate – I want dark chocolate.' 'Some of you didn't sing that time. Don't be afraid – you've gotta sing!' 'There's a couch outside, you can lie down when we've finished, but right now we work until we've got this song down.' As time ticked away Núñez had sharp words for anyone who was not concentrating. But he also took a break and made the choir sing some downward sirens and massage one another's shoulders in order to relax their voices. 'Think beautiful thoughts ... close your eyes ... open them again ... now sing!' And there was praise, too, particularly for the lovely rich bass sound.

Only two carols were laid down in the three-hour session – 'Joy to the World' and a gospel-style 'Hark the Herald', in terrific, zany arrangements by Jim Papoulis, a frequent collaborator with the choir who was sitting in on the recording. From time to time Núñez would turn to him to ask for permission to alter a phrase, then the choir's section leaders would turn to the younger members to make sure they understood the change. Commissioning is a hugely important part of Núñez's strategy for YPC, and since 2001 the choir has premiered an impressive portfolio of more than 50 pieces which have been published internationally (by Boosey & Hawkes in collaboration with G Schirmer and Chester Novello) under the series title 'Transient Glory'. Most have also been recorded on two CDs of the same name. 'The aim is to spotlight the children's chorus as a serious, indeed glorious instrument for making music during that fleeting period when their voices endow the music with a particular poignancy and innocence,' says Núñez. 'Some of the pieces are by composers like John Tavener and Judith Weir who are already known for writing choral music, but I've been very keen to encourage those like John Corigliano, Steve Reich and Michael Torke who may be better known for instrumental music to write for us. I've also encouraged them to stretch our singers, techni-



ing for something much more rigorous and challenging.'

The sophistication of the 'Transient Glory' pieces extends to words as well as music. They range from settings of classic poetry by the likes of Burns, Blake and e e cummings to edgy contemporary texts that reflect the reality of city life, such as the children's poetry set by Kevin James in 'NYC Playground', and Michael Gordon's 'Every Stop on the F Train', which is a bit of a YPC calling card. It featured in the Concert Choir's programme for last summer's Choir Olympics in Graz, Austria, when they and the Young Men's Division competed against choirs from all over the world and brought home three gold medals.

But while winning international prizes is a source of great pride for Núñez and his colleagues, they are equally proud of the work they are doing at the most basic of musical levels in their satellite schools programme. The day after the recording session, I saw YPC's principal pianist Jon Holden taking an after-school choir at Lower East Side Preparatory School, which specialises in helping students of late secondary age who have recently arrived from China to assimilate into an English-speaking culture. Most of the participants were living in extreme poverty, often working long into the evening in low-paid jobs in addition to their school day. They had hardly any English and were too shy to speak to a journalist, but they were prepared to have a go at singing. 'We all love this,' a more confident black student told me. 'Our lives can be very stressful, but we all feel good after choir.'

Back in midtown the children of Prelude were getting to grips with Britten's 'Ceremony of Carols' in the basement while upstairs in the church Núñez was rehearsing the Young Men's division. The most impressive aspect of this session was the way in which 16- and 17-year-olds were helping younger boys with changing voices to cope with reading an unfamiliar part; and here too the mix of race and class was very apparent. Afterwards, some of the boys assured me that the mix is not just musical but social. 'What keeps us coming back is the music, but most of our friends are in the choir, and some of them are people we would never have met otherwise,' said one. 'It becomes a whole other life.' But membership of YPC is not something they feel embarrassed about. 'On the contrary, we feel we're ambassadors for choral music. Francisco is a really great teacher and we get to perform in some fantastic places. The feeling at the end of a concert is just amazing, everything else just fades away. We're so lucky to be part of this.' ■