

Cappella Festiva Treble Choir: Much More Than Notes and Lyrics

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The Hudson Valley is famous for many treasures, especially cultural ones. Just when you think you've found them all, you are pleasantly surprised to learn there are even more, much like children finding beautiful eggs full of treats at Easter. This Spring my treat was discovering incredible music being performed locally by young people, and it's only fair that I share my good fortune.

Since 1974, the Cappella Festiva Chamber Choir, composed of professional and skilled amateur singers, has been performing concerts of a wide range of classical music to critical acclaim and building a loyal following that now extends outside New York State. In 2006 a separate Treble Choir was organized with its own program and choral director to offer the opportunity of choral singing to children with unchanged voices from ages 8 to 18. Originally, the age limit was set at 16, but members so often expressed reluctance to leave, the adjustment proved beneficial to all. In addition to their own two to four concerts each year, the ensemble is also given the opportunity to perform with the adult chamber choir. Both girls and boys are invited to audition, but of the present 32 members, the girls still outnumber the boys.

Both Cappella Festiva and the Treble Choir have been invited to perform in a variety of venues and collaborate with numerous other choruses and orchestras. In April, Cappella was invited to join members of the American Symphony Orchestra, Bard Conservatory Orchestra, the Bard College Chamber Singers and the Vassar College Choir in a concert of Brahms under the direction of conductor Leon Botstein at the Fisher Center at Bard College. According to Michael Miller, editor/publisher of *New York Arts and the Berkshire Review*, the singers' "rich vocal sound ... clarity, and precision came together to make a choral component that was pretty much ideal for this music." The Treble Choir might observe such success and hope to follow, perhaps all the way to Carnegie Hall ... except they have already. In May 2009, lucky members appeared as part of a special Mid-America Production Memorial Day Concert at the famous venue. Equally important, however, have been concerts with the Hudson Valley Philharmonic and regular invitations from many and varied local venues, such as the Rhinebeck Sinterklaas Festival.

The success of both choirs can be attributed to the professionalism and talent of those at the helm. Dr. Christine Howlett, the current artistic director of Cappella Festiva, and Susan Bialek, co-founder and artistic director of the Treble Choir, are both accomplished professional conductors. They have the privilege of continuing the work started by a number of world-renowned musicians. Jameson Marvin, then choral director of music at Vassar College, began Cappella by presenting exclusively the music of Johann Sebastian Bach (he is currently head of the Harvard Glee Club). Luis Garcia-Renart, cellist and much loved conductor of several Hudson Valley ensembles, followed as the musical director from 1978 to 2000 and expanded the repertoire to include Classical, Romantic, and modern music. Leadership then passed to Dr. James Bagwell, the current choral director of Bard College, who also maintains an active schedule throughout the United States as a conductor of choral, operatic, and orchestral literature.

For all the professionalism of the Cappella Festiva leaders, both choir leaders stress the informality of the audition process. Ms. Bialek, currently the Director of Music at Dutchess Day School in



Millbrook, has extensive experience working with children. She explained that a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere is crucial to the children who audition for the Treble Choir. The "choral interviews" are held in January and September by appointment, and the young people are asked to sing a short song they are comfortable with and then evaluated as to how well they can read music. Participants should love to sing, have good pitch and rhythm, and be committed and focused during rehearsals. When the work begins, the children learn much more than notes and lyrics. Together, they discover how much they gain from being part of a musical ensemble. The teamwork becomes evident from the start, as children who have even one season of experience assist "beginners" with the basics of reading the music. Most important is their example of commitment and persistence—of thinking beyond a world of instant gratification—and of the rewards it pays in being part of the creation of the truly universal language of music.

The Treble Choir also holds a two-week Summer Choral Festival, this year from July 5 to 16. Two vocal ensembles have been tailored for young singers: Cor Capriccio is geared for children ages 8 to 11 and Cor Cantabile for ages 12 to 18. Both groups will assemble at Vassar College, where, in addition to preparing for the Summer Festival Concert to be held on July 16, they will participate in yoga, sports, crafts, dance, and hiking. The College—and the access it provides to an art center, greenhouses, library, and gardens offers an enriching home for the groups' rehearsals, performances, and summer camp.

After my interview with Susan Bialek, I had the opportunity to experience for myself one of the instrumental groups she had talked about: the Stringendo Orchestra School of the Hudson Valley. I left in awe of the talent of the teenagers who handled Vivaldi and Mozart with passion and precision, in one instance even

without benefit of conductor or sheet music. A combination of those instruments and the voices of the Treble Choir would be an unforgettable event.

Among the conclusions of a study conducted in 2009 by Chorus America—a national organization that promotes choral singing as an essential part of society—was that children who sing in choirs display many of the enhanced social skills found in adult singers and learn valuable life skills. So it is good news to know that there are more than a dozen choral societies, not including those within school settings, to be found in Dutchess, Ulster and Columbia Counties. Dr. Howlett's advice: "If you want to sing, there is a place for you."