



VOICE OF A GENERATION: The Young People's Chorus unites privileged kids with those from poorer neighbourhoods

VOICE OF THE STREETS

Now in its tenth year, The Young People's Chorus of New York delivers hard-edged messages from top composers such as Steve Reich and George Crumb. What has enticed them on board? asks **Brian Wise**

To see them filing on stage wearing their pastel blue shirts and multicoloured scarves, you might think the Young People's Chorus of New York City is just another cute group of kids singing earnest choral music with simple, uplifting messages. Then they start singing pieces with big topics – sexual identity, war, mental illness or the holocaust. They use extended vocal techniques (sighs, chants, moans, drones) and texts in unfamiliar languages such as Swahili, Hebrew or Native American dialects. And the

composers they present have name recognition beyond the margins of the choral music world.

Since May 2001 the Young People's Chorus (YPC) has been expanding the serious repertoire for children's choir through *Transient Glory*, a commissioning series that targets high-profile composers. Named after the ephemeral stage when kids' voices are at their youthful prime, so far the series has produced 40 commissions including seven new pieces – by Steve Reich, Ned Rorem, George Crumb, Meredith Monk, Tarik O'Regan and

Bruce Adolph – that will premiere this month at New York's 92nd Street Y. The mix of musical styles mirrors the group's membership of kids from diverse racial, religious and economic walks of life in New York City.

Francisco J Núñez, the founding artistic director of the YPC, says that traditionally, children's choir directors have not been aggressive enough in commissioning composers with broader name recognition. 'There is a lot of good choral music but no one knows the good choral composers,' he says. 'Yet in the orchestral world, composers are winning Oscars and Grammys. People know Tan Dun through *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. They know John Corigliano with *The Red Violin*, or John Adams winning the Pulitzer with his 9/11 piece. But aside from large choral pieces that require children's chorus, composers of that stature weren't writing for the medium.'

TEAM EFFORT: (left) artistic director Francisco J Nunez puts the YPC (right) through its paces; and he has commissioned composer George Crumb (below) to write for them



Along with building a repertoire and raising the profile of children's choirs, *Transient Glory* is designed to challenge to hyper-stimulated city kids who may have thousands of songs on their iPods and yawn at the bland Broadway arrangements and sugary seasonal tunes that often pass as standard choral fare.

'In school chorus you sing SATB [soprano, alto, tenor, bass] music or really easy stuff with slick, straight-up melodies, and lots of thirds and fifths and octaves,' says Lousia Thanhauser, a high school senior in Manhattan and a nine-year veteran of the chorus. 'Every song has to have a positive message and nothing can make you question anything. To me, a lot of that sounds the same.' In contrast, the YPC has given Thanhauser a chance to premiere a piece by Milton Babbitt, which appealed to her own budding interest in maths and music theory.

'At first it was so ridiculously hard and I was really afraid of it but then it started to make sense,' she notes. The choir also premiered a piece by the pop singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright. 'To be able to meet Rufus Wainwright and tell my friends he wrote a song for the chorus that I'm in is awesome.'

Certainly, not every piece is an instant hit with the YPC's 250 choristers, who range in age from eight to 18 and comprise four divisions. Some pieces are rather long and composers unknowingly push the children's vocal capacities. And they may take countless hours of rehearsals – a challenge for kids whose extracurricular time is already stretched thin with everything from sports to college applications. Yet many members and alumni

'It was great to be able to do something that no other choir in the US was tackling'

say the *Transient Glory* commissions are more satisfying to perform.

'They weren't the boring classical pieces that you'd hear performed in a church,' says Dunia Rkein, a sophomore at Dartmouth College who sang with the YPC for nine years. She is now musical director of her school's *a cappella* choir. The *Transient Glory* pieces, she says, were 'musically challenging with contemporary, six-part harmonies. It's just really great to go and do something that no other choir, at least in the US, was tackling.'

For some of the commissioned composers, writing music for children's choir wasn't a big stretch. Ned Rorem, Richard Rodney Bennett and Dominick Argento, for example, each had written dozens of choral pieces before the YPC approached them, and adapting to young singers was largely a matter of gauging their vocal stamina, breath support and sight-reading ability. Still, other composers had no prior experience either with young singers or choruses and were reluctant.

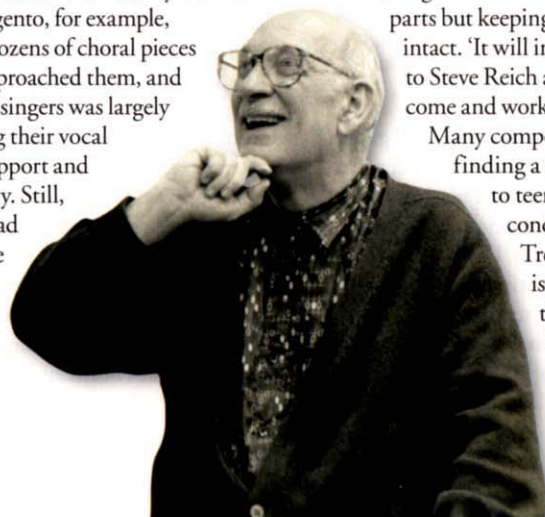
Steven Mackey said he twice turned down Nunez's requests for a piece before agreeing to write *The Attic Which is Desire*, a setting of a William Carlos Williams poem. Mackey, who came to classical music as a rock guitarist, says he was lured by the fact that the young singers have a rich vocal blend without the big, operatic vibratos. 'The great thing about the gig was the sound of those voices,' he says. 'Certainly it took a while to get my head around the capabilities and rhythmic restraints and harmonic language. But the sound of the voices made me want to do it.'

GETTING A BIG NAME COMPOSER

Nunez, who at 42 has a boyish charisma that seems capable of winning over the crustiest composer, persuaded a hesitant Steve Reich to write a piece for this year's *Transient Glory* commissions. Reich eventually agreed to adapt an earlier piece, his 2004 *You Are (Variations)* for large ensemble and voices. Nunez was happy with the solution, which will involve

reducing some of the large instrumental parts but keeping the vocal lines intact. 'It will introduce the kids to Steve Reich and hopefully he'll come and work with them,' he says.

Many composers wrestle with finding a text that speaks to teenagers but doesn't condescend. David Del Tredici, whose music is famous for its gay themes, took the final phrase of the poem 'Sabbath's



YOUNG PEOPLE'S CHORUS THE STORY SO FAR...



GOING FOR GOLD: YPC at the Choir Olympics



1988 FRANCISCO J. NÚÑEZ (left) forms a children's chorus at the Children's Aid Society of New York, a community arts centre where he directs the music programmes.

1998 The Young People's Chorus (YPC) becomes an **INDEPENDENT**

ORGANISATION and begins a residency at the 92nd Street Y, which provides rehearsal and office space.

2001 Transient Glory, a commissioning project, begins with pieces by **JOHN TAVENER AND MICHAEL TORKE**. The project includes a concert series and publishing component.

2003 YPC sets up satellite programmes in four **NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**, an effort to reach children where arts education has been eliminated from the school curriculum.

2003 The YPC forms a residency at **WNYC RADIO**, the first-ever resident chorus at a New York radio station.

2004 The YPC wins two gold medals at the **2004 CHOIR OLYMPICS** in Bremen, Germany. In July the chorus performs at the reopening of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor.

2007 The sixth installment of **TRANSIENT GLORY** features new works by Steve Reich, Ned Rorem, George Crumb, Meredith Monk, Tarik O'Regan and Bruce Adolph.

Child' ('bonny and blithe, good and gay') and had the singers shout out the last word repeatedly in his *Four Heartfelt Anthems* ('It doesn't do well in the South,' Núñez jokes). Michael Gordon, known for his edgy, rhythmic music, is writing *Every Stop on the F Train* a piece whose text consists of the names of the station stops on a subway line that connects three of New York's boroughs.

STEPHANIE BERGER

REHEARSAL TIME: Nunez conducts the YPC; and (below) junior chorus members



'I'm getting kids who are poor like I was so they can open each other's horizons'

Like many urban children's choirs throughout the US, the YPC brings together kids from elite private schools in wealthy neighbourhoods as well as remote public schools and centers for at-risk kids. Núñez himself grew up as a child piano prodigy in New York's Washington Heights neighbourhood, where his parents moved from the Dominican Republic. When his talents eventually exposed him to the world beyond his neighbourhood, he saw that music could teach values of hard work and self esteem. 'What I'm doing with the choir is getting kids who are poor like I was and who have a lot of musical talent and creating a bridge so they can open up each other's horizons,' he says.

Núñez graduated from New York University and the University of Calgary with degrees in piano performance and music education and was a music teacher at a Lower East Side community arts center in 1988. He formed a chorus, and a decade later it became independent. Today the YPC holds residencies at both the 92nd Street Y and WNYC New York Public Radio; its Transient Glory commissions have been released on a disc for Vital Records (a second instalment is due this year), and are available for other youth choruses through a deal with Boosey & Hawkes.

DECADE OF SUCCESS

As the YPC marks its tenth year of independence it is outgrowing its home base. Some 750 students participate in a satellite programme with eight New York City public schools. Starting in the fall, private voice lessons will be provided for every member of the main concert chorus, with the option for piano and music theory instruction. Students talk about Núñez's growing drive to win international choral competitions and take on bigger musical challenges. But while Núñez rattles off the growing numbers of YPC alumni who are entering conservatories and college music schools, there are also those members who find it provides a welcome break from school and other pressures. 'When you're learning music you just have to forget about everything else,' says Rkein, the Dartmouth College student. 'It was a cathartic experience, clearing your mind with nice music.' ■

Young People's Chorus of New York: Transient Glory, is on Vital Records 2014 at full price