

## The Sounds of Music

### Kids Make Serious Music in the American Youth Chorus

BY EMILY CLARK

To paraphrase an old saying, “Big Dreams Come in Small Packages.” Anyone sitting in on a rehearsal or catching a performance of the American Youth Chorus can see that these kids sing their hearts out and dream big. Their efforts pay off, and the lessons they learn reach far beyond music.

Now in its fourth year, the after-school choral program—split into junior and senior divisions—was conceived as a way to bring back the kind of music program that has all but disappeared from schools. The AYC has more than doubled in size since its beginning in 2008, and there are now about 50 in the junior group of 8-10-year-olds, with another 24 in the 11-to-14-year-old senior group.

Each group rehearses once a week at the Atlas Center for the Performing Arts, and artistic director David Simmons finds ways to harness all that chaotic youthful energy without raising his voice.

#### Swinging into Jazz

Lately, the AYC has been rehearsing for its April show, “JAZZ: Made in America.” Simmons channels the junior group’s enthusiasm into a warm-up that includes sighing, yelling and hand gestures, as well as scales. He calls out cues: “Pretend you have five big wads of gum and you’re singing while you’re chewing.”

The kids yawn through scales in

two-part harmony (senior division has three-part harmony), “Mi may mi mo mu.” They sing, “Doopi Doopi Do, Bippity Boppity Boo!” They sing, “I just want to chew my Tutti-Frutti gum.”

Then they get serious and start

down immediately.

Kennedy, who teaches with Simmons at a Maryland school, called the process “electrifying.”

“One day the kids don’t know the right side of the page, and then they’re reading music and singing

rus “discipline disguised as fun,” training the kids to be on time, take direction and be responsible to the group.

“It’s such a confidence builder,” she said. “It teaches the kids that it takes work to succeed and you have to keep trying. And the kids have a mentor in Dave—he’s like the Pied Piper of music.”

Liz Riddle has two sons in the chorus, Jamie Wodatch in the senior group and Matthew in the junior group. “It’s thrilling when I hear them singing at home, especially together,” she said. “Sometimes it’s Jay-Z and then it can be Cole Porter or Duke Ellington.”

Letitia Chase’s 10-year-old daughter Shaniah Robin has overcome her shyness, is proud to be “bringing the sheet music to life” and now wants to learn other languages to enhance her singing. Northeast dad Joel Cavicchia said that being in the chorus has broadened

his daughter Lena’s “already considerable exposure to music.

“Lena studies violin and piano and is grounded in classical music. But now she also talks about Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker,” he said.

Being in the chorus has opened doors for Maya McGuire. The 9-year-old has already sung at the opera with Placido Domingo and was chosen to sing the child’s part in a newly-commissioned work for the Congressional Chorus show in June. She now has an



AYC performers at the 2011 Fall Concert. Photo: Courtesy AYC

working on performance. They run through “Jazz,” followed by “Choo Choo Ch’Boogie.” Next it’s on to “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If it Ain’t Got that Swing),” and Simmons asks who wrote the piece. Hands go up and someone answers “Duke Ellington.” Dave tells them, “Duke was born and raised right here in Washington DC.”

Rehearsal assistant Susan Kennedy works on choreography, while Simmons says, “I can only do this choreography if there’s complete silence.” The kids settle

from memory,” she said. “They’re learning to sing in parts, music theory, time signature, rhythm and key notes.”

#### Expanded Horizons

Parents, most of whom wait in the Atlas lobby during rehearsals, claim their children are learning so much more than just singing and music.

Mary Masters, whose 10-year-old daughter Tatyana is in her second year with AYC, called the cho-

agent and wants to be on TV.

"Once you start doing one thing, you just keep going and going and you get lots of chances," she said.

### Capitol Gigs

AYC singers have entertained at the White House (where First Lady Michelle Obama shook hands with each of them), State Department (where they were congratulated by ambassadors), Kennedy Center (where they had Sir Paul McCartney clapping), Library of Congress and the opening of the Capitol Visitors Center (a televised event).

Each year there's a free holiday singalong at the Atlas and the spring performance focuses on American music. At the end of the school year, the group joins the .

Involved parents, as well as dedicated volunteers from the Congressional Chorus, keep the AYC running smoothly. Louise Buchanan, who shows up every Tuesday for the junior division rehearsal, works with the kids and their parents, does PR and is backstage during performances.

"Our job is to give the kids some reassurance that they're doing great. It's fun, but it can be daunting, especially for the newcomers. Kids this age need extra love and care, so sometimes my job is to give them a hug or a pat on the back when things get intense," Buchanan said.

American Youth Chorus performs April 21 at the Atlas Center for the Performing Arts on H Street NE. For tickets, contact the Congressional Chorus website at [www.congressionalchorus.org](http://www.congressionalchorus.org). For more information on the AYC, go to [www.americanyouthchorus.org](http://www.americanyouthchorus.org). ★



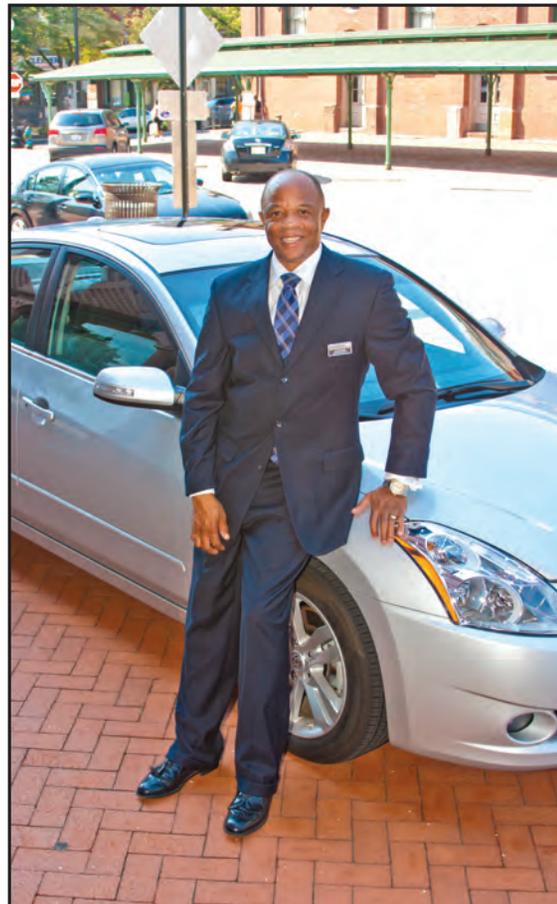
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