



STRONG VOICE · STRONG MIND · STRONG SPIRIT

CHESTER CHILDREN'S CHORUS

ANNUAL REPORT

2019–2020





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ANNUAL REPORT CREDITS:
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THE CCC'S 25TH SEASON: OUR BEST EVER... AND THEN OUR MOST CHALLENGING

In the nine months before the pandemic, our CCC children learned more music, sang more beautifully and confidently, and practiced more math than in any previous season.

The children and staff were thriving in a wonderful cycle of practice, success, and pride, which fueled the desire to practice even more. Optimism permeated the entire program. Our students conquered difficult music and sang their most polished performances, and they learned math in leaps and bounds. Fittingly, our 25th year was our best.

Then, with the pandemic, the killing of unarmed Black men and women, and ensuing protests throughout the country, our anniversary year became our most challenging. All rehearsals and concerts were cancelled, and our wildly successful Math Practice Program was reduced to a few children with sporadic online attendance. Like you, we were frightened, angry, lost.

Our Virtual Summer Program (July '20) marked a turning point for CCC, helping us discover what is possible in the face of our limitations. It was, in a sense, a long CCC practice session. This fall, with in-person, outdoor rehearsals resuming and fifty students participating in our online math program, the children are returning, and our collective optimism is blossoming.

Eventually the world will heal. We will sing for you again and you will cheer wildly for our beautiful Chester children. Together with you, we will continue to provide our children with a community that fosters artistry, academic achievement, and shared humanity.

John Alston

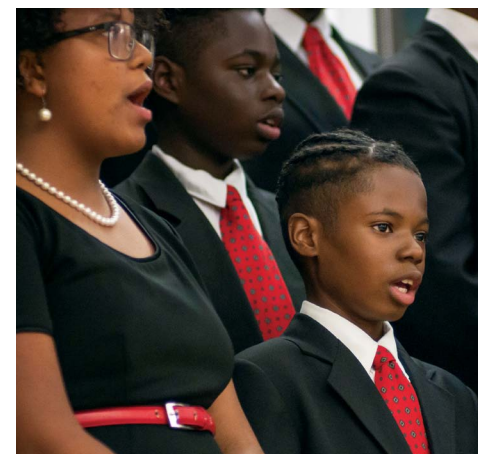
JOHN ALSTON
Executive and Artistic Director



Our abbreviated season (July 2019–mid-March 2020) was our most productive and refined ever, with the children learning and performing a wealth of challenging, culturally significant, and stylistically diverse music. Together, we had many impressive musical triumphs and remarkable moments.

- **Messiah:** By March, we were ready to perform eleven movements—*And the Glory, O Thou, For Unto Us, Glory to God, He Shall Feed, Behold the Lamb, Surely, Hallelujah, Since by Man, Worthy is the Lamb, and Amen*. Except for the *Hallelujah* Chorus, the music was unfamiliar to our students, who often asked if we could, instead, sing Mozart's *Requiem*. To facilitate learning *Messiah*, the Concert Choir practiced hundreds of sight-reading exercises in the primary keys of *Messiah*, and by February, many of the children could read most of the final *Amen* chorus. By early March we were aggressively polishing in rehearsals, with our students pointing out passages that needed more work and asking for 'do-overs.' In the final sessions before the dress and concert, we were prepared, excited, and proud of our accomplishment.

- **Bohemian Rhapsody:** We performed Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* seven times last season, followed by seven standing ovations. The students spent most of the 2019 Summer Program fine-tuning the exotic harmonies and creating the choreography. In rehearsals, our advanced students took great pleasure in pointing out mistakes in my transcription. Sometimes they were actually right, but in their teenaged brains, they were always right.



- **Air:** Bach's sublime *Air* is part of his *Third Orchestral Suite*. When the children first listened to an instrumental recording in September, they immediately appreciated its beauty—*Air*'s long expressive melody and perfectly pointed bass line. After a month of rehearsing, we sang through *Air* for the first time... and then the children burst into spontaneous applause and cheers.
- **At Night/At Dawn:** Swarthmore professor and composer Tom Whitman '82 wrote *At Night/At Dawn* especially for our 25th anniversary. The music is filled with unfamiliar intervals, dissonances, and rhythms. It is a difficult piece, and the students were not immediately keen to learn it. By mid-fall, they were singing it during the van rides to and from rehearsals.
- **Let It Be:** Before the middle schoolers began learning *Let It Be*, I told them that they were going to learn the greatest song ever written. They didn't believe me. After two sessions, they asked to sing it at every rehearsal, and now they love *Let It Be* as much as you do.

During our December concerts, the children experienced their first rock concert moment as the audience waved their cell phones in the air during the song.

- **Bennie and the Jets:** The older boys looked at me with blank stares when I asked if they knew the Elton John song. I played the classic live recording for them, and by the first time Elton sings, "Bennie—Bennie, Bennie and the Jets," the boys were moving their heads to the beat in that subtle and perfect way that only beautiful Black teen boys move.
- **The Love You Save:** In my humble and completely biased opinion, our cover of this Jackson Five favorite is better than the original. After learning and performing it, our children love this song as much as their parents and grandparents do.

It was CCC's most remarkable season of music making, filled with our children learning and loving some of the best classical and popular music ever written. Love and practice make excellence—and really good singing.

THE CCC MATH PRACTICE PROGRAM LEAPS FORWARD

CCC's Math Practice Program (MPP) took a giant step forward this year. The results have been phenomenal!

After three years of developing the program as an individualized tutoring program for middle and high school students, we began providing foundational group math instruction to our youngest students—our third graders. Meanwhile, we continued to offer MPP to our middle and high schoolers, and through the hard work of CCC Lead Math Teacher Kevin Downs, we began a more thorough documentation of MPP's positive results.

Third Grade: Early Intervention

After witnessing how intensive support for the older students remediates the gaps in their math comprehension caused by years of ineffective math instruction in school, we decided to proactively address these crippling gaps by starting a supplementary math program for our youngest students.



Last fall, twelve CCC students participated in our first year of math practice for third graders. They each completed a ten-question assessment of their math fluency that included basic addition and subtraction, knowledge of place value, and their number sense—that is, their understanding of how numbers work. Of the twelve children, ten were not able to complete more than five questions. Some simply did not know the answers, while others were too intimidated to persist.

Throughout the fall, the group met with two math teachers twice weekly. Each hour-

long lesson included two playful activities that provided practice as well as snapshots of the students' progress:

- "Number of the Day" focused on place value and number sense.
- "Puzzle of the Day" included word problems, fractions, or multiplication.

In October, each student had earned at least one perfect score on these activities! Each student's average success with the fall curriculum was also calculated. Over half of the group earned 85% or higher, and two more earned 70-80%.

We gained two additional third graders in the spring semester, as the group focused on fluency with math facts. Students worked at their own pace, beginning with the lowest numbers and moving up as they mastered each group of facts.

By March, when our program was suspended by the pandemic, five students had mastered the 7 and 8 times tables, and nine students were working on the threes and fours. Students also practiced telling time and counting money, and all fourteen students earned at least one perfect score on a telling time worksheet.

In summary, after just six months of meeting twice weekly with CCC math teachers, our CCC third graders demonstrated strong improvements in their math fluency. We had planned a comprehensive assessment in May that would have included place value, word problems, fractions, multiplication, time, and money. While the pandemic shutdown interfered with this formal assessment, it remains clear that our investment in group math instruction for the Training Chorus represented a successful deepening of CCC's commitment to math support.

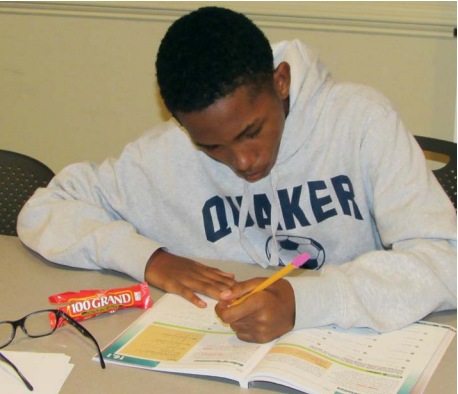


Middle and High School Students: Impressive Progress

Thirty-four middle and high school students participated in our MPP this year. Five were eleventh and twelfth graders, who prepared for the SAT. The twenty-nine younger students each worked one-on-one with a Swarthmore College student math coach. A cohort of fifteen was assessed in both September and December, using ixl.com. On this assessment, a total score of 750 indicates grade-level skills appropriate for the middle of seventh grade; this cohort's average score in September was only 480. In other words, our students' math knowledge was below the fifth-grade level, approximately three years behind.

We then individualized the curriculum for each student based on their September assessment results. After just three months of twice-weekly sessions with their individual coaches, our older students achieved an average total score of 570, indicating nearly a year's growth. This impressive improvement manifested across all six math content areas—numbers and operations; algebra and algebraic thinking; fractions; geometry; measurement; and data, statistics and probability.

In the final quarter of the fiscal year, we offered MPP as a remote learning program in response to COVID. A small number of students opted to continue math practice with CCC during this period. As staff and young people adapted to Zoom instruction, we all began to learn what works well for virtual teaching and learning. As of early Fall 2020, we are confident that CCC can continue to provide meaningful math support to our children on a remote basis while COVID restrictions remain in place.



THE 2019 CCC SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAM

Every CCC year begins with the Summer Learning Program, CCC's 6-week comprehensive arts and academic enrichment day camp, held on the campus of Swarthmore College.

The Summer Learning Program (SLP) is the entry point for new Training Chorus members (rising third graders). Importantly, the SLP serves as an intensive community-building period for the entire Chorus, as being together every day builds trust, solidifies relationships, and creates a foundation for the coming year.

One hundred children, ages 8-18, attended our SLP in 2019, with six of the older teens employed as counselors. The heart of the program revolves around Chorus rehearsal, but our other offerings were highly diverse. Focused on enrichment, 2019 SLP activities included a combination of core and elective classes:

- Chorus Rehearsal
- Music Theory class for Concert Choir members (high school students and also middle school boys whose voices have changed)
- Piano and voice lessons
- Math instruction and practice
- Science for Kids—an inquiry-based science program, including lab work and individual research projects, designed and facilitated by Swarthmore College faculty and students
- Horticulture
- Reading support—individual buddy sessions with volunteers and also discussion-based book clubs
- African Dance
- Hip Hop Dance
- Drama/Musical Theater
- Visual Arts
- Photography
- Swimming instruction
- Outdoor games
- Basketball

Weekly trips to the pool at the Swarthmore Swim Club and an outrageously fun field trip to Sahara Sam's Waterpark supplemented our daily activities.

The 2019 SLP culminated with an outburst of productivity and expression: three choral concerts, three drama and dance performances, an art exhibit, and a science fair, attended by a combined total of 1,400 people. The musical



highlight was the Concert Choir's show-stopping performance of Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Research shows that participation in arts and academic enrichment summer programs improves school attendance and contributes to improved cognitive, social, and personal growth (Stevenson, et al., 2013). These findings ring true at CCC, but we place equal stock in how the children themselves see the experience. An overwhelming majority of Chorus members reported that participation in the 2019 Summer Learning Program taught them to work through hard challenges, prepared them for the upcoming school year, and helped them develop as people.

SUPPORTERS

On behalf of our children at the Chester Children’s Chorus...Thank you!

We celebrate the generosity of our donors who contributed \$1,113,380 in charitable gifts to the Chester Children’s Chorus between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020. Gifts made in support of our children have a profound impact and bring the mission of our program to life. Please know how grateful we are for your support, big hearts, and applause—and for helping our children become the people the world needs them to be.

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“What does CCC mean to me? When I think of the CCC, I think of family, MY family. There is a unity that comes with being with the Choir. CCC means the world to me, and there is nothing but love surrounding the CCC.”

A'Najah, CCC 2020 Graduate, Freshman, Widener University

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“Chorus gives kids a chance to understand not only about music but also about their community and about the world. It shows them that they as individuals can change the world, and that they all have the ability to do so. That is so vitally needed in our world right now.”

Jesse, CCC 2020 Graduate, Freshman, Cairn University

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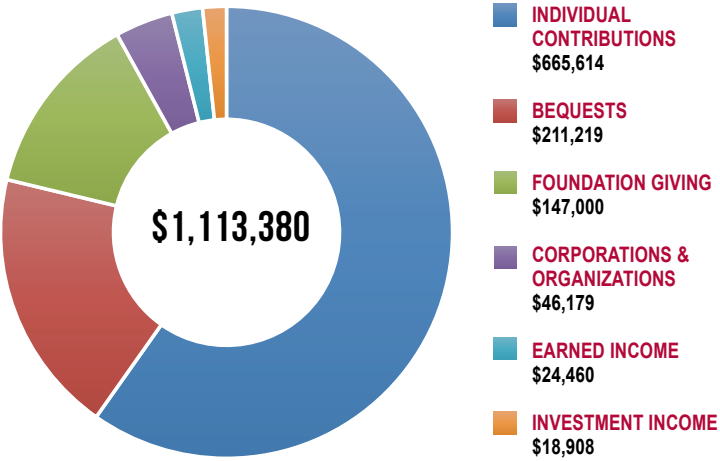
This Annual Report reflects giving from July 1, 2019–June 30, 2020. Every effort has been made to be complete and accurate, and we apologize for any errors or omissions.

If you have any questions, or would like to further discuss the ways you can have an incredible impact in the lives of our children, please contact Carolyn Marzo, CCC Director of Development, at 610.328.8617 or email at ccc@swarthmore.edu.

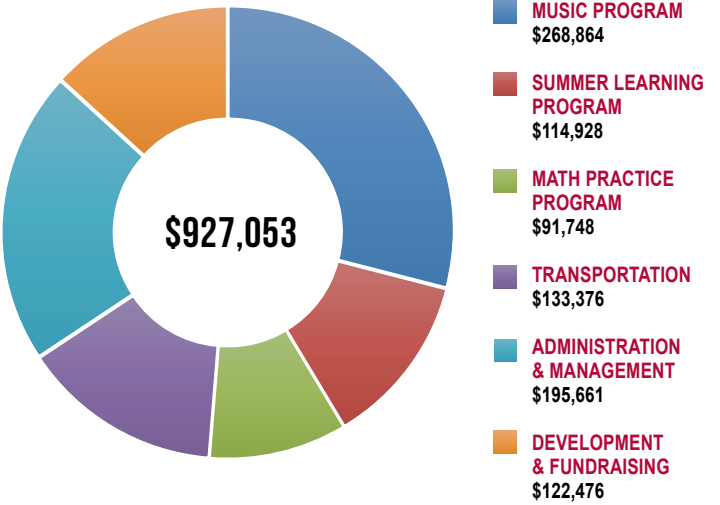


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CCC LIVES MATTER

Last fall, after a Saturday afternoon music theory class, four of our older girls walked over to the Swarthmore Dunkin' Donuts/Baskin Robbins for milkshakes. Approaching from the opposite direction were three elderly women. As they neared the girls, one woman clutched her handbag tightly to her body. Our girls are Black, and the women were White. When the girls returned with their shakes, they recounted the incident. One of the girls, M, insisted, and continued to insist for thirty minutes, that she was unfazed—even though she was clearly and justifiably upset.

How is it possible that someone walking in Swarthmore could be afraid of four beautiful Black girls who had spent the afternoon singing Bach and Billy Joel, and learning to write scales and do Roman numeral analysis?

George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter protests have rightly brought police brutality and systemic racism to the front of the American consciousness. Breonna Taylor's death broke our children's hearts. I have never talked about racism on stage or written about it in CCC communications, but in rehearsals with the older children, we talk about it almost daily.

We are hopeful and determined, but not naive. We know that our lives will be more difficult because we are Black, but we also know that many Americans understand that the sins of slavery have not been adequately addressed, and that systemic racism is real.

America has twice failed, first with Reconstruction and then with the incomplete Civil Rights Movement, to build a just and welcoming society for its Black children. **But with every rehearsal, every song, every concert, CCC children become better equipped to succeed in the world beyond Chester. Our brave and beautiful CCC children show us all what our country could be.** —JOHN ALSTON

CHESTER CHILDREN'S CHORUS STAFF

John Alston, *Executive and Artistic Director*

Elisa DeNofio, *Program Coordinator*

Kevin Downs, *Lead Math Teacher*

Carolyn Marzo, *Director of Development*

Dana Semos, *Managing and Education Director*

Sean Tripline, *Assistant Music Director*

The Chester Children's Chorus is an affiliated program of Swarthmore College and receives generous in-kind support from the College, but raises its own funds to cover all direct expenses.

Official tax receipts for charitable contributions to the Chorus come directly from the College.



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