Discovering Handel

On May 18, 2014 the CCC Concert Choir (45 sixth–twelfth-graders) performed Handel’s Messiah. Despite the length and difficulty of the piece, the children were magnificent, and their performance was by far the most impressive they’ve ever given. Our journey to learning and loving Handel began seven years ago—and it did not begin well.

By spring 2007, I was sure we had sung enough classical music to appreciate and learn the “Hallelujah” Chorus, the most familiar piece in the Western classical canon. I remember the Saturday afternoon rehearsal in which I anticipated the children’s enthusiastic approval of the piece. After I explained the importance of the “Hallelujah,” the children slowly and dutifully began learning this monument, when, after 30 minutes, Destiny Sharp (now a college junior) raised her hand and commented, “John, this is boring. All we do is sing ‘hallelujah’ over and over.” I asked the other choristers if they agreed with Destiny, and they did, rather eagerly. I still remember my disappointment and tears welling in my eyes.

Our second try happened two years later. We learned “Hallelujah” during our 2009 summer learning program. This time the children loved the drama, the powerful rhythms, and triumphant melodies. During the pre-concert warm-up, I told them that the audience would reward their performance with a standing ovation (the first, but not last, they would receive for singing a piece of classical music). When the audience stood and cheered wildly, I shouted at the singers with delight, “I told you so! I told you so!”

In spring 2013, I shared with the Concert Choir the difficulty of finding music as great and accessible as Mozart’s Requiem, which we had performed the semester before. Aliyah Tanner (now a college sophomore) casually suggested that we “learn the piece that ‘Hallelujah’ was from.” I was more than a little embarrassed that I didn’t think of this.

We spent the next 10 months learning 13 more Messiah choruses, while also working on R & B and gospel music for our regular concerts. The children really enjoyed struggling with and mastering this glorious and difficult music. (The closing “Amen” was particularly challenging.) For the performance, we invited

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“I don’t believe I’ve ever had so much FUN at a CCC concert!”

Attendees of the culminating summer concerts were truly in for a treat when John and the 140 members of the Chorus performed a 12 minute tribute to ‘70s hits from “YMCA” to “Killing Me Softly With His Song” and ending with a rocking version of “Joy to the World.”

But the CCC didn’t just do the ‘70s. This summer was busier than most in recent history. The Concert Choir members performed as part of Swarthmore College’s Sesquicentennial Alumni Weekend on June 7 to an amazing audience of 300 college alumni. Thirty CCC members formed a chamber choir to sing John’s tribute to the 22 victims of gun violence in Chester last year, “If I Had Known” at Delaware County’s Rally for Sensible Gun Policy on June 27.

And it didn’t stop there. 140 students, ages 7–19, participated in the six-week Summer Learning Program that incorporated academic classes such as math, science, horticulture, creative writing, history, and critical thinking with classes in visual art, drama and dance. We were honored to have author Becky Bitha read her published books to the newest Training Chorus members.

At camp’s end, students presented their science experiments at a science fair, showcased their artistic flair at a gallery exhibit, demonstrated their grace and flexibility in a dance program, and performed three full-length chorus concerts.

On their own initiative, Concert Choir altos, Kaya Banton and Jordan Sarinana, led a team of Chorus members in a car wash that generated ever had so much FUN at a CCC concert!”

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On their own initiative, Concert Choir altos, Kaya Banton and Jordan Sarinana, led a team of Chorus members in a car wash that generated $430 for CCC!

None of this would have been possible without many community and campus supporters including the following departments and personnel who graciously shared their space, time and expertise with us for the Summer Learning Program: Lang Performing Arts Center-Eastern department, Parish Career Services, Sharples Dining Hall, Scott Arboretum, the Science Center, and Lang Music Building; the staff at Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility, Facilities, Media Services, and Public Safety, Swarthmore Borough Building, and the more than 50 volunteers who helped us in countless ways. Thank you!