

Youth In Harmony

Choral Academy provides training, friends.

BY ADRIENNE VAN DER VALK

When Haley Steinberger looks at sheet music for Bach's "Komm, Jesu, Komm," she can hear the music in her head. She can imagine her own resonant soprano harmonizing with 84 other voices, bringing the little black dots and twisting clefs to life. She is an accomplished classical artist and has been performing publicly for more than 12 years. Haley, 18, just graduated from South Eugene High School.

As a participant in the Oregon Bach Festival's Youth Choral Academy, Haley and other youth experience ten days of intensive formal vocal training on the UO campus, concluding their experience by performing a full concert on July 6 as part of the festival's scheduled line-up. While choral music may not be the first genre most people think of when they imagine teens participating in music, director Richard Clark says the high school students who audition for the academy are motivated both by the excitement of living on campus and by the sense of accomplishment they get from such rigorous training.

"One of the most fun things is the hard work," Clark says. "Experiencing over 80 people all on the same note, the same chord. The emotional impact it can have is incredible. The hard work combined with the success they are achieving is a magical experience."

Clark explains that having high school students involved in the Bach festival is a great way to attract younger audiences and generate increasing interest in the prestigious nine-year-old program, which this year auditioned more than 140 students from eight states.

"The caliber of audition was miles beyond what it has been in years past," Clark said. "There wasn't a single student who couldn't have contributed. This group really is the cream of the crop."

Listening to Haley talk about her experience, it's obvious that "the cream of the crop" goes far beyond just kids who can carry a tune. The choir sings pieces in German, Latin and Spanish as well as English, and accepted students must learn all the music in advance of their arrival on campus. All are proficient in reading music and have a highly sophisticated understanding of the language of choral directing. The academy gives them an opportunity to hone these skills, primarily under the direction of conductor Dr. Anton Armstrong of St. Olaf College.

"We sang eight to nine hours a day," Haley says about last year's experience. "By the end I had definitely put a strain on my voice."

Anton Armstrong conducts rehearsal.



The training youth receive while at the academy takes singers who have proven themselves in their local high schools and moves them to a new level of sophistication. Clark reports that participants from past years are teaching privately, employed as choir directors or studying music with Dr. Armstrong at St. Olaf. Haley is interested in being a choir director, and while she knows her voice and her ambition have been fed by the technical education she's received at the academy, she feels the experience has enriched more than just her talents.

"I keep in touch with students from all over," she says. "These are lifelong connections for me. Everybody has a common interest, and we're all passionate about the same thing. That makes for really good friends." ■

The Youth Choral Academy performs 8 pm Thursday, July 6 at the Hult Center.

The Tao of Bach

Music through movement

BY ADRIENNE VAN DER VALK

Anyone who attends the Tai Ji and Music seminar at the Bach Festival this year should plan on doing more than just sitting and listening. Tai Ji master, philosopher and dancer Chungliang Al Huang will open the festivities by engaging audience members' ears, bodies, spirits and minds. Huang's classes are designed to help musicians and spectators alike gain a heightened relationship with the music they will see and perform over the next two weeks using Tai Ji learning combined with Chinese philosophy.

"Every musician's voice and body is an instrument," Huang explained. "When your body is free and expressive, everything is an extension of who you are. Many musicians realize the most essential practice and discipline is to get their body working well."

Huang has been integrating Eastern traditions in a Western setting for more than 40 years and is the founder of the Living Tao Foundation in Urbana, Ill. He has an extensive performance background and feels drawn to contribute his talents in settings such as the Bach Festival, where large numbers of people inspired by music and the arts gather. He first collaborated with the festival five years ago and says he is honored to be invited back this year.

The Tai Ji and Music seminars begin with a participatory exercise challenging the stereotype that classical music is stuffy or Eurocentric. Huang believes utilizing Tai Ji not only stimulates the relationship between the body and mind but can foster music appreciation on an entirely new level, regardless of how sophisticated a listener you are.

"It is a four-class, four-concert package. They are for everybody, all ages, all levels of experience. Come to have fun. If you love music, you will love moving to music," he says.

Although Huang himself designed the seminars, he also has an all-star cast alongside him throughout the series. "I have the musicians joining me, teaching and performing. I use the musicians to work with me to encourage people to join, — not just watch, but move with us." ■

The Tai Ji seminars will be held June 29-July 1 in Studio One at the Hult Center.

