

Anton Armstrong and some YCA participants having fun



TRANSFORMING LIVES

Anton Armstrong's Youth Choral Academy fosters community

STORY BY ED DORSCH • PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MCDERMOTT

It's showtime. "Oh my God. I'm going to faint," says a girl, one of 85 high school students about to go on stage at the Hult Center. They'll be singing with professional musicians in a hall with more than 2,000 seats, in front of an Oregon Bach Festival audience.

Overcoming stage fright is just one part of the learning experience at the Stangeland Family Youth Choral Academy. Every year, festival devotees look forward to a warm, entertaining performance by young musicians. What they may not know is that the academy is among the best in the nation and quite possibly the preeminent youth choral program for ensemble performance.

Each summer, the academy brings some of the nation's best high school singers to Eugene. For 10 days, they live, work and perform under the baton of Anton Armstrong, a professor of music at St. Olaf College in Minnesota and conductor of the prestigious St. Olaf Choir.

A handful of youth programs in the U.S. offer this level of vocal training and performance, but most are about solos, says Armstrong. No other program emphasizes the ensemble experience — or community — quite like this.

"This is more than just making music for simple, naïve, artistic excellence," says Armstrong. "It's about producing music and art so that it transforms lives. It builds bridges. It makes us better human beings."

Recipient of the 2006 Robert Foster Cherry Award (the largest award in the U.S. for teaching excellence), Armstrong is known worldwide for his remarkable ability to work with great young singers and make them even better. "Back home, these students are the leaders," says Armstrong, "the best singers in their schools. Here, they are surrounded by others just like

themselves. We set the bar high."

"What I think is so distinctive about the Oregon Bach Festival," says Armstrong, "and the thing I've been drawn to is, first of all, this is really a family. We expect them to reach the highest level of excellence they can — not for selfish reasons, but to become better people and to share a musical experience that enriches others."

Armstrong holds the baton, but he is only one part of a teaching trio that makes this program more than just a summer camp or a choir competition. Movement instructor Therees Hibbard and director Richard Clark also serve as teachers, mentors and counselors, guiding the students through 10 days of intense intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth.

VENI SANCTE SPIRITUS

Preparing for their big night, the students rehearse in a classroom at the UO music school. "I want you to know what you're singing," Armstrong tells them as they sing Mozart's Veni Sancte Spiritus, a work the composer wrote when he was just a few years younger than most of the students.

Mozart's first language was German, Armstrong explains, so they will sing in Latin — with a German accent. He explains that Veni Sancte Spiritus is the Latin sequence for Mass at Pentecost, a celebration of the Holy Spirit.

"This is a story of unity," says Armstrong. "A song of unity. Veni Sancte Spiritus. Come Holy Spirit. Fill the hearts of your faithful. Kindle the fire of your love."

Perhaps it's his passion for perfection or the respect he shows his students. Somehow, Armstrong has achieved something most teachers only dream of — total discipline coupled with the

respect and admiration of his students. They trust him. They do what he says. And they laugh at his jokes.

Abruptly, Armstrong interrupts. "It doesn't spark! Again. Kindle the flame right there. So can you fire it up? Fire it up, baby. I want that 'Li' to have a little special-ness. You're treating it like a middle child. How many of you are middle children?" The students laugh. "Treat it special now," he scolds them in jest. He tells them to stand. "You look like, 'I think this is crap,'" he says. "You've got to have alleluia faces. Make your eyes look like the stars of Christmas trees!"

"You have to respect young people," says Armstrong. "They're like dogs. If they smell fear and incompetence, they'll bite you. They understand when there's a phony in front of them. They're much smarter than we are."

OBF Artistic Director Helmuth

Rilling and Executive Director Royce Saltzman started the academy in 1998 to introduce young musicians to the music and meaning of J.S. Bach while providing tools and techniques to help them become better singers.

For Taryn Curry, a soprano who has always lived on her family's farm in Madison, Kansas, being away from her family was difficult. "It was hard the first couple of days," she says. "But I got to know everybody, and then they weren't as different as I thought we were. It was eye opening."

Curry says that the YCA "is the experience of a lifetime." She thinks people her age aren't often into classical music, but "if anybody ever experiences it like we did in those 10 days, I think they would love it forever."

BACH MEETS KELLY CLARKSON AND GREEN DAY

Sun pours through high windows into a cavernous dance studio at the university. Shoes and backpacks are piled along the wall, and music fills the room. Then silence.

"Good morning," says movement instructor Therees Hibbard. "You were wonderful yesterday, but we have more to do. Hand on heart. Draw your sword. You must always open, open, open." She turns the music back up and leads the students through some basic dance warm-up exercises. Though not perfectly in sync, the students make an effort to wake up and follow Hibbard. They move their arms and feet to the music, back and forth, walking in tandem. They put their hands above their heads, sway their hips, flap their arms.

A longtime member of the OBF choir, Hibbard is an assistant professor of music at the University of Nebraska. She has worked as a music teacher, choral conductor and singing instructor at all levels of music education, from nursery to primary and secondary vocal music, and on through to college, university and adult professional instruction. And she has always included dance and movement as an integral part of her teaching.

"Tall bodies. This is going to help us stand on those risers forever. Come on. Wake up. Smile. Express yourselves. There you go. Those are the people I saw yesterday." Why do singers need tai chi



YCA '06 participants celebrate after their big performance