

San Francisco Boys Chorus turns 60

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Kids sing the darnedest things. Especially if they've spent any time as members of the San Francisco Boys Chorus.

So when the group celebrates its 60th anniversary at the War Memorial Opera House next Sunday, don't expect the boys to sing "Happy Birthday."

At least not until completing a choral run-through of Franz Schubert's Mass in C Major and Léo Delibes' "Messe Breve." Their lungs may be young, but together their presence and their voices are *big*.

"There is an utter spiritual and musical beauty of the sound that boys can make," says Ian Robertson, San Francisco Boys Chorus artistic director.

A former choirboy in his native Scotland, Robertson took over as director in 1996, two years before the group's 50th anniversary. For that half-century mark, Robertson took the boys to their debut at Carnegie Hall in New York. This year, the special concert will be back where it all began: at the War Memorial Opera House.

The San Francisco Boys Chorus was founded in 1948 to train kids to sing and to add a new vocal dimension to the San Francisco Opera. The connection between the two has continued steadily - they have performed together in nearly 200 productions. Through the years, the boys have performed for Mikhail Gorbachev, the queen of England, the king of Sweden and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Dignitaries aside, chorus alumni memories tend to focus on more random details - such as stealing deli meats meant to be used as props for Italian numbers or spontaneously singing bits of Latin or Greek songs between pitches during games of stickball.

"I remember on the corner of Eddy Street, where we rehearsed, there was a guy named Smiling Jack," recalls George Gorbatenko, who was 11 years old when he joined the first San Francisco Boys Chorus in 1948. "Smiling Jack was a used-car salesman, and he was trying to break the record for flagpole sitting. After practice, all the boys would go see if Smiling Jack was still there. The famous Tucker car was up in the showroom on Van Ness. After singing, we'd go ogle over that."

Of course, the former chorus members remember the singing, too.

"In 1948, kids pretty much did as they were told without any questions," says another original chorus member, Michael Jesse Butcher. Now 71 and a retired physical-education teacher, Butcher can, on demand, still sing "Carmen" - a complicated Spanish-themed opera sung in French.

"I have no idea how, but I still remember that melody," he says. "And I don't ever remember it being difficult."

In the 2008 edition of the San Francisco Boys Chorus, there appears to be a case of the more things change, the more they stay the same.

"What we like to do is harness the energy of the young mind and spirit into music as one part of their lives," Robertson says. The energy of the young boy and openness of the mind take us to a real different repertoire. But I don't say, 'Now, this is difficult.' I ask, 'What do you think this piece is all about?' "

The answers are always honest, as was the case when Robertson recently asked for feedback from the boys during rehearsal of a particularly difficult song.

"It's dark," one boy in a soccer jersey said.

"It's spooky," another boy said, before remembering to take off his baseball cap.

"It's very confusing music," a third boy said as the group of about 30 all nodded in agreement.

That's to be expected, considering that these boys are in the Concert Chorus, the highest of the five levels of the San Francisco Boys Chorus, which practices at the Jones United Methodist Church facilities on Post Street at Fillmore.

Robertson's reply: "The first time through, you can look at the sheet. The second time through, trust me."

The boys do just that, and finish the song beautifully.

Meanwhile, in other rooms of the church facilities, boys age 6 and older gather to sing scales to test their range, snapping their fingers to keep time and trying not to fidget. All seem happy simply having songs to learn and sing.

"I always knew it was work, but it was truly enjoyable work," says Christòpheren Nomura, an alum from the 1970s and now a professional opera singer. "I loved being with 20 kids all working together to accomplish a piece."

It was around 1970 when 6-year-old Nomura was piled into the family's Pontiac station wagon by his mom and driven across the bridge from Berkeley to his first chorus rehearsal.

He cried. She left. He sang his heart out. Mom came back. By then, he was smiling and laughing.

One of the biggest changes to the San Francisco Boys Chorus in recent years was the implementation of the Willie L. Brown Jr. Music Scholarship. No, none of the kids walk around wearing three-piece suits and fedoras. In 2005, Robertson approached then-Mayor Brown for help in making the chorus more diverse.

"We wanted the boys chorus to reflect more what the Bay Area looks like," says Susan Brown, who was assigned by her father, Willie Brown, to oversee the project.

As director of the outreach program, Susan Brown goes to public schools in underserved areas such as the Excelsior, Mission and Bayview districts in San Francisco and the Canal District in Marin County.

"We tell them it's a little like 'American Idol,' " Brown says. "They feel like they've won something, and they have. There's a full scholarship. Most of these kids don't even know they can sing."

In its third year, the Willie Brown program now supports 26 kids in the chorus. Two are in the highest level and will be traveling with the chorus to France in July.

"I'm a pretty fast learner," says 13-year-old soprano Dominique Shaw of Pittsburg, a scholarship winner. "It can be difficult, but I try not to think about it too much. I just want to keep singing as long as I can."

San Francisco Boys Chorus 60th Anniversary Concert: 7:30 p.m. next Sunday. War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. \$35- \$45. (415) 392-4400, www.cityboxoffice.com.

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