

CHORUS EFFECT

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SINGING IN THE SYMPHONY'S HOLIDAY FESTIVAL CHORUS HAVE LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES —AND AUDIENCES GET MAYBE THE BEST RENDITION OF "JINGLE BELLS" THEY'LL EVER HEAR.

BY STEFENE RUSSELL



DILIP VISHWANATH

The Holiday Festival Chorus on stage at Powell Hall

“The most memorable part of it in my mind is we sang the ‘Hallelujah Chorus,’” says Pattonville High School senior Taylor Dalk, remembering his sophomore year, the first year he performed with the St. Louis Symphony Holiday Festival Chorus. “The crowd loved it so much they gave us a standing ovation at intermission, which I’ve never seen before. The crowd was so warm, and the conductor was so happy with our performance. It was . . .,” he pauses a little bit, maybe wondering if what he’s about to say is over the top. Then he decides, no, it’s true: “It was probably one of the most moving things I’ve ever done in my life.”

Dalk will be one of the 100-plus local high school and college students singing in this year’s concerts, which will be performed December 18-20. The kids, who come from Fort Zumwalt, Metro East, and all points between, received a spiral-bound collection of sheet music at end of October. Some students worked with private vocal coaches to learn the repertoire; some worked independently. Dalk practiced with the 33 other members of Pattonville’s chamber chorus, under the direction of music teacher Melynda Lamb. She’s been participating in Holiday Festival Chorus for four years. The chorus, which is modeled on a similar program in Rochester, New York, launched here in 2010, so the Symphony celebrates season five of the program with these concerts.

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Kevin McBeth,
Holiday Festival Chorus director

“They all participate, and we get a school bus and we go down for rehearsals and performances,” Lamb says. “It’s just been a really incredible experience for the kids. The very first rehearsal we go to, when we get there, they have the kids enter through the musicians’ entrance and go straight on stage. Most of my students have never been to Powell. It is so incredible for these high school kids, for their first experience of Powell Hall to be walking in the musicians’ door and their first view of the inside to be from a performer’s perspective. I was almost in tears the very first year, because these kids walked onto the stage, and their mouths dropped.” Then, she says, they all whipped out their cell phones and started taking pictures.

Though the students start to practice the music as soon as they get their scores, they only have three rehearsals inside Powell itself. The first is conducted by Kevin McBeth, who also leads the St. Louis Symphony IN UNISON Chorus; McBeth starts off the second rehearsal, then turns things over to the Symphony’s resident conductor, Steven Jarvi.

“And then their next rehearsal is with the orchestra,” McBeth says. “That’s typically where things get *really* exciting for the students, because they get to be on stage, usually with about 70 or 80 members of the St. Louis Symphony, and hearing some things really from a vantage point that some of them have never had a chance to hear before. So it’s exciting to watch that process.”

Lamb is usually sitting in the audience when this happens: “To watch the faces of these kids who have never heard the symphony before, to watch their faces as they hear the first notes of the symphony, and they’re on stage with the musicians....” It wows her every time, she says.

There’s awe in the process of rehearsing at Powell, but there’s a lot of hard work being done, too. “It helps them to get acclimated to the space,” McBeth says. “It’s a big room to sing in, so for students who’ve not experienced this before, you’re singing to the room, but you’re also singing to balance yourself with the orchestra. So it’s a different kind of experience for students who are used to singing with maybe a group of 40 or 50 in their auditorium. And now they’re at Powell Hall with the orchestra. So it takes a little bit of adjustment.”

There’s a lot of hard work that goes on behind the scenes administratively as well: every year, Susan Patterson, Manager of Chorus Activities, touches base with local music teachers to see who will be performing. Then McBeth and Jarvi plot out the repertoire, choosing between five and seven selections. Classics like “Silent Night,” stay on the program, because they’re audience favorites that people love to hear. Once the music’s chosen, it goes back to Patterson, who prepares all the

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scores with McBeth's rehearsal notes, and then the Symphony sends the binders out to the students. McBeth says that though there are songs that don't go out of rotation, they always strive to weave fresh works into the program. "This year, one of the new pieces that we're doing is an African Noel by Andre Thomas, an arranger from Florida," he says. "So it's a wide variety of carols, Christmas tunes, some wonderful songs," which in the past has included Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," and the aforementioned "Hallelujah Chorus."

The arranging, too, helps bring freshness to songs that have been in constant rotation during the holidays for just about forever. "I can't remember if it was last year or the year before that, we sang a paced-up version of 'Jingle Bells,'" Dalk says. "I still sing that today—it was just very catchy, and I loved it. And I really love 'Silent Night.' It's just such a beautiful, beautiful piece, it was a different take on a song I've been singing since I was in elementary school."

The weekend of the performances is a very intense one, Lamb says. "I don't know about the other schools, but they are taking final exams the week before the Holiday Festival Chorus," she says. That Friday, they take finals in the morning. "Then we leave from school, do two performances, and get back to the school at about 10 p.m.," she says. "Then we leave Saturday before noon, go downtown, do our performances, get back at 10. Sunday we go down, and do another one." Between shows, they go down to Best Steak House and hang out and eat dinner. "That's our little thing," she says.

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McBeth, who's been involved in the Symphony's holiday choruses for the past 20 years, says at this point he's overjoyed to be able to step back and be part of the audience. Though he's still analyzing what he hears, jotting down notes and thinking of ways to fine-tune the next performance. "It's a thrilling thing for the students, but I think also for those of us who are involved," he says. "Parents and audience goers who don't know I'm connected, I'll sit and just sort of eavesdrop on the conversations, and hear them saying wonderful things about the chorus."

McBeth adds that many high school students continue to participate at the college level. Lamb says that last year, her kids sang with a Patterson alum who returned as an IN UNISON young artist. And Dalk says he's headed to Murray State to study music, and that the Holiday Festival Chorus was the experience that cemented that decision. He encourages students who love music, and love to sing, to give it a try themselves.

"I would say that no matter what you believe your skill level is, you can do this," Dalk says. "It might push you hard, but it will be one hundred percent worth it in the end. That was my mindset going in the first year. I was like, there's no way I'm going to be able to sing these pieces with one of the best symphonies in the whole world. And then I did it, and we crushed it, and loved it, and it was just amazing."

Stefene Russell is St. Louis magazine's Culture Editor.