



YOUNG VOICES

Chorister Training in the 21st Century

Part 3: Notre Dame Children's Choir Notre Dame, Indiana

By Mark Doerries

This is the third installment in an ongoing series highlighting music programs for young singers.

Reclaiming Sacred Music for Children's Voices

The Notre Dame Children's Choir (NDCC) is a partnership between the University of Notre Dame; Sacred Music at Notre Dame (SMND), the university's graduate degree program in conducting, organ, and voice; and the regional community. Founded in 2013, its mission is to train the next generation of musicians for the church and the concert stage. The NDCC also provides a laboratory choir where master's and doctoral students learn to train and conduct young choristers. What was originally anticipated to be a choir of 20 children has grown into a multilevel program with eight ensembles, over 250 choristers, and a team of 20 graduate and undergraduate students and staff serving as directors and music educators. Now celebrating its tenth anniversary, the NDCC has nurtured over 1,000 choristers in our community—from infants to adolescents. Alumni from our graduate program hold leadership positions in children's sacred music programs across the country and the world, including at the Madeleine Choir School and the Fort Wayne Children's Choir.

Primarily structured as an after-school program for children ages 5 to 17, NDCC holds rehearsals for choristers up to three days a week depending on



their ensemble level. Children ages 5 to 6 meet once a week, while singers ages 7 to 17 attend biweekly 90-minute rehearsals. Choristers in our liturgical choir, an ensemble of child and adult vocalists modeled on the English cathedral tradition, rehearse three days a week and sing for Mass and Vespers at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at Notre Dame and the Sisters of the Holy Cross Convent at St. Mary's College. We also offer early childhood music classes for infants and toddlers with a parent or guardian, as well as a class for singers with mixed abilities, bringing choristers from our main ensembles together with students with cognitive disabilities.



The Chamber Choir sings for Mass at a local parish.

In 2015 the Organ and Piano Training Program of the Notre Dame Children's Choir was founded, to invigorate interest in the pipe organ and to complement choristers' vocal training. More than 40 children now receive keyboard lessons from our graduate-student instructors. Thanks to generous grants from the Lilly Foundation and the University of Notre Dame, all of the NDCC's services are provided at little to no cost to families and choristers, allowing any child to participate, regardless of financial means. The NDCC also operates van service from local schools and churches, permitting singers from across our racially and economically divided community to join.

Over the past decade, our ensembles have toured the United States and Europe and performed in churches and concert halls from Washington National Cathedral to Walt Disney Concert Hall. Of the five commercial albums released by the NDCC, two debuted at number one on Billboard's Traditional Classical Music and Jazz Music charts. Collaborators include Grammy-winning trumpeter Arturo Sandoval and Grammy-winning jazz pianist J.J. Wright. Performance highlights include concerts for the Organ Historical Society, the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, the National Association of Pastoral Musicians, the Indiana Music Educators Annual Conference, and a TEDx talk titled *What if Children Were More Than Cute*. The NDCC regularly commissions and premieres new music. Past collaborations include new works by Paul Carey, Stephen Mager, Mark Miller, Evelyn Simpson Curenton, Pulitzer Prize-winner Caroline Shaw, and English composers Philip Moore, John Duggan, and Daniel Justin. Much of this music is published through ECS Publishing's University of Notre Dame Children's Choir Choral Series and can be heard on the Universal Music, Arsis, and Dynamic Catholic



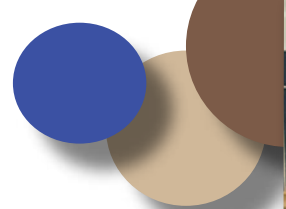
Members of the Cantabile and Cherub Choirs practice vowel hand signs.



Descant Choir singers practice solfège hand signs.



Members of the Chamber Choir explore their head voices through kinesthetic movement.



labels. In honor of the program's tenth anniversary, film music composer and frequent collaborator Alex Mansour wrote *The Mystery Play of Jonah and the Whale*, a contemporary medieval mystery play in the form of a one-act operetta, reminiscent of *Noye's Fludde* by Benjamin Britten.

While the NDCC's repertoire focuses on the heritage of sacred music that includes plainsong, polyphonic Renaissance motets, and Latin liturgical music, the breadth of our repertoire reflects the cultures, nationalities, and religious diversity of our singers and graduate-student directors. Our choristers regularly sing sacred music from Nigeria, South Africa, the Philippines, China, Columbia, Australia, Canada, and South Korea. We also have specialists in American gospel and jazz music on staff, and we frequently explore music from the Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian traditions.

Our curriculum is rooted in Kodály methodology but uses sacred music as its source material. Choristers in the youngest choirs begin by learning foundational songs, discerning how to translate elements of these melodies into rhythm and solfège syllables; only then are they introduced to musical notation. The process requires a significant time commitment on the part of choristers, but we find that our singers develop strong audiation and sight-reading skills by the time they reach the middle and high school ensembles. Our retention rate is high because, in addition to music and spirituality, we place great emphasis on belonging and develop a welcoming environment where singers from different backgrounds may explore music and faith.

On occasion I am asked whether children appreciate singing chant and Renaissance polyphony. The answer is that over the past decade we have grown a community of singers, families, patrons, and parishioners who deeply value this style of music. With few sacred children's choral programs for singers to look to near our area, in 2019 our oldest choirs traveled to the United Kingdom to sing alongside choristers at St. Anne Catholic Cathedral in Leeds and Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral. In the process, our singers discovered that they are part of a tradition that transcends time and geography. The NDCC is a sister ensemble to the Diocese of Leeds School Singing Programme led by Benjamin Saunders and Tom Leech, which works through schools and after-school programs to train over 4,000 singers weekly.



The NDCC's Liturgical Choir sings for weekly liturgies and is composed of child and adult choristers.

While Sacred Music at Notre Dame offers graduate performance degrees, we believe in Zoltán Kodály's performer-as-educator paradigm. We view music educators as performers of the classroom, and our most effective teachers are also our most gifted vocalists, conductors, and organists. Because of the close connection between the NDCC and SMND, our choristers frequently attend and sing in concerts, operas, and liturgies that feature their instructors as professional musicians.

The practice of children participating in sacred music has more than 1,000 years of precedent, from choristers singing Gregorian chant in the middle ages to the robust English, German, and Italian cathedral traditions of the past half century. In the United States, while many community and school-based choral programs are prosperous (including the Chicago and Indianapolis Children's Choirs near Notre Dame), in sacred environments children's choirs are often relegated to performing "cute" repertoire, with little attention given to music literacy. Children are seen as adults in training rather than a pinnacle of vocal excellence. While Episcopal and Anglican churches in the United States continue the English choral tradition, many parishes struggle to assemble a quorum of choristers. The NDCC unites singers from diverse locations to construct a plenum. We sing the music of Palestrina, Victoria, Allegri, Telemann, Byrd, Lassus, Tallis, Bach, Buxtehude, and Mozart for liturgies across the region in an effort to reclaim this repertoire for young voices.

The Notre Dame Children's Choir is committed to revitalizing children's sacred choral music and to preparing graduate students to lead and grow choirs of children and adults in their own communities. We hope the self-sustaining nature of the NDCC can be a model for religious colleges and universities that offer degrees in music performance and education. We have shown that with the right training and constant, gentle pressure, performers can become highly effective educators and mentors in choral classrooms. The music of the church belongs to our children. As performers, educators, and composers, we have a responsibility to safeguard and transmit this tradition.

The vitality I feel when working with young singers gives me hope not just for the church, but for our fractured culture. Children are willing to take risks and explore new music with abandon. Sacred music sung by children transcends division and hate, left and right politics, and the high and low worship wars. The diversity of sacred music is their common language, and through it they discover culture, theology, performance, and friendships that last a lifetime. Let us all aspire to sing as these children do. Let us engender a surplus of opportunities for children to encounter sacred music. And let us err on the side of abundance.

Mark Doerries is associate professor in the practice of conducting at the University of Notre Dame, head of the graduate choral conducting studio for Sacred Music at Notre Dame, and artistic director of Concordia Vocal Ensemble and the Notre Dame Children's Choir.