

## American Boychoir to sing at St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights on October 29

by Mike Telin



Fernando Malvar-Ruiz will conduct The American Boychoir in a concert at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights on Wednesday, October 29 at 7:00 pm. The concert is part of the choir's 75th Anniversary Tour of the Midwest from October 17 to November 1, which includes performances in Milwaukee and Madison in

Wisconsin, Minneapolis, Faribault & Northfield in Minnesota, Napierville, Illinois, Fort Wayne, Indiana and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Founded in 1937 in Columbus, Ohio as the Columbus Boychoir, the ensemble moved to Princeton, New Jersey in 1950 and changed its name to The American Boychoir in 1980. Together with the St. Thomas Choir School on New York's Fifth Avenue, the institution is one of only two boarding schools dedicated to the training of boy choristers in the United States, but is distinct from St. Thomas in not supplying singers to serve a religious institution. The ABC School now includes students in the fourth through eighth grades who come from all over the United States.

"The choir is only a means to an end," Malvar-Ruiz said in a recent telephone conversation. "The goal is to educate the boys and to build their character by participating in a professional touring choir. In that context, the choir becomes an incredibly powerful tool. To watch them grow up and mature in front of my eyes is the most rewarding part of my job."

Students who attend choir schools in England and Europe are kept busy singing for services in cathedrals, but the American Boychoir has a more secular agenda. Its activities have brought its young singers into contact with such orchestras as the New

York Philharmonic, The Philadelphia Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, where they have worked with Alan Gilbert, Charles Dutoit and James Levine. They've also crossed into jazz and popular music for appearances with Wynton Marsalis, Sir Paul McCartney and Beyoncé.

“There are wonderful lessons to be learned from every experience we've had, whether it's an orchestral collaboration or otherwise,” Malvar-Ruiz said. “By doing those things, their characters build and their education is enriched because each one of these people becomes a teacher to them. And when you look at the list of teachers they've had, it's quite impressive.”



Malvar-Ruiz, who is now in his fifteenth season as director, gets a kick out of working and traveling with his young charges. “You have some very entertaining conversations. It's funny to hear them comparing conductors. ‘Whose Mahler 3rd do you like the best?’ And they can do that because they have worked with those people. They can be sophisticated enough to talk about tempos but they can also just be boys and say things like, ‘that conductor was scary!’”

In addition to training young singers, The American Boychoir School has very rigorous academic requirements. “We have a three-pronged approach to their education,” Malvar-Ruiz said. “It is the integration of these three areas that has made us so successful at building the boys' character.”

One prong is academics, which in the touring choir's case is related to their travels. “Right now we are on tour of the Midwest,” Malvar-Ruiz said, “and we travel with a tutor, the dean of academics, who has been working with the musical and academic staff to create a curriculum that is appropriate for this tour.”

A second factor is residential life. “We are a boarding school and the residential component is very important. This is where they learn to live with forty brothers, which

teaches them to get along and solve conflicts. Things like accountability, responsibility, feeling that you are an individual but that you are also part of a whole that is bigger than yourself — all of these are important elements in building character.”

The third is the music. “For them, singing in a professional touring ensemble comes with the same expectations as any professional choir or orchestra. For the boys to meet those expectations time and time again creates a sense of self and builds confidence. “In the end,” Malvar-Ruiz said, “they feel that there really is nothing they cannot accomplish.”

Those accomplishments include *Boychoir*, a recent feature film starring Dustin Hoffman, Kathy Bates, Josh Lucas, Garrett Wareing and several ABC students and faculty in speaking and non-speaking roles, with a soundtrack by the choir. “The film was directed by François Girard, who also made *The Red Violin*, so he has impeccable musical taste,” Malvar-Ruiz said. “There’s no fluff on the soundtrack, which includes portions of Britten’s *Ceremony of Carols*, the “Pie Jesu” from Fauré’s *Requiem*, and Handel’s *Hallelujah* chorus.

“The script writer, Ben Ripley, lives in Lawrenceville, very near to Princeton, and his script was inspired by the school. Girard started doing research and listened to recordings of the choir and told us later that he was really taken by them and wanted to capture that sound. Of course we accepted his invitation right away. The film premiered at the [Toronto Film Festival](#), where it received glowing reviews.”

The program for the choir’s current Midwest tour is entitled “Starlight.” “We open with a Gregorian chant, *Ave Maris Stella — Hail, Star of the Sea* — and continue with Randall Thompson’s “Choose Something Like a Star” from *Frostiana*,” Malvar-Ruiz said. “There is a section that is influenced by light that includes R. Murray Schafer’s *Epitaph for Moonlight*. We also have a section that is about movie stars, which is a different kind of star. In that section we will sing music from the soundtrack we just finished filming. Between those sections, the choir will sing classics by Mendelssohn and J.S. Bach as well as contemporary and world music.”

Immediately after the concert at St. Paul’s, Malvar-Ruiz will hold auditions for the ensemble as part of its National Talent Search. “Our goal is to have one boy from each state in the choir by 2018. We do have some boys now from Ohio, but not from the Cleveland area.”

Malvar-Ruiz says that would-be choristers should not be afraid of singing for him. “The auditions are very simple. I will play a few notes on the piano and ask the boys to sing the notes back. That’s it. No arias required! The misconception is that you have to be a prodigy to be a member of the American Boychoir. The choir is made up of very normal individuals. What makes it prestigious is the collective.”

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