

‘Singing the Underground Railroad’: Bach Choir’s youth chorus teaches kids to use voices to ‘stand up for what’s right’

By MICHELLE MERLIN

THE MORNING CALL | JUN 25, 2021 AT 7:03 AM



Over the last year, the 21 members of the Bel Canto Youth Chorus of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem have been studying music and poetry by African American artists.

Through their exploration of the music, the choristers learned about the local connections to the Underground Railroad and the ways systemic racism lives on today.

“Music provides an opportunity to work your way into these conversations in a way that is not threatening because the music is powerful, the kids want to sing the music, to be expressive, to know, to understand,” said Joy Hirokawa, the chorus founder and artistic director.

She said that through research and questions about the songs and lyrics, the choristers were able to understand systemic racism — the social, political and institutional systems and cultures that contribute to racial inequality in areas such as employment, health care, housing, education and the criminal justice system.

Their program is earning praise from the parents of students in the group, including Wamuni Mwaura, whose 9-year-old son is one of the only students of color in the choir.

“He realizes that being an African American it may be hard, some of the songs were saying it’s hard, but they won’t take away my soul,” she said.

She said being in a music video the chorus created helped her son feel good about himself and understand he can still be influential as an African American.

Bel Canto’s concert, “Stand Up: Singing the Underground Railroad,” went live on YouTube Tuesday night and will be up for two weeks. It includes an arrangement of the song “Stand Up” from the movie “Harriet” about Harriet Tubman.

The music video was shot in several Lehigh Valley area locations with connections to the Underground Railroad, including the Richland Friends Meeting in Quakertown, which was a safehouse for former slaves; the Freemansburg trailhead on the D&L Trail, which would have been part of the path runaway slaves took as they fled north; and the Mount Gilead A.M.E. Church, a Bucks County church built in a community of freed and runaway slaves that tradition holds was a stop on the Underground Railroad, according to the church’s website.

“Through music, storytelling, and dialogue, the Chorus hopes to encourage greater self-awareness regarding issues of race and greater understanding of communities and the world,” according to a news release about the chorus.

Hirokawa and administrator Silagh White made sure the students did more than just visit historically significant places. They also did research and gave parents literature and other information to help them have discussions with their kids.

Mwaura appreciated how much they checked in with parents, and that they were committed to the program and did so much research.

Last summer, the chorus did a joint virtual summer camp with the Choir School of Delaware, a nonprofit organization serving at-risk students from the greater Wilmington area. Hirokawa said she wanted members of her choir, who are largely white and suburban, to interact with a more urban and African American population.

“We need to learn how to traverse each other’s worlds,” she said. “We need to know how to communicate with each other, and music is one way of doing this.”

White said the pandemic gave the chorus time to pause and delve into the curriculum. She encouraged people to reach out to learn more about what they’ve done. Hirokawa said she’s compiled a database of resources for teaching about spirituals, for parents to talk about racism with their children, and other resources that she’s made available to music teachers in the region.

Florence Taylor, an Allentown resident whose twin daughters are in the chorus, praised Bel Canto leaders for how they handled such complex topics.

“They acknowledged there was trauma, but through it that there can be triumph,” she said. “It was small, foundational steps and they allowed a lot of dialogue and education for kids.”

Her daughter, Lila, said the chorus was able to have more frank discussions about slavery and Tubman. In school, teachers just lightly touch on those topics, she said.

“But we got into an entire discussion, and started talking about the things [Tubman] did and other people did,” she said of the chorus.

For Julia Sobrinski, a singer from Stroud Township in Monroe County going into eighth grade, what she’s learned in the chorus has helped her become more empathetic and understanding.

“I always want to be accepting and an ally to everyone, but it’s hard to do that when you don’t have a lot of knowledge, and researching yourself can only go so far,” she said.

“Being in a choir teaches you how to sing and use your voice, but being in Bel Canto, you learn why you’re using your voice and how to use your voice to stand up for what’s right,” Julia said.