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Eastern Horizons

The ever-ambitious Los Angeles Children's Chorus makes China its next stop.

By Brenda Rees

Shortly before the world's eyes turn to China for the 2008 Summer Olympics, the pint-size members of the Los Angeles Children's Chorus will get a close-up look for themselves. The Pasadena-based troupe is planning a two-week China tour in early summer, with stops in Beijing, Hong Kong and Shanghai. And the LACC, considered one of the country's leading children's choruses, is traveling in good company: alongside the Stanford Symphony Orchestra, whose musical director and conductor, Jindong Cai, grew up in Beijing.

For the young chorus members, the international adventure will offer opportunities to perform, meet their music-loving peers and get a first-hand education in local culture and history, according to Rachel Fine, LACC's executive director.

"China is on everyone's mind these days, and it's especially exciting for us to be there before the Olympics," she says. "We like to give our children a chance to explore an area, like China, that hasn't been developed yet; we want them to see and experience the traditional China."

Of course, not all news from the Middle Kingdom has been good: China's grim record on human rights has triggered protests of a Beijing Olympics float in Pasadena's Tournament of Roses Parade. But, Fine says, the company's Chinese connection is a harmonious one. "We are speaking the international language of music," she says. "Songs can unite us across countries and borders."

To that end, the LACC's Dec. 9 winter concert will include the Los Angeles premiere of "The Cataract of Mount Lu" by the esteemed Chinese composer Chen Yi. Sung in Mandarin and accentuated with sounds of nature, the choral work is part of a larger piece, "Chinese Poems for Children's Chorus in Six Levels," written in 1999 for the San Francisco Girls Chorus. Joshua Kosman of the San Francisco Chronicle noted its "intricately wrought harmonies and graceful pentatonic melodies with the occasional chirrup and whooping glissando."

This is the first time LACC has performed a piece from Chen Yi, whom Fine calls "one of the foremost female composers alive today. It's not common for composers to write for children's choruses. We're so fortunate to be doing this."

Such an ambitious program isn't unusual for the group, which isn't limiting its foreign affairs to Mandarin. Indeed, LACC's winter concerts will feature a wide range of languages, from French, German and Spanish to Latin, Czech and Catalan.

For 22 years, the organization's reach has earned it critical acclaim. Along the way, it has trained more than 1,000 boys and girls in the art of bel canto (beautiful singing) and notched more than 300 performances with such renowned companies as the Los Angeles Opera and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

LACC has come a long way since 1986, when founder Rebecca Thompson launched it as a small children's chorus assembled for a "War Requiem" concert at Pasadena Presbyterian. (Good things come full circle: This January, the chorus will once again perform Benjamin Britten's electrifying piece at Walt Disney Concert Hall, under the baton of Lorin Maazel.)

Today, 260 choristers ages 8 to 18 make up LACC's four choirs – preparatory, apprentice, intermediate and concert – as well as its chamber group. This year's enrollment is the largest yet, with singers coming from 65 communities across Southern California (though most live in the San Gabriel Valley). Members attend once- or twice-weekly rehearsals as well as classes in music theory. Throughout the year, they perform at top local venues like the Music Center and the Hollywood Bowl. Their programs run the gamut of classical music, folk, jazz and spirituals.

Plácido Domingo, the Eli and Edythe Broad General Director of LA Opera, praises the musical sophistication of his junior colleagues. "I look forward to conducting them again this season in 'La Bohème,'" he wrote in an email. "Their participation in some of our more theatrically adventurous projects here over the years—such as 'Grendel,' 'Der Rosenkavalier' and 'Hansel and Gretel' — has been particularly rewarding."

The choirs also perform free at area retirement homes and public schools. It may sound exhausting – especially for homework-burdened youth – but the singers say that being a member of LACC is exhilarating and well worth the time and energy.

"Every day I'm here, I love it," says Gregory Sliskovich, 14, of Sherman Oaks, a member for four years. "Singing gives me an awesome feeling of power and strength. It's like all that emotion that's inside, all balled up, can come out in a beautiful, powerful way."

A member of the concert choir, Sliskovich tried out at LACC's annual auditions when he was in fifth grade at the urging of his music teacher. "I was scared out of my mind," he says with a laugh, "but they were all very nice and supportive. I couldn't believe it when they said I was in."

To be sure, the audition process can be trying: Two out of three children don't make the cut. "It's one of the hardest things for us to do," admits Anne Tomlinson, artistic director. "We would love to expand but we are maxed out." (The next auditions are slated for June 12-14, 2008.)

During auditions, would-be choristers ages 8 to 12—the cut-off point for joining—are broken up into groups of five to reveal each child's music knowledge, voice and ear quality and eagerness to learn. Singers and their families must also commit to a September-to-May year of study as well as annual tuition, which runs from \$900 to \$1,450. For financially strapped families, LACC has a "robust scholarship program," according to Fine.

In fact, LACC's finances are flourishing. The organization has loyal benefactors who help bankroll an annual operating budget of \$1.3 million, and its spring fund-raising gala brings in about \$200,000. Annual sales of poinsettias from mid-October to mid-November also feed the kitty.

The ongoing support has paid off in some striking accomplishments. LACC was the subject of the 2001 documentary "Sing!" which was nominated for an Academy Award and is still shown on PBS stations nationwide. And last year, the chorus commissioned and performed the world premiere of an original opera, "Keepers of the Night," by Peter Ash and Donald Sturrock. The production, which featured opera stars like Pasadena mezzo-soprano Suzanna Guzman, was reportedly the most ambitious mounted by any children's chorus in the nation, although its reach may have exceeded its grasp, according to some critics who gave it

mixed reviews. But Grant Gershon, who conducted “Keepers of the Night,” remains one of LACC’s biggest fans. The Los Angeles Master Chorale’s music director praised it as “a world-class, terrific organization. They have a great system for producing such well-trained kids that they are vocally and musically prepared for anything.”

Indeed, Gershon says he has jumped at the chance of collaborating with them whenever he can. “Working with children takes you back to that place in your own life when everything was a new discovery,” he says. “They remind us how music, this incredible, wonderful thing we live with each day, is a true wonder beyond ourselves.”