

HILLARY CLINTON APPLAUDS BYC!

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Held on Tuesday evening, May 24th, before an enthusiastic audience of hundreds of the City's top creative professionals, the event was a "thank you" to honor the participating advertising agencies' contributions to the fight against illegal drugs. The Brooklyn Youth Chorus presented an inspirational program that reflected the Partnership's hope for the future: "Amazing Grace," "From A Distance" and our all-time favorite, "When I Sing."



While shaking the hand of each and every chorister, Mrs. Clinton graciously turned to the standing audience and said with a smile, "This is going to take a few minutes!"



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BYC and Ben Vereen -- On Stage at the Lincoln Center Bandshell



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At the invitation of the U.S. Postal Service, the Brooklyn Youth Chorus joined world-famous entertainer **Ben Vereen** and Postmaster General **Marvin Runyon** on the stage of the Lincoln Center Bandshell in Damrosch Park to celebrate the First Day of Issue for a new series of commemorative stamps, the Popular Singers series. At the September 1 event, the BYC provided musical tributes to the five singers honored by the new stamps: Al Jolson, "Baby Face"; Ethel Waters: "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child"; Bing Crosby, "Swingin' on a Star"; Ethel Merman, "Friendship"; and Nat "King" Cole, "Smile" --which Mr. Vereen rehearsed and then *sang and danced* with the BYC, giving them professional performance tips that delighted the choristers!

For the musical finale, Vereen and the other guests joined the Chorus in singing "I've Got Rhythm" -- and everyone agreed that *he did!!!*



Sheneka Horne gets a big hug from Ben Vereen after the show!

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

DECEMBER 1995 \$2.75

MUSIC

Charting a New Chorus

By Micah Fink

“I’ve had it with elite organizations,” says Dianne Berkun, the 29-year-old founder and director of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, as she glances down at the program of the 1995 International Children’s Choral Festival in Des Moines, Iowa. “Out of all the choruses at the festival, including two from South Africa, we were the only one that was racially mixed.”

Berkun, looking primly Victorian with her Laura Ashley dress, shoulder-length blond hair and bright blue eyes, may seem an unlikely spokesperson for diversity, but the group she directs includes children from every corner of Brooklyn. And the chorus, whose repertoire ranges from Bach to Billie Holiday, has quickly evolved into a world-class ensemble that now holds its own against some of the best-established children’s groups in Europe and America.

“There’s a particular sound you look for in a youth chorus, a very pure sound that is a mixture of innocence and excitement,” says Bruce Adolph, education director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, who invited the group to appear at Manhattan’s Merkin Hall next March. “They definitely have it.”

The fact that Berkun and her kids have come so far in such a short period of time is a minor miracle by choral-music standards: four years ago they were just getting started. Last season the group sang for Hillary Clinton at a reception for the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, performed for Mayor Giuliani at Gracie Mansion, cut a tape for Paul Simon’s new Broadway musical *Capeman* and sang with the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Back in 1989, when Berkun was first hired to teach music and lead a chorus at the Brooklyn Friends School, all this might have seemed inconceivable. “We

could only practice during school hours,” she recalls. “There were administrative restraints and the pool of voices to draw on for the chorus was very limited by the population of a single school.” Berkun eventually began thinking about starting her own community singing group. “I was amazed to learn there was no children’s chorus that I knew of that represented all of Brooklyn,” she says. The borough seemed a giant repository of untapped talent, an opportunity to test her ideas about teaching with a diverse group of children.

Helped by a small grant for supplies from Brooklyn Union, Berkun began to advertise and hold auditions in 1992. She

includes over 120 members who range in age from 6 to 16, practice one to four hours each week during the school year.

Berkun maintains that their phenomenal achievements are the result of those practice sessions—along with rigorous training and extensive exposure at venues such as the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, the Brooklyn Children’s Museum and the public library. “We’ve had success in making contacts in the local community,” she explains. “But all this support is meaningless unless you have a product. I have high standards and I’ve given the children the skills to achieve those standards. The kids also have a sense that they are earning what

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Berkun’s teaching style mixes firm discipline with a sensitivity to detail and an obvious affection for the children. She seems as comfortable making the chorus repeat a phrase a half-dozen times as she is jumping rope with the children after rehearsal. “Since Melissa joined the chorus, all she does is sing,” says Anna Mayo, whose daughter became a member a year ago. “She sings classical and jazz all over the house. She goes to a mostly white school. The other kids in the chorus come from schools that are different cultures. Here they get a chance to socialize and mix and interact.”

“Dianne pushes us because she really wants us to be good,” explains Sheneka Horne, a tall 11-year-old from Bedford-Stuyvesant with red barrettes in her hair and a soft Jamaican patois. “We don’t care what language the songs are in. If the song has a nice, interesting melody, we like it.”

Berkun stresses that the kids are primed to listen and have learned how to hear the sounds of the language and to master the vowel sounds of each word. This training carries over to vocalizing in foreign languages: the children are as comfortable singing Nat King Cole’s “Smile” as they are performing Vivaldi’s “Laudamus Te” in Latin or Dvorak’s “Veneček” in Czech.

This past June, Berkun resigned from her teaching position to devote all her energy to the chorus (she recently started taking a small salary). And she has just accepted an invitation for the group to be the guest artists in residence at the International Choral Music Experience Institute in Canterbury, England, next summer. In the meantime, there’s work to do—getting ready for a special winter holiday recital on December 15 at the Old First Church in Park Slope and a performance the next evening with the Brooklyn Heights Orchestra at Saint Ann and the Holy Trinity Church. And, come March, there’s the show at Lincoln Center.

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ARTS IN THE BOROUGH



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Diverse Voices in Unison

Variety is the hallmark of Brooklyn's Youth Chorus

By John Simerman
STAFF WRITER

AMID THE CLANKING of chairs, the falling of food crumbs and the rowdy banter of a roomful of school children, Dianne Berkun claps loudly. Suddenly, the relative chaos turns to near-silence, and then to a single, angelic tone — young voices in unison.

No big deal for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, maybe. But this rehearsal is in Brooklyn, and the kids singing Vivaldi as one are a diverse lot from all over the borough. Berkun is the founding director of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, an independent group of 80 children ages 8 to 16.

Just three years old, the chorus — with a repertoire from Bach to Billie Holiday — already has garnered starlike attention. Earlier this year, it sang for Hillary Clinton at a gala reception benefitting The Partnership for a Drug-Free America ("She kissed everybody on the cheek, and she was pretty," says Michael Foy, age 12) and for Mayor Giuliani at Gracie Mansion (no kisses). It has also performed with Ben Vereen at Lincoln Center and with the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra. Recently, musician/songwriter Paul Simon stopped by a rehearsal; he plans to use some of the choristers in a stage production he's developing, Berkun says.

The chorus — which is split into a 50-member concert chorus and a prep chorus for newcomers — covers a wide range of material, from Bach to spirituals to Ethel Mer- man. This Friday, it will put on its annual winter benefit concert at St. Ann and the Holy Trinity Church in Brooklyn Heights, where a full plate of Christmas music is on tap.

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"Everybody knows that arts education in schools is strained, and when it's something you're serious about, you reach a frustration level," she says. "I wanted to create for myself and my kids the highest quality musical program with no restrictions on what they could achieve."

The ethnic diversity of the chorus is its hallmark. Nearly half of the choristers are black, and the group draws its membership from 50 private and public schools in Brooklyn. Tuition is easily affordable, and for those unable to

pay, scholarships are available. The chorus relies heavily on corporate and private donations.

Berkun is adamant about the need to take from all segments of the borough, and on road trips to choral festivals and other engagements the group has become something of a collective ambassador.

"When you look around at choruses, so often you find the makeup is not representative of the geographic area," Berkun says. "This chorus is the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. For us to say that, we had better represent our borough."

At the same time, Berkun is quick to offer up that the quality of the music, more than the group's racial makeup, has been the ticket to its success so far.

"People can say, 'Look at this wonderful group of diverse people — black, white, green, purple.' But if you can't perform, that's it," she says. "When there's a good thing going, people get you the connections."

Berkun, who studied music education at New York University, focuses her teaching on creating challenges through performance. Her method is modeled after the philosophy of Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodaly, who thought that a child was never too young to learn music education, even in the womb.

Berkun's biggest reward is watching her students take pleasure in music they might never have come in contact with otherwise, and in their own voices. "It's music history without the lecture," she says. "They know the elements. It's like, 'Wow, look at that neat contrapunto!'"

Berkun pushes the children hard, with two fast-paced rehearsals a week and no patience for inattention or horseplay. And they seem to like it. "You gotta make sure your voice is in tune. Sometimes my voice doesn't want to sing," says Lateefa Shaw, 13. "She's tough, but I can live with it."

Sharon Hayes, whose 11-year-old daughter Sarah sings in the chorus, says the twice-a-week rehearsals can be a strain but the rewards are many. "What has been best for her is the intermingling with kids from all over," says Hayes. "And they love the hype."

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By Bill
STAFF WRITER

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A large group of students, mostly young women, are posing for a group photo in front of a building. They are wearing white shirts and dark vests. Some are standing in the back rows, while others are kneeling or sitting in the front. A fountain is visible on the right side of the image. The building in the background has many windows and a sign that says "FIVE FIVE".

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Robert I. Brooklynn, a veteran of the Vietnam War, is the curator of the landmark inscriptions at the Parkway. Mr. Brooklynn has become curator of the site and Dr. Brooklynn has become curator of the site.

LATE SPORTS

New York Times

ARTS & youth

Edition



Cassette

August 13, 1996

Dianne Berkun
Artistic/Executive Director

Ms. Ann Stock
Social Secretary
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
East Wing, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20500

AUG 16 1996

Dear Ms. Stock,

122 Pierrepont St.

Since the founding of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus five years ago, it has been our dream to sing at the White House. Two years ago, we had the honor of singing for Mrs. Clinton in New York at the annual gala of the Partnership for A Drug Free America. After Mrs. Clinton shook the hand of each and every chorister on stage (while a standing crowd applauded patiently), several pledged to never wash their hands again.

This past week the Chorus returned home from their first overseas tour to Canterbury, England. Chosen to be the 1996 Artists in Residence for the prestigious CME Institute for Choral Teacher Education, 50 inner city children from Brooklyn had the tremendous privilege of representing the U.S. in England.

Brooklyn NY 11201

Founded in 1992, it is the Chorus' mission to provide children of diverse abilities and backgrounds with a unique program of music education and choral performance that seeks to fulfill each child's musical and personal potential, while creating a model of artistic excellence and harmony that enriches our community. The 150 girls and boys enrolled in the Chorus program are drawn from over 65 public and private schools and reflect the broad social, economic and ethnic diversity of New York City.

718-243-9447

The Chorus has received two invitations for the coming year to perform in Washington DC. If there would be an opportunity for the Brooklyn Youth Chorus to perform at the White House, or for an upcoming special event, this would truly be a dream come for our Brooklyn youngsters.

I have enclosed some press materials for your perusal and a cassette tape of our concert. I thank you for your attention, and I hope to hear from you soon.

Very respectfully yours,

Dianne Berkun
Dianne Berkun



Brooklyn Youth Chorus 1996

SIDE A

A-TISKET, A-TASKET
SOUND THE TRUMPET
BASHANA HABAYAH
SIMPLE SONG FROM MASS
THREE SHAKER SONGS
AHI SI MON MOINE VOULAIT DANCER

SIDE B

SAVORY, SAGE, ROSEMARY AND THYME
HEY NONNY NO!
CLAP YO' HANDS
THE STORM IS PASSING OVER
WHEN I SING
AMAZING GRACE © 1996 BROOKLYN YOUTH CHORUS

BYC1996
CHROME
120 µs EQ

Brooklyn Youth Chorus

WHEN I SING

SIDE A

A-Tisket, A-Tasket
Sound the Trumpet
Bashana Haba' Ah
Simple Song from Mass
Three Shaker Songs
1. Be Joyful
2. The Shameful Three
3. Wake Up
Ahi Si Mon Moine Voulait Danser

Ella Fitzgerald, arr. David Elliott
Henry Purcell
Nurit Hirsch
Leonard Bernstein
Nils Vigeland

arr. Donald Patriquin

SIDE B

Savory, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme
Hey Nanny No! from Four English Songs
Clap Yo' Hands
The Storm Is Passing Over
When I Sing
Amazing Grace

arr. Donald Patriquin
Crystal La Point Kowalski
George Gershwin, arr. Peter King
arr. Barbara Baker
Bill Henderson, arr. David Elliott
arr. Francisco J. Nunez

Dianne Berkun, Founder
and Artistic Director
Matthew Brady, Piano

Anne Schelleng, Flute
Recorded by
Christopher Greenleaf, Westerly RI
at Old First Reformed Church,
Brooklyn 1996

Photo: Tom Callen

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Berkun is adamant about the need to take from all segments of the borough, and on road trips to choral festivals and other engagements the group has become something of a collective ambassador.

"When you look around at choruses, so often you find the makeup is not representative of the geographic area," Berkun says. "This chorus is the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. For us to say that, we had better represent our borough."

At the same time, Berkun is quick to offer up that the quality of the music, more than the group's racial makeup, has been the ticket to its success so far.

"People can say, 'Look at this wonderful group of diverse people — black, white, green, purple.' But if you can't perform, that's it," she says. "When there's a good thing going, people get you the connections."

Berkun, who studied music education at New York University, focuses her teaching on creating challenges through performance. Her method is modeled after the philosophy of Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodaly, who thought that a child was never too young to learn music education, even in the womb.

Berkun's biggest reward is watching her students take pleasure in music they might never have come in contact with otherwise, and in their own voices. "It's music history without the lecture," she says. "They know the elements. It's like, 'Wow, look at that neat contrapunto!'"

Berkun pushes the children hard, with two fast-paced rehearsals a week and no patience for inattention or horseplay. And they seem to like it. "You gotta make sure your voice is in tune. Sometimes my voice doesn't want to sing," says Lateefa Shaw, 13. "She's tough, but I can live with it."

Sharon Hayes, whose 11-year-old daughter Sarah sings in the chorus, says the twice-a-week rehearsals can be a strain but the rewards are many. "What has been best for her is the intermingling with kids from all over," says Hayes. "And they love the hype."

The Brooklyn Youth Chorus will be performing Friday night at 7:30 at St. Ann and the Holy Trinity Church, on the corner of Montague and Clinton Streets. Seating is limited and tickets are \$10 for adults and \$5 for children, at the door. Auditions for the chorus are open to any child in the city between 8 and 16; no training is required. For information, call (718) 243-9447. ■

By Bill
STAFF WR

Museum

Robert T. Brookyn M. veterans to t landmark ins Parkway. Ma become curato. ts and Dra sibility fo

NEW YORK EDITION
NEWSday
LATE SPORTS

Making Music at Gracie Mansion

BYC Sings for Mayor Giuliani and The Congressional Arts Caucus



A three-van escort with all the drama of a secret government mission -- complete with walkie-talkie communication and ID badges -- was how it began, **Our Recital at Gracie Mansion!**

The event was a brunch on April 17th hosted by Mayor and Mrs. Rudy Giuliani for the Congressional Arts Caucus during that group's meeting in New York City, and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus was invited to be the entertainment. The audience, which represented both politics and the arts (guests included Kitty Carlisle Hart and NYC Commissioner of Cultural Affairs Schuyler Chapin), found the performance wonderful and moving, and gave them a long, standing ovation. Jeanne M. Stafford, Deputy Director of the Mayor's Office of Special Projects and Events, wrote this to us: *"As I am sure you heard many times over, the Brooklyn Youth Chorus was a hit! The Mayor and Mrs. Giuliani, each of the congressmen and congresswomen, members of the arts community and friends of the Giuliani's all wanted to know where you came from. Aside from having extraordinary voices, the children were very well behaved. . . . Thank you for being such a beautiful part of the day."*



"On behalf of our Congressional Arts Caucus Members, please extend our sincerest thanks to all of the Chorus members who performed so extraordinarily at Gracie Mansion during our trip to New York. The performance was a perfect end to a wonderful weekend and left our Members inspired and filled with song!"

Louise M. Slaughter,
Member of Congress

Jeanne M. Stafford
Deputy Director
Mayor's Office of Special Projects and Events
Brooklyn, NY 11201

CONGRESSIONAL ARTS CAUCUS
U.S. CONGRESS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515
April 29, 1994

The performance was a perfect end to a wonderful weekend and left our Members inspired and filled with song. Also, please accept our sincere gratitude for your hard work in making the performance such a success. Sincerely, JAMES M. JEFFORDS U.S. Senator

BYC Welcomes New Choristers

New recruits and "graduates" from the Preparatory Division to the Concert Chorus are adding new vitality to our ranks this season. So far 24 new members have joined the Chorus -- 13 in Prep and 11 in Concert -- and four students have moved up from Prep to the more rigorous demands of the Concert group.

Here are comments from some choristers:

"Chorus is fun and it's different from the music you normally sing -- not too easy and not too hard. I made a lot of friends. The kids in the chorus are very interesting because they've been places I have only dreamed about and sung to people I have only seen on TV." Tanisha Blake (CC, gr. 8)

"You get to do concerts and meet different stars The

Prep Chorus was a good way to begin because you taught us how to make sounds and shape them and different songs." Sheneka Horne (CC, grade 5)

"I yelled and yelled when I got into the Concert Chorus . . . Chorus is just my favorite thing to do." Mollie Ashford (CC, gr. 4)

"This is for people who want to sing so we get things done. A lot of it is challenging. I play the clarinet which helps me learn about music too. I like that you get to meet new people and make new friends outside of school." Amanda Lui (CC, gr. 6)

"I have been in the Chorus for two years now, and I consider it a great experience. Making friends as well as improving my singing voice has been really fun and I have learned a lot. I hope we can take more trips in the future." Katherine Ambia (CC, gr. 6)

"In the Chorus, people, however different they may be, can unite under one common cause, to sing to express ourselves as one voice. In my three years here I have watched the Chorus grow and develop to what it is now. I feel it is part of me." Jenny Kelaher (CC, gr. 7)

Borough President Proclaims May 25, 1994 "Brooklyn Youth Chorus Day in Brooklyn"

At a Reception hosted by Brooklyn Union at the Heights Casino on May 25th for BYC corporate sponsors and special guests, Deputy Borough President Jeannette Gadsden read a Proclamation by Borough President Howard Golden naming that day "Brooklyn Youth Chorus Day in Brooklyn."

The text of the Proclamation was:

Whereas, Music is the universal language and throughout the centuries it has lifted the spirit of humankind and brought joy and happiness into all our lives; and

Whereas the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, under the leadership of its Director, Dianne Berkun, has established itself as a dynamic force in New York City's arts and cultural community, and it is most fitting that we celebrate the talents and achievements of this outstanding chorus and its dedicated Director; and

Whereas, the

Brooklyn Youth Chorus unites children from different backgrounds through their common interest in music and nurtures the members' musicianship and vocal talent through study, training and exposure to a diverse repertoire of choral music; and

Whereas, the Brooklyn Youth Chorus represents the promise and talent of our young people and provides a musical context for fostering a spirit of learning and cooperation as a means to a greater end; and

Whereas, on behalf of the People of Brooklyn, I congratulate the members of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus for their outstanding work, and thank its Director Dianne Berkun for her commitment to discovering and nurturing the musical talent of our young people; and

Now, therefore, I, Howard Golden, President of the Borough of Brooklyn, do hereby proclaim May 25, 1994, as

Brooklyn Youth Chorus Day in Brooklyn

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the Borough of Brooklyn to be affixed this 25th Day of May, 1994.

Howard Golden
President, Borough of Brooklyn

New Chorus Members

Concert Chorus

Amy Advocat (I.S. 239, gr. 7); Jessica Advocat (P.S. 193, gr. 5); Molly Ashford* (Brooklyn New School, gr. 5); Tanasha Blake (I.S. 240, gr. 8); Sheneka Horne* (Packer Collegiate, gr. 5); Jonathan Juarbe (St. Francis Xavier, gr. 4); Amanda Lui (St. Ann's, gr. 6); Alicia Lopez (East Side Middle School, gr. 8); Melissa Mayo (St. Agnust Seminar, gr. 5); Mervyn Mercano* (St. Francis Xavier, gr. 4); Lyn Muhleisen (P.S. 8, gr. 4); Victoria Restler (Packer Collegiate, gr. 9); Kristin Solomon* (Phillipa Schuyler, gr. 6); Stephanie Weiner (P.S. 230, gr. 5); Jaclyn Rochez (James Reynolds School, gr. 8)

*Graduate from Prep Chorus

Preparatory Division

Kenny Advocat (P.S. 193, gr. 3); Victoria Bryant (P.S. 279, gr. 2); Jamila Hunter (P.S. 119, gr. 2); Julie Notwicz (P.S. 204, gr. 2); Michelle Oliveri (P.S. 230, gr. 2); Elizabeth Alspector (Brooklyn Friends, gr. 3); Raymond Pank (Good Shepherd, gr. 3); Elisa Panek (Good Shepherd, gr. 5); Deena Lopez (P.S. 8, gr. 4); Ayisha Duncan (P.S. 149, gr. 5); Tanisha Perry (St. Marks Lutheran, gr. 6); Janelle Reid (J.H.S. 51, gr. 8); Keith Morancie, P.S. 279, gr. 3).

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF BROOKLYN
CITY OF NEW YORK

Proclamation

WHEREAS, MUSIC IS THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE AND THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES IT HAS LIFTED THE SPIRIT OF HUMANITY AND BROUGHT JOY AND HAPPINESS INTO ALL OUR LIVES; AND WHEREAS, THE BROOKLYN YOUTH CHORUS, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF ITS DIRECTOR, DIANNE BERKUN, HAS ESTABLISHED ITSELF AS A DYNAMIC FORCE IN NEW YORK CITY'S ARTS AND CULTURAL COMMUNITY, AND IT IS MOST FITTING THAT WE CELEBRATE THE TALENTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THIS OUTSTANDING CHORUS AND ITS DEDICATED DIRECTOR; AND WHEREAS, THE BROOKLYN YOUTH CHORUS UNITES CHILDREN FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS THROUGH THEIR COMMON INTEREST IN MUSIC AND NURTURES THE MEMBERS' MUSICIANSHIP AND VOCAL TALENT THROUGH STUDY, TRAINING AND EXPOSURE TO A DIVERSE REPERTOIRE OF CHORAL MUSIC; AND WHEREAS, THE BROOKLYN YOUTH CHORUS REPRESENTS THE PROMISE AND TALENT OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE AND PROVIDES A MUSICAL CONTEXT FOR FOSTERING A SPIRIT OF LEARNING AND COOPERATION AS A MEANS TO A GREATER END; AND WHEREAS, ON BEHALF OF THE PEOPLE OF BROOKLYN, I CONGRATULATE THE MEMBERS OF THE BROOKLYN YOUTH CHORUS FOR THEIR OUTSTANDING WORK, AND THANK ITS DIRECTOR DIANNE BERKUN FOR HER COMMITMENT TO DISCOVERING AND NURTURING THE MUSICAL TALENT OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, HOWARD GOLDEN, PRESIDENT OF THE BOROUGH OF BROOKLYN, DO HEREBY PROCLAIM MAY 25, 1994, AS

BROOKLYN YOUTH CHORUS DAY IN BROOKLYN

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I HAVE HEREUNTO SET MY HAND AND CAUSED THE SEAL OF THE BOROUGH OF BROOKLYN TO BE AFFIXED THIS 25TH DAY OF MAY, 1994.



Howard Golden
President, Borough of Brooklyn



BYC Performs at NYC Events - We were featured performers at two important events in NYC the Hands on Promoting Excellence (HOPE) for New York Awards Ceremony at the CUNY Graduate Center on May 19 (shown above); and on June 17 a program of multi-cultural music at the Tri-Institutional Noon Recital, which is an ongoing concert series at the Rockefeller University, presented by Rockefeller University, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and the New York Hospital-Cornell University Medical College.

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

DECEMBER 1995 \$2.75

MUSIC

Charting a New Chorus

By Micah Fink

I've had it with elite organizations," says Dianne Berkun, the 29-year-old founder and director of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, as she glances down at the program of the 1995 International Children's Choral Festival in Des Moines, Iowa. "Out of all the choruses at the festival, including two from South Africa, we were the only one that was racially mixed."

Berkun, looking primly Victorian with her Laura Ashley dress, shoulder-length blond hair and bright blue eyes, may seem an unlikely spokesperson for diversity, but the group she directs includes children from every corner of Brooklyn. And the chorus, whose repertoire ranges from Bach to Billie Holiday, has quickly evolved into a world-class ensemble that now holds its own against some of the best-established children's groups in Europe and America.

"There's a particular sound you look for in a youth chorus, a very pure sound that is a mixture of innocence and excitement," says Bruce Adolphe, education director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, who invited the group to appear at Manhattan's Merkin Hall next March. "They definitely have it."

The fact that Berkun and her kids have come so far in such a short period of time is a minor miracle by choral-music standards: four years ago they were just getting started. Last season the group sang for Hillary Clinton at a reception for the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, performed for Mayor Giuliani at Gracie Mansion, cut a tape for Paul Simon's new Broadway musical *Capeman* and sang with the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Back in 1989, when Berkun was first hired to teach music and lead a chorus at the Brooklyn Friends School, all this might have seemed inconceivable. "We

could only practice during school hours," she recalls. "There were administrative restraints and the pool of voices to draw on for the chorus was very limited by the population of a single school." Berkun eventually began thinking about starting her own community singing group. "I was amazed to learn there was no children's chorus that I knew of that represented all of Brooklyn," she says. The borough seemed a giant repository of untapped talent, an opportunity to test her ideas about teaching with a diverse group of children.

Helped by a small grant for supplies from Brooklyn Union, Berkun began to advertise and hold auditions in 1992. She

includes over 120 members who range in age from 6 to 16, practice one to four hours each week during the school year.

Berkun maintains that their phenomenal achievements are the result of those practice sessions—along with rigorous training and extensive exposure at venues such as the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, the Brooklyn Children's Museum and the public library. "We've had success in making contacts in the local community," she explains. "But all this support is meaningless unless you have a product. I have high standards and I've given the children the skills to achieve those standards. The kids also have a sense that they are earning what

tions such as Independence and Crossland banks, Con Edison and NYNEX.

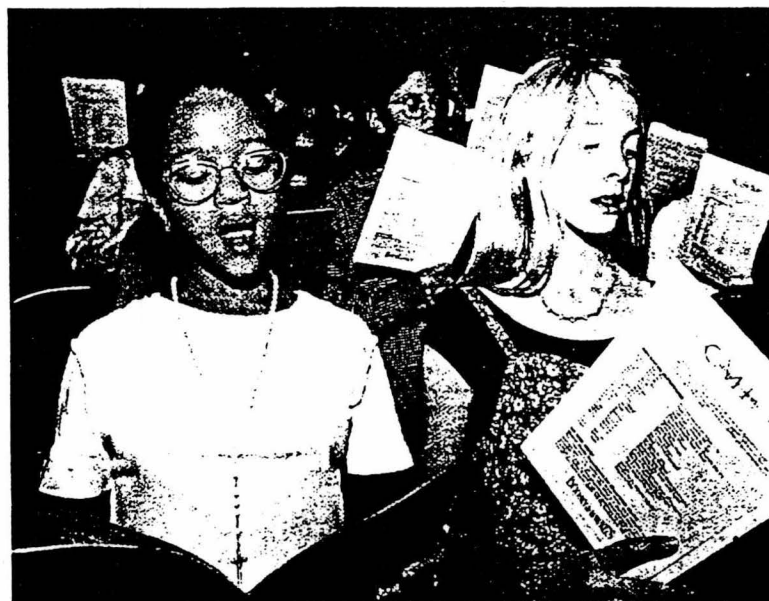
Berkun's teaching style mixes firm discipline with a sensitivity to detail and an obvious affection for the children. She seems as comfortable making the chorus repeat a phrase a half-dozen times as she is jumping rope with the children after rehearsal. "Since Melissa joined the chorus, all she does is sing," says Anna Mayo, whose daughter became a member a year ago. "She sings classical and jazz all over the house. She goes to a mostly white school. The other kids in the chorus come from schools that are different cultures. Here they get a chance to socialize and mix and interact."

"Dianne pushes us because she really wants us to be good," explains Sheneka Horne, a tall 11-year-old from Bedford-Stuyvesant with red barrettes in her hair and a soft Jamaican patois. "We don't care what language the songs are in. If the song has a nice, interesting melody, we like it."

Berkun stresses that the kids are primed to listen and have learned how to hear the sounds of the language and to master the vowel sounds of each word. This training carries over to vocalizing in foreign languages: the children are as comfortable singing Nat King Cole's "Smile" as they are performing Vivaldi's "Laudamus Te" in Latin or Dvorak's "Veneček" in Czech.

This past June, Berkun resigned from her teaching position to devote all her energy to the chorus (she recently started taking a small salary). And she has just accepted an invitation for the group to be the guest artists in residence at the International Choral Music Experience Institute in Canterbury, England, next summer. In the meantime, there's work to do—getting ready for a special winter holiday recital on December 15 at the Old First Church in Park Slope and a performance the next evening with the Brooklyn Heights Orchestra at Saint Ann and the Holy Trinity Church. And, come March, there's the show at Lincoln Center.

"It's a real honor to perform with the Chamber Music Society," says Berkun. "It means we're being taken seriously and not being viewed as some kiddie chorus or just a cute group of black and white kids. We're being respected as a musical ensemble, and this is what we have strived for since the beginning."



ALL TOGETHER NOW: The Brooklyn Youth Chorus at a rehearsal on Pierrepont Street.

quickly gathered 45 untrained but eager young voices from every sector of the community. Rehearsals were initially held at the Brooklyn Friends School, then moved to the YWCA on Atlantic Avenue; the group recently found a permanent home in a trim brownstone belonging to Saint Ann and the Holy Trinity Church on Pierrepont Street, where weekly practices are now held in a lavish Louis XV-style drawing room decorated with gold-trimmed mirrors, molded plaster ceilings and a gilded chandelier. The chorus, which now

they've learned, and this makes them want to strive for more."

Most of the children don't have any musical training when they sign up and a few are weeded out during a brief ten-minute audition. But for the most part, Berkun says, "If they can pass the audition and attend the classes regularly, nobody is excluded." Yearly tuition is \$150 to \$250 and scholarships are available to students with financial need; the majority of the funding, however, comes from performance receipts and grants from corpora-

Let Children Sing

**Dianne Berkun Unites the Voices of Young Brooklyn;
 Only the Truly Tone-Deaf Don't Make the Grade**

By ALEX ROSS

LATE one weekday afternoon, Dianne Berkun was standing before a fidgety crowd of schoolchildren in a dusty chamber of the downtown Brooklyn Y.W.C.A. She was trying to get them to sing Vivaldi's "Laudamus Te," music from the Baroque era that has no immediately apparent connection to their lives.

"Do you remember what the main quality of Baroque music is?" she patiently asked. "Dancing," several children replied.

"Yes, this music must be dancelike. I want it to be very lively, but I don't want it to sound like it's getting away from you." In the end, miraculously, the Vivaldi had the proper nimble lilt.

Ms. Berkun, a 27-year-old music teacher at the Brooklyn Friends School, set herself a fairly epic challenge two years ago. She made plans to form a children's chorus not quite like any other in Brooklyn. Its members, aged 8 to 16, would be drawn from schools all over the borough, yet it would remain independent of any one institution. Its repertoire would address a wide array of traditions, yet it would concentrate on essential skills of musicianship.

Starting only with a donation of stationary supplies from Brooklyn Union Gas, Ms. Berkun's 50-voice Brooklyn Youth Chorus is doing pretty well. Earlier this month, the group traveled to Disney World in Orlando, Fla., as one of nine choirs from around the country invited to participate in the first Children's Holiday Choral Festival. Beginning on Tues-

day, through Dec. 23, the chorus will perform "The Waltz of the Snowflakes" in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's production of "The Hard Nut," Mark Morris's topsy-turvy version of "The Nutcracker." The chorus landed this last engagement after appearing at the academy's commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day last January.

"We all just sat up and said, 'That's the children's chorus for next season,'" said Lynn Moffat, associate general manager of the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

How has Ms. Berkun done it? The story, oddly enough, begins in Hungary. Studying music education at New York University and the University of Calgary, Ms. Berkun specialized in a teaching method devised early this century by the Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodaly that has proved particularly successful among children. Vocal training at an early age was the best way for children to learn music, Kodaly always insisted. His paragon was the 600-year-old choral tradition in the British Isles, to this day the foundation of Britain's exceptionally active musical culture.

In this country, by contrast, musical training of any sophistication is increasingly scarce. Classical music, one of many kinds of music that Ms. Berkun teaches to the children, has to cross an enormous cultural gap. There are also the social gaps among the children themselves. White, black, Asian, Hispanic, rich and poor, attending 40 different Brooklyn schools, they are a model of the teeming diversity that has made musical education such a challenge.

Auditions are not demanding; Ms. Berkun screens out only the hopelessly tone-deaf. This is in accordance with Kodaly's stricture that a children's chorus does not require abundant or innate musical ability. At the same time, however, Kodaly insisted that musical standards be maintained. And in a recent two-hour rehearsal at the Y.W.C.A., the group's current home, Ms. Berkun gave a performance of which Kodaly would undoubtedly have approved. She was patient, but also musically demanding.

Most noticeably, she does not talk down to the children. Rehearsing the Vivaldi piece, she makes free use of technical terms: "How many times have I told you we need a long crescendo here?" On the next try, a smooth crescendo magically appears. Detours on matters like Baroque style are an important part of the program; Ms. Berkun regularly throws in morsels of music history, along with instruction on basic music theory and notation. Her equally patient accompanist, Alfred Ayres, gives piano lessons to many of the students on the side.

The program being rehearsed on this day balanced classical pieces with multicultural selections, including spirituals and gospel



Dianne Berkun, a 27-year-old music teacher, conducting the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, which she founded last year.

hymns, along with Christmas favorites. Even in "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," however, Ms. Berkun kept up musical demands. Noticing a lack of enthusiasm, she asked, "Is Christmas a depressing holiday for you?" Unexpectedly, there were a few subversive murmurs of assent. From this she drew an important lesson of public performance: "Well, even if you don't feel happy, you have to sound happy in this song, because that's what the song is communicating."

Afterward, as the children raced around having their permission forms completed for the Disney World trip, Ms. Berkun talked not only about the musical challenges of teaching the group but also the logistical challenges of holding it together.

"It's a feat in itself to have these kids together in one space," she said. "If there are problems, if one child doesn't want to sit next to another, then I just have them talk it out. For the most part, the issues they deal with

out there are never issues here. The children become friends, and so have some of the parents when they car-pool together."

Elaine Unkeless of Park Slope, whose 12-year-old daughter, Vanessa, has been in the group since it started, singles out Ms. Berkun's intense devotion as a teacher.

"She's got a real desire to help the kids learn and perform in a professional manner," she said. "My daughter sings all the time now; she sometimes sings herself to sleep. It is a real commitment, that's the one problem: it takes a lot of time and energy. It can be tough when they come home tired and still have homework to do."

As Ms. Berkun sees it, the children have found in the choir "something new and challenging that they love."

"The most important gift you can give a child is self-esteem," she said. "I leave a lot of responsibility to them. They have to tell me if they can't come to a rehearsal and give me a good excuse. No child is afraid to come

up to me. They're always calling me at home. I can't expect maturity and self-discipline, but I love this job more than anything else I've done in my life."

The job is not an easy one. Ms. Berkun has yet to draw a salary for any of the work she has done over the last year and a half, and resources are at a minimum. She charges \$80 to cover some expenses, although she has arranged scholarships with Brooklyn sponsors like the Independence Savings Bank. She spends more time than she would like raising money for such necessities as uniforms and chorus risers.

But Ms. Berkun sees limitless possibilities for her fledgling enterprise. She has been able to start a preparatory division for younger children, and her hope is to eventually start an independent choir school.

A comment from one student seems to sum up the group's promise: "If I wasn't in this chorus, I could be watching TV, but I'd rather be singing."



Required Tone: Enthusiastic

Children from 8 to 16, from any borough, can audition for the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. No preparation or training is required to try out for either the Preparatory Division or the more advanced Concert Chorus. Both levels perform. There is no ceiling on the number of singers accepted. "I'm looking for musical potential, the ability to match pitch, and enthusiasm," says the director, Dianne Berkun. Information is available by calling (212) 674-0522.