



Rick Graefe photo

St. Louis Children's Choirs director Ethelyn Sparfeld directs a choir during a recent rehearsal at the SLCC headquarters, 11631 Olive Blvd. in Creve Coeur.

Musical excellence

Children's choir members share love of music here, abroad

By Regina DeLuca
Staff writer

The Russian-born composer Igor Stravinsky once said his music is best understood by children and animals.

If he were around today, he'd likely be amazed by the sounds coming from the former Creve Coeur Government Center, 11631 Olive Blvd., the headquarters of the St. Louis Children's

Choirs.

The choirs were founded in 1978 by Diane Finley for children ages 8 to 18 who wanted to learn music and quality singing.

When Finley moved out of Missouri in 1982, she passed the baton to Ethelyn Sparfeld, who thought she'd direct the choirs for two months.

"But after those two months, I saw that this was my niche, this is why I

had had all this training before and it just turned my life around, too," Sparfeld said.

Sparfeld recently left the The Principia school in Town and Country — where she taught music for 25 years — to become the full-time musical director of the St. Louis Children's Choirs.

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"It was so fulfilling to hear these young voices and to see, when you really demanded the excellence, they rise to the occasion," Sparfeld said.

The SLCC has five divisions: Children's Choir (beginning); Chorale (intermediate); Choristers (upper intermediate); Concert Choir (advanced) and Chamber Singers (for high school girls and boys whose voices have changed to tenor and bass).

"We started Chamber Singers a number of years ago, because the boys couldn't bear to leave, and I couldn't bear to have them leave knowing that if they're not cared for during that wonderful period of change and they don't sing through it, very often that's the end of their singing," she said.

In fall, Sparfeld plans to start a chorus for high school boys whose voices are changing but are not quite ready for the SLCC's Chamber Singers division.

Voices are not all that have changed for SLCC members.

"It's the music that has changed their lives," Sparfeld said. "Music is a very powerful tool. And we can use it for a very negative result as you see in many of your hard rock bands ... or it can be just as positive and powerful a force for good, however you want to term 'good.'"

The concentration, devotion and responsibility choir members must employ at the SLCC with rehearsals and performances spill into other aspects of their lives, Sparfeld said.

The Concert Choir is planning a concert tour of Washington, D.C., June 21 through 27 as part

of the U.S. Navy's ceremonies observing the 50th anniversary of D-day.

In addition, the Choristers just returned from performing at Carnegie Hall in New York City, marking its third trip there.

"We're much more recognized nationally than we are in St. Louis," Sparfeld said, attributing that to the choirs' travels and performances with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

That recognition also has crossed international waters. The Concert Choir has traveled to Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Japan.

Musically, the heart of the SLCC lies with the classic masterpieces, but it also has delved into new music, some of which it commissions.

"It's a very important part of our program," Sparfeld said.

Members of the SLCC in April performed Webster University composer Kim Portnoy's "Wreath of Memory," a collection of poems written by children of the Holocaust.

"It was stunning," Sparfeld said. "It was so moving that many of the children had tears either coming down their face or you could see them glassed over, they were so moved. And the audience was just enthralled, and many of them were weeping at the end.

"And I think we could do this as a children's choir, not in a morbid fashion, but as one of the children said to me, 'It feels so wonderful, Mrs. Sparfeld, to be able to carry on their memory. You know, we are their voices we are telling the world that this must never happen again.'"

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"(Hungarian composer) Zoltan Kodaly would say, 'Music is for everyone,'" she said. "It is a crime to not give the music that is in that child to that child. You know, talent is useless unless it is developed."

Those interested in the SLCC must audition. The last audition for fall performances is set for June 14.

If the SLCC does not fill its target number of members, auditions may be scheduled in late July or August, Sparfeld said.

"But we want to fill our numbers; we have to because it's tuition-based choirs and we have to survive," she said. We are non-profit. The accent is on 'non.'"

Tuition ranges from \$320 to \$500, but it's not enough to cover scholarships, Sparfeld said.

"We have no scholarship at the moment for tours," she said.

The SLCC will remain based in Creve Coeur for at least another year.

"If we can sound good here," Sparfeld said about the poor acoustics of the headquarters building, "we can sound good anywhere."

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