

St. Louis Kids Hit Big-Time In Full Voice

By Patricia Rice
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

CARNEGIE HALL is magic to musicians. The greatest names in classical and jazz music have played at the New York landmark. On Tuesday, for 45 minutes, its stage will belong to 74 kids from St. Louis.

They are members of the St. Louis Children's Choirs' Concert Choir. Eight other choruses will appear that week as part of a national children's choir festival. About 27 groups auditioned.

Then, in mid-June, the same St. Louis team will pack its music, red choir gowns, jeans and T-shirts and head for Leningrad and Moscow in the Soviet Union; Vienna, Austria; and Prague, Czechoslovakia. In Eastern Europe, it will sing in public performances with children from each of those countries.

It's been a heady spring for the group. The concert choir won praise for its off-stage participation in Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem" with the St. Louis Symphony and its Symphony Chorus on May 11 and 12. Until 1987, whenever the Grammy Award-winning symphony chorus needed a mixed children's choir, it bused in a children's choir from Glen Ellyn, a Chicago



Jim Visser

Members of the St. Louis Children's Choirs' Concert Choir, which will perform Tuesday at Carnegie Hall.

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suburb. No need now. The SLCC has sung with the Symphony four times.

In March, it was the only group to get a standing ovation at the American Choral Directors' annual convention. It has been directed since 1982 by Ethelyn M. Sparfeld. The group was founded in 1978 by Diane Finley.

Its Concert Choir and its Chamber Chorus, a 20-person high school chamber chorus that is also going overseas and to Carnegie Hall, are the cream of a larger choral music program that Sparfeld runs. About 125 area children, age 6 to 18, are enrolled. They are drawn from 80 schools from Missouri and Illinois. All rehearse in west St. Louis County in a rented hall at Parkway East Junior High School.

Most singers begin in the Children's Choir division, which now has 35 children from age 6 to 12. In August, a second beginner's choir will rehearse in South County, where there is strong demand. A South County rehearsal space has not yet been chosen. Intermediate-level students from age 10 to 18 sing in The Children's Chorale. The Concert Choir includes 74 polished singers who range in age from 10 to 18. The Chamber Chorus singers are 20 high school singers. But only a few students start in the top choirs.

"We never think about age, only where the child is on the track of vocal training," said Sparfeld.

Choristers have many other interests, from sports to science projects to parties, but all find time for the one or two hours weekly required for rehearsals at their level.

"Once you get in, you *make* time for it," said concert chorister Susan Church, a sophomore cello major at the St. Louis Public Schools' Visual and Performing Arts High School. "It has a high priority for me. I love it. I do lots of other things, but I don't mind missing things for the choir."

At all levels, singers perform masterpieces of music from many styles and periods. Sparfeld frequently talks to children and parents about composer Zoltan Kodaly's philosophy that "for the young, only the best is good enough." Folk music and spirituals are included in many programs, but the spine of their programming is Bach, Mozart, Handel, Ralph Vaughn Williams, Aaron Copland and George Gershwin.

"At 8 or 9, children may think they don't like classics if they have only listened to rock music," she said. But after a year of being in the beginner's chorus, they *all* come to appreciate masterpieces, she said.

"They realize, 'Oh, I can do this.' Bach, Handel, Mozart, they are the ones who feed them, nourish

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them," Sparfeld said. "They love it. They are not challenged by elevator music."

Some music programs in the schools "kowtow to present taste on television entertainment," she said. "If schools are educational institutions, they should educate — bring out the best, offer the best music quality."

Sparfeld, 47, who also teaches music part time at The Principia and Whitfield School, both in West County, earned an M.A. in sacred voice after majoring in conducting voice under Abraham Kaplan at Union Theological Seminary in New York. She has taught music ranging from elementary schools in California to Principia College in Elmhurst, Ill.

Like so many other musicians, she is saddened by the lack of music enrichment in most American schools. Some of her choristers have some music programs in their schools. Many study instruments. It's more common for them to take the training they got in the choirs to star in their schools' musicals. Few have choirs in their own schools.

"It is criminal not to have a good music program in a school," she said. "It is a child's right to have that artistic part of himself drawn out. Just as it is to speak and learn his name, his language, about numbers and how they work. It is criminal for that part of himself to lie dormant. In the desert, there are a few oases feeding children. I want to support those in the desert."

Few of her choristers are exceptionally gifted natural singers, she said. They are motivated, and disciplined at weekly rehearsals. They have parents who organize car pools to get them to rehearsals and pay the tuition, which ranges from \$275 to \$400 annually. Scholarships are available.

"Every child can sing. If a person works with a child persistently, almost all can learn to match pitch consistently," Sparfeld said. In many schools, children are not taught to match pitch. All can be taught except a tiny percentage whose physical mechanics don't function, she said.

Her only requirement for the beginners choirs is

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that the child can match pitch at the audition.

"I don't have time to teach them that," she said. "I can teach them rhythm, sight-reading, breathing, placing the voice."

The SLCC is supported by tuition, which pays 90 percent of the expenses, including rent and salaries for the director, associate director, assistant director, pianist and part-time business manager. The group also gets small arts grants. To raise the \$120,000 needed for the overseas trip, choristers

sold candy and parents ran garage sales.

On tours, singers are challenged by performing under the direction of noted choral conductors. At a five-day festival in 1988 in Powell River, British Columbia, the St. Louis Children's Concert Choir sang under the direction of Michael Gormley, who had directed the Vienna Boys' Choir for six years.

Parents find many non-musical values in the program.

"The kids are very supportive; they get rides for each other and go to hear each other at music events at each other's schools," said Joy Rouse, chairman of the choirs' board of directors and mother of two choristers: Bradley, 18, and Douglas, 14. "They really care about each other. I look forward to chaperoning them in Europe. They are such responsible, good kids."

The discipline that music requires is a plus on college applications, too. Bradley Rouse, who graduates this spring from Parkway North High School, sent in his choral audition tape along with his application to Harvard University. Harvard may have chosen him because of the tape. Brad said he chose Harvard over other colleges that accepted him because of the high quality of its choral groups. Touring with the choirs widened his interests, his mother said.

"When the choir travels, we aren't just a Parkway family, not just a St. Louis family, we represent the United States," she said. "It broadens their perspective."

For more information about the St. Louis Children's Choirs, call 537-3150.