



KODÁLY-INSPIRED MUSIC EDUCATOR NAMED A 2011 MACARTHUR FELLOW: MARY ALLMON EPSTEIN

On September 20, 2011, Francisco J. Núñez was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship as choral conductor and composer. Núñez's award is the first for a Kodály-inspired music educator in the history of MacArthur Fellowships. Sometimes referred to as the genius grant, the MacArthur Fellowship awards each fellow \$500,000 over a period of five years. The unique feature of this fellowship is that there are no reporting requirements or other stipulations, thus allowing Núñez the freedom to carry out his work at his own pace.

Núñez conducted the Children's Choir at the 2005 OAKE National Conference in Springfield, Massachusetts. The members of the Conference Planning Committee, who suggested Núñez, were fully aware that Núñez had the spirit of a Kodály music educator.

Biography

Francisco J. Núñez is founder and artistic director of the award-winning Young People's Chorus of New York City (YPC), a multicultural chorus of young people ages 8 to 26. He was only 23 years old when he began the chorus with nine students. Now over 1,000 children from different neighborhoods and socioeconomic groups sing with Núñez. YPC has been widely recognized for its exceptional caliber and has been cited as a model of artistic excellence and diversity by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities under the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations.

Born in New York City of parents from the Dominican Republic, Núñez lived in a neighborhood where gangs prevailed, Francisco's mother was worried about her son's future and decided to buy him a piano. This courageous, creative mother gambled that her son would take to it. He did and "that piano gave him the world." He began to compose at age 15, writing his first choral work, *Misa Pequeña*. As a composer Núñez won early acclaim for seamlessly fusing a wide range of cultures and musical idioms. Today, he composes and arranges in all musical formats and styles, from classical to pop, for choirs, orchestras, and solo instruments. He receives numerous commissions, including an arrangement of Coca Cola's "Buy the World a Coke."

Interview

Note: I interviewed Núñez via Internet on June 21, 2012.

Mary Epstein: Is there a correlation between your Kodály work and your MacArthur prize?

Francisco J. Núñez: The Kodály philosophy has been an important part of my teaching from practically my beginnings as a young teacher. I remember I wanted to give children the tools they needed for a good musical foundation, so they could grow into great musicians.

At YPC we use the basic Kodály principal of teaching from the "known to the unknown" as the foundation of our teaching. The Kodály concept of the "known and unknown" is especially evident in YPC's dual mission of diversity and musical excellence. The "known" for some of our children is "unknown" to many of the others, and so the children from diverse backgrounds help and coach each other in the group resulting in a glorious whole.

Beginning with our youngest choristers (ages 7–10), we start with music and sounds that are familiar, such as folk songs, gospel tunes, or rhythmic pieces from the pop or musical theater cultures before we move onto more unfamiliar music, such as newly composed music, art songs, or music from other cultures. Singers can stay with us until they are 18 years old, and as they grow as musicians, their minds expand and they become more comfortable with new music. As they

mature musically, we then introduce them to more challenging music, such as the compositions we commission from today's leading composers who are writing for YPC as part of our Transient Glory new-music series.

There is no way of knowing why the MacArthur Foundation singled me out for a fellowship, but I am so honored and thrilled to be recognized not only as a composer, but a teacher, especially a choral teacher of children. This recognition confirms that music teachers are important in our society. Now with this recognition, I am given the platform to further the cause of a good music education for everyone. From the time I created my first chorus in 1988, I have never veered from my initial mission of bringing children of all backgrounds together by teaching them music at the very highest artistic level. Zoltán Kodály was instrumental in bringing the best music to young people, not only his own but that of his colleagues, such as Béla Bartók. He understood and knew the importance of excellence in music making and in music education for young people. Only by offering young people the very best can we expect them to excel.

Mary Epstein: Please describe your background particularly as it relates to the influence of Kodály-inspired teaching in your work.

Francisco J. Núñez: As a young teacher, I was intrigued by the idea of teaching children not only to perform at a high artistic level, but also to learn to be independent musicians. I remember as a child how thrilled I was by the incredible education I received from my piano teachers, such as Dominican legends Renee Milan Rodriguez and Bulumba Landestoy and my greatest mentor in New York City, Seymour Bernstein. They insisted not only on performance, but also on excellent sight-reading skills, a keen ability to transpose at sight, and a complete knowledge of harmony. Only in this way could I comb through many scores each week and learn what kind of music I wanted to perform.

I learned quickly that the only way to become independent from my teachers was to be musically knowledgeable. Therefore, the Kodály practices, which emphasize literacy and great art music for young musicians, were my main attraction to the Kodály methodology. After I graduated from NYU,



Núñez conducting a rehearsal of the Children's Choir at the 2005 OAKE Conference

Tribute by Lois Choksy

In a class of outstanding graduate students, Francisco was outstanding. It was clear to me from his first days at Calgary that he was an exceptional musician with a huge talent and a mind like a sponge for absorbing new ideas. I'm not at all surprised at the successes he's had in his career. It's what I expected of him. And yet when I think of him in those long ago days, I don't remember our discussions about pedagogy. I always remember him laughing. He always took such joy in life. It was a delight to be with him. I've rarely taught anyone I enjoyed more as a student.

where I received a terrific, well-rounded music performance education, I went to study with the remarkable Kodály teachers at University of Calgary, headed by Lois Choksy. In Calgary, we sang three- to six-part solfège exercises, played and sang musical canons, studied the many folk songs of Canada and the U.S., performed the music of Bach each morning, and studied the great choral works of Kodály. It was one of the most inspiring educational times in my career. From this foundation and knowledge I was able to return to New York City and work with urban children from the public schools, put into practice what I had learned, and create new ways of reaching more and more children.

The current 380-voice, core after-school program of YPC is a performance-based Kodály program with a special emphasis on diversity and artistic excellence. Of course, I have grown the curriculum to incorporate the needs of our urban setting and have developed new tools and a unique methodology that help to form the young musical minds of our singers. I am working with our young conductors to create ways to pass on this multifaceted methodology to others so that more teachers can incorporate these concepts not only in YPC's affiliate programs, which already exist in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, but also wherever else their careers take them. In working with our in-school satellite program, which serves 1,000 children in the New York City public schools, our curriculum is carefully charted and includes many of the same progressions found in the after-school program.

Recently, I have been asked to create a national choral program for the children of the Dominican Republic based on the mission and curriculum of the YPC core program. I would like to go further and reach several other smaller countries once this curriculum is piloted.

Mary Epstein: Is there something you

could share with OAKE members—Maybe a story from your Kodály training, a tip you use, why you love the Kodály philosophy, or some other influences on your dreams?

Francisco J. Núñez: Music education is a means to ignite young people's dreams and transform their lives, starting from a simple descending minor third to the invigorating performance of atonal clusters. Kodály emphasized that we must surround our students with only the very best teachers. At YPC we bring the world's finest composers and musicians to the children. In this way we surround our singers with great artists that only expect the very best from young people, and this helps them elevate their artistry. Only in this way will our children always be able to recognize and respect the best. As teachers and parents, we must be aware that creating an early foundation for the youngest child is the most important thing we can do. It is our job to create a passion for learning and a means to learn beyond the teacher.

Kodály insisted that young people be consummate musicians. It was said that before signing an autograph, he would ask a child to sight-read a simple melody from his notebook. Today, a large part of our audi-

ences are fascinated only with performance. Many believe that the concept of musical knowledge and musical independence is not important in order to become a star.

A big question we should continually ask ourselves, especially as Kodály educators, is how do we balance literacy and performance for our young ones? Is a good ear for rote learning and the time to practice all we need to perform? To be a great artist we must have great teachers with the training and dedication to schedule a balance in the time we have with our students, a balance that includes teaching concepts and performance techniques and the importance of learning how to practice, problem solve, and find good literature. That is what Kodály was saying over 60 years ago. As teachers, we are responsible for shaping the future of singing for children, which will, in turn, change both individual lives and the attitudes of society.

Mary A. Epstein is codirector of the Kodály Music Institute, Anna Maria College. She was a 1971 NEA Fellow, studying Hungarian music education at the Liszt Academy under the leadership of Alexander L. Ringer. She served as program cochair for the 2005 OAKE Conference with Pamela Wood and Jonathan Rappaport. Since 1998 she has codirected, with Jonathan Rappaport and Joanne Crowell, the Kodály Music Institute and Vocal Vacation programs at Anna Maria College, Paxton, Massachusetts, originally at New England Conservatory, Boston, MA, where she is a doctoral candidate and completing her thesis under the supervision of Richard Colwell.

Tribute by Seymour Bernstein

Francisco came to study piano with me when he was in his 20s. He was very gifted as a pianist and was making amazing progress, until one day he told me that he was composing student pieces in order to get his pupil's left hands more functional. Being a composer myself I asked him to bring in the pieces at his next lesson. Moreover, he told me that he had a children's mass and many other compositions. That did it. From then on it was composition lessons exclusively.

I made compositional suggestions and wrote out many examples for him, most of which he included in his compositions. I recorded most everything he wrote, and I even was instrumental in getting him published by two major publishing firms.

Later I discussed interpretation with him on the choral works he wished to conduct. At one point, I accompanied his chorus at their first recital. So you see I have had a major role in Francisco's development. I have always considered him to be deeply sensitive, brilliantly intelligent, and a man of exceptional talent for conducting composing, and playing the piano.

It is a privilege to write this tribute to him.