

# Latina

# The music man

**N**ervousness filled the air. At their annual concert at New York City's 92nd Street Y, before an audience of 900, the kids of the Young People's Chorus of New York City filed onto the stage one by one, dressed in long, blue shirts and multi-colored ties and scarves. Many of them were young Latinas, and they stood in a half-moon four rows deep, waiting anxiously for their conductor and artistic director, Francisco J. Núñez, a *dominicano* with green eyes and Ricky Martin good looks.

As Francisco raised a hand, the chorus filled the room with sublime sounds. Among its rapt listeners were such music-world luminaries as maestro Kurt Masur, the music director emeritus of the New York Philharmonic, and parents such as Margarita Flores, 51, a single mother from the Bronx who was in tears as she

*As the leader of a diverse urban chorus, conductor Francisco Núñez raises young voices—and spirits*

listened to her teenage daughter sing.

Only a few years ago, Margarita says, her now 15-year-old daughter, Virginia Creary, had been a lonely child suffering from low self-esteem. But as a member of the Young People's Chorus that Sunday afternoon last April, Virginia performed a solo in a robust alto voice and confirmed to her mother that the girl's life had changed in ways neither of them had ever thought possible. "I was at the point where I didn't know what to do with her," Margarita says of the Virginia who joined the chorus at age 12. Now, however, Virginia has friends, keeps up with her schoolwork, and aspires to attend the prestigious Juilliard School to pursue a career as a composer and conductor. "I get really emotional," says Margarita, a school administrative assistant who is raising four daughters alone. "She's trying so hard, and she's really getting there."

TEXT BY MIREYA NAVARRO • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JORDAN HOLLENDER



This story of salvation is common among Virginia's fellow chorus members. Some of the children once did little more than hang out, while others were on the verge of quitting school. Now, they've been completely turned around by Francisco and his chorus, which is as devoted to making beautiful music as it is to changing lives.

**T**he group, which sings and swings to a repertoire that includes jazz, pop, classical, contemporary, and opera, has won major international competitions, performed at landmark venues such as Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, and wooed some highly respected composers to write for it. A nonprofit organization, it now has a nearly \$1 million annual budget and several divisions for ages 8 to 26. But perhaps most impressive is the group's ethnic mix: The chorus is divided almost half-and-half into white kids and children of color. Mostly female—girls outnumber boys more than three to one—it includes Jews and Muslims, African Americans and Latinos, kids raised in housing projects and those growing up in the gilded environs of Park Avenue.

Because he himself grew up in Washington Heights, one of New York City's most solidly Latino working-class neighborhoods, Francisco, 38, knew the importance of building such diversity: Too many children in

**'He introduced me to other kids. He made me realize I'm good'**

the city never leave their segregated enclaves, he says. So he wanted to expose kids from different neighborhoods, backgrounds, and income levels to high musical standards, connections among New York's elite circles, and above all, each other. "You need something that you have in common to give you the opportunity to meet kids from other backgrounds," he says. "Plus, I wanted to catch kids young and let them in on my secret: that while many of my buddies ended up with very nice blue-collar jobs, I've gotten to travel the world through scholarships and friends."

Francisco's father, an engineer, died when Francisco was 14. Francisco and his older brother were left with their mother, who worked as a piano teacher and seamstress while raising them. She insisted on fostering her son's musical talents by buying him

his first piano, giving him lessons, and forcing him to practice.

Despite the importance placed on the arts, money was tight at home, Francisco says, and he remembers sometimes being shut out of play simply because he couldn't afford the right skateboard. "At 11 I took a job working at a doughnut shop on Saturdays to make money and afford stuff other kids had," he recalls.

After attending both public school and private Catholic schools, Francisco went on to earn a bachelor's and a graduate diploma from New York University and the University of Calgary in piano performance and music education respectively. Today he is a composer and conductor who writes mostly classical pieces for solo instruments and major choruses and orchestras internationally.

If composing and conducting satisfy his artistic and professional sides, then it is the chorus, which he put together in 1988 while working as a music teacher at a Lower East Side community arts center, that ignites his passion. He makes himself accessible to every one of the chorus members during and after their many re-

hearsals. Through his organization, he gives them free voice lessons so they can earn spots in university music programs.

He pushes girls to apply to college and move away instead of staying in the city and getting stuck on their boyfriends. He writes letters of recommendation and arranges for counselors to help the chorus's high school students prepare for the SAT and apply for financial aid.

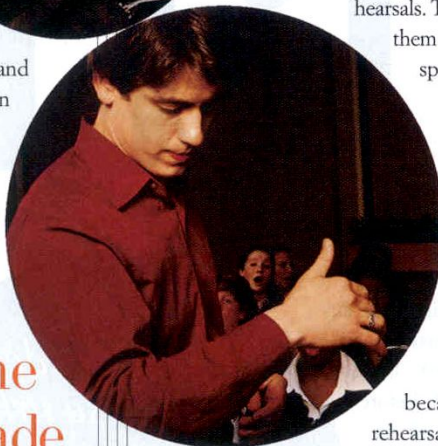
"He once pulled me aside because I had missed a couple of rehearsals, and he wanted to know how

I was doing," says Elizabeth Wagoner, 18, a high school senior and soprano who joined the chorus when she was 14. "He wants to know how you live."

Says Virginia, Margarita's daughter, "Francisco would talk to me and say, 'Why are you so shy? Speak up!' He introduced me to other kids, and that helped a lot. He also made me more confident about my singing. He made me realize I'm good."

And Eliana D. Raviv, a 15-year-old alto-soprano, recently went to Francisco when her mother warned her that she would have to quit if she did not devote more time to her schoolwork. "He told me to organize myself," Eliana recalls, "and to create a detailed schedule."

Francisco's work with the chorus is in stark contrast with some of his other duties. Recently hired as director of choral activities at New York University, he also conducts the 120-man University Glee Club of New York City, a 109-year-old institution that draws in lawyers, CEOs, and other corporate





types who enjoy belting out songs like “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” at the end of a workday.

He navigates the two worlds with ease. At a recent glee club rehearsal, which took place in an ornate room at the New York Genealogical & Biographical Society, he stood on a dais surrounded by row after row of men ages 20 to 80, some of them wearing bow ties and suspenders. “You’re speeding up,” he admonished a section of tenors. Just several days later he said something very similar (“We’re having a lot of trouble with this”), but this time it was to the kids from the youth chorus, who were gathered in a spartan rehearsal room at the Y, dressed in jeans and sweaters and sneakers.

**F**rancisco admits that the children aren’t always harmonious angels. “At first it’s rough because some of them think they are cooler and better than each other,” he says of newcomers. “But then they realize that if this child doesn’t sing as well as this other child, they’re not going to succeed. So they have to get along.”

The chorus holds auditions twice a year to recruit new singers, who must have good voices and enough devotion to put up with a sometimes grueling schedule of rehearsals and concerts. The core concert chorus, for instance, has some 30 performances a year.

“I’ve gone to places that I would have never imagined,” says Shaiita Torrado, 16, who has been a chorus member since she was 8. Shaiita, an aspiring merengue singer, has traveled to Vancouver and Walt Disney World for chorus appearances and sang with Celine Dion at a concert at which the chorus was asked to perform.

Francisco has also been able to convince major composers to write special pieces for children’s voices, often for the first time. Collaborations with composers such as Pulitzer Prize-winning David Del Tredici have been so successful that Francisco is now editing a new series of children’s choral-music publications based entirely on works commissioned by the Young People’s Chorus. The chorus also has three CDs to its credit; the latest one, scheduled for release in July on Vital Records, is called *Transient Glory*. In an effort even closer to Francisco’s heart, the chorus is now being used as a model for similar programs across the country, and he is traveling to urban cities to teach others how to replicate it.

With so much going on in his life, the young conductor makes sure he takes time out in the summer to travel to Europe just to study and write his own music. He says he also plans to spend more time with his girlfriend. “When we travel, a lot of other choruses go, ‘He’s sooooo cute!’” says Elizabeth, the 18-year-old whom Francisco pulled aside after she had missed a couple of rehearsals. “I remember one mother even said, ‘Oh, my God. He’s gorgeous!’”

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## Director de un coro de ángeles

Parados en el escenario frente a una audiencia de 900 personas, los niños del Young People’s Chorus esperan ansiosos la aparición de su conductor y director artístico. Cuando Francisco J. Núñez —un dominicano de ojos verdes con pinta a Ricky

Martin— da la orden, el teatro se llena de música celestial.

Margarita Flores, madre soltera del Bronx, llora mientras escucha a su hija Virginia cantar. Tres años atrás Virginia era una niña solitaria que sufría de baja autoestima. Ahora Virginia, de 15 años de edad, tiene amigos, hace sus tareas y aspira a estudiar en la Juilliard School.

Esta historia de salvación es una de las tantas entre los participantes. El coro —que interpreta música clásica, popular, jazz y ópera— ganó importantes competencias internacionales y se ha presentado en el Lincoln Center y el Carnegie Hall. Esta fundación sin fines de lucro tiene un presupuesto de casi un millón de dólares, pero lo más impresionante es su diversidad étnica. En el coro hay tantos blancos como minorías, judíos, musulmanes, afroamericanos y latinos de todos los niveles económicos.

Francisco, que se crió en un barrio latino de Manhattan, sabe lo importante que es crear esta diversidad: muchos niños nunca salen de su ghetto. “Precisas tener algo en común para acercarte a otro niño que es diferente a ti”. Francisco y su hermano se criaron con su madre, maestra de piano y costurera. Ella le daba importancia a las artes, pero en el hogar escaseaba el dinero. “A los 11 años tomé un trabajo en una tienda de *doughnuts* para poder comprarme lo que tenían otros niños”, recuerda Francisco. Graduado de New York University y con grados en educación musical y actuación, Francisco es hoy un conductor y compositor que escribe mayormente piezas clásicas. Organizó el coro en 1988, cuando trabajaba como maestro de música. Así descubrió su pasión. Francisco se toma los veranos para viajar a Europa, estudiar y componer. Con todo esto, dice que quiere tener más tiempo para su novia.

