

CHOIR & ORGAN

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Cantus in Choro A GLOBAL VIEW OF CHORAL SINGING

Francisco J Núñez talks to *Ken Smith*
about his adventurous project with the
Young People's Chorus of
New York City

Getting them through the door



In New York's fragmented classical music world, people who might feel at home at an orchestral concert or a piano recital would probably never dream of attending a choral concert, much less a performance by a children's choir – and frequently the reverse is true as well.

No one is more aware of this polarity than Francisco J Núñez, the director of the Young People's Chorus of New York City, a composer and former piano prodigy. 'When people go to hear Mozart's Requiem or Beethoven's Ninth they often don't even know who's singing,' he observes. 'I've spent a lot of time looking for music by the famous composers, but most of them have written for every genre other than children's choir.'

So does that situation hold true today too, when most established concert composers have little choral music in their catalogue, and much less for young singers? Even the most performed choral composers still remain anonymous in the musical world at large. Though he could do little about the Mozarts and Beethovens of the past Núñez set out to rectify the situation in his own time.

His project, *Transient Glory*, is a bold step to entice concert composers to write for young singers. With the help of his publisher, Boosey & Hawkes, Núñez has managed to convince a growing number of established composers of the merits of young singers, as well as bringing a number of budding choral composers into the publishing fold.

opposite **evangelising for young
singers: Francisco J Núñez**
Photos courtesy of Shuman Associates

Núñez's best tool for recruitment is his own group, a superb ensemble of young voices largely representative of the city's mix of cultures and socio-economic levels. "They have a full vocal range," Núñez says. "They can sing in parts, and in several languages. I know that once I get people in the door and show them what we can do I can keep them, but it's a challenge just getting them to the door."

A few who've entered – and subsequently signed on to the project – include composers Ned Rorem, Michael Torke, Michael Nyman, John Tavener and David Del Tredici. In addition to the YPC's concert of *Transient Glory* commissions, which were inaugurated in 2001 at the 92nd Street Y, where the YPC is in residence, the works themselves are featured on a recording released on Vital Records and will be published by Boosey & Hawkes, except for composers already affiliated to other companies.

Where the concert composers are concerned, the biggest challenge comes in scaling back their expectations from the pay structure of concert hall commissions – \$1,000 a minute is the going rate – to accept rather less for their *Transient Glory* works. This is not to be confused with charity, as Boosey & Hawkes president Jenny Billfield is quick to point out,



since in the choral field the majority of the money comes from sales of printed scores. "The choral world can be a highly lucrative market, and many choral composers do much better financially than many concert composers," she explains. "Choruses, like wind bands, are always looking for new works. The pieces for treble chorus," she adds, "will be marketed to both the children's and adult market."

This will be for composers who can present a delicate distinction more in subject matter than technical issues, as Núñez discusses freely. "I think people forget when they're writing for children that you don't always have to write about floppy bunnies. You have to write about real things, because in exactly the way adults can size up a phoney at a





party, young people can size up what is real. They want a challenge, and if they're going to study something for months it had better be worthwhile.'

As far as composers finding their own definition of 'real', Núñez essentially lets the make-up of his own chorus speak for itself. 'We're dealing with an urban child, specifically with a New York child, and that makes a lot of difference,' he says. 'Not only are they really smart, they already know life. The school system here is highly competitive with lots of pressures, but even on the way to school they have to defend themselves on the street every day. They have to be strong, and they want music with an emotional content that matches the stress levels they already feel. The composer Elena Katz-Chernin asked them what they wanted and they said "a very difficult, fast piece."¹¹

Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum, a recent graduate and current administrator of the composition department of the Juilliard School, grew up singing in children's choruses, so she knew very well the strengths and weaknesses of that age group. 'Kids can sing anything as long as they can hear it,' she says. 'They're not limited by tonality, although by the end my piece was pretty standard. My only concern was rhythm, which I had to make sure was very clear. I wasn't too incredibly stressed about the music on the page.'

She would rather spend most of her time looking for an appropriate text, which she found in e e cummings. 'These texts are playful and see the whole world upside down but at the same time impart their own element of wisdom,' she says. 'Translating that sense of wisdom into music required being simple without being simplistic. Although the vocal lines had some relatively complicated counterpoint, the resolutions needed to be simple.'

The results have paid off. 'Two Songs' from *Days of Innocence* by e e cummings for treble chorus, clarinet and piano garnered one of this year's

ASCAP Young Composer Awards and has already been taken on by Boosey & Hawkes as the composer's first published composition.

Boosey veteran composer Steve Mackey, however, came to *Transient Glory* from exactly the opposite direction. Best known for his colourful orchestral works (his recent organ concerto *Pedal Tones* was commissioned by Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony) and chamber works featuring the electric guitar, the Princeton University-based composer had no prior experience either with young singers or choruses.

'I came into classical music from rock and roll in my early twenties,' he says. 'I had no experience as a young classical musician to draw on, and nothing from my life as a student or teaching at Princeton had changed that. Choral music for young people just didn't sound like my thing, and I put it off for a couple of years. But Francisco was persistent, and the fact that he clearly knew who I was, and that this was not an obvious step for me, gave me almost as much faith in myself as he had.'

A former camp counsellor, Mackey already knew better than to condescend to young people and instead sought a place where youthful sensibilities overlapped with his own creative leanings. 'My music relies a lot less on virtuosity and ornament now and is more concerned with line,' he says. 'So I thought, let's emphasise line to the point that a 14-year-old can sing it.'

In William Carlos Williams's *The Attic which is Desire* Mackey found an emotional sentiment that he thought the young singers could relate to, as well as a text that left plenty of room for him to establish his own often ironic musical context. 'It helped that I was working with young singers and not trained adults with big vibratos. I want to hear clear vowels and consonants, and how I place the words is as important an aspect of my orchestration colour as how I assign musical lines to certain instruments.'

The *Transient Glory* experience has since worked its way into other writings, Mackey admits, including the substantial four- and five-part vocal writing in *Dreamhouse*, which was given its première at last summer's Holland Festival. 'The summer after I worked with Francisco I was invited up to lead a young composers' seminar at Tanglewood on writing for chorus. I asked "Why me?" and they said "Precisely because you're not a chorus guy." If someone from that world had come in preaching the greatness of choral music no one would have believed it.'

Núñez, for his part, has no doubt that great composers in one genre will succeed in crossing over into another. 'So far we've struck gold with our commissions,' he says. 'And, just as important, we're breaking down barriers of what people think are different kinds of contemporary music.'

Since its inauguration, *Transient Glory* programming has include not only concerts but a public forum bringing composers, critics, orchestral conductors and music publishers together. 'That,' he says, 'has served to clear up many misconceptions

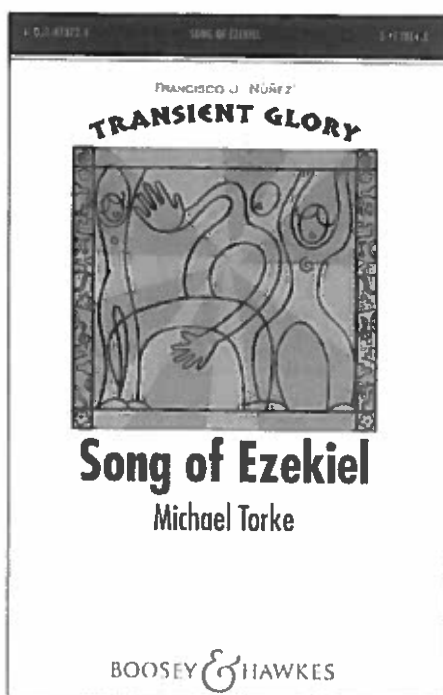
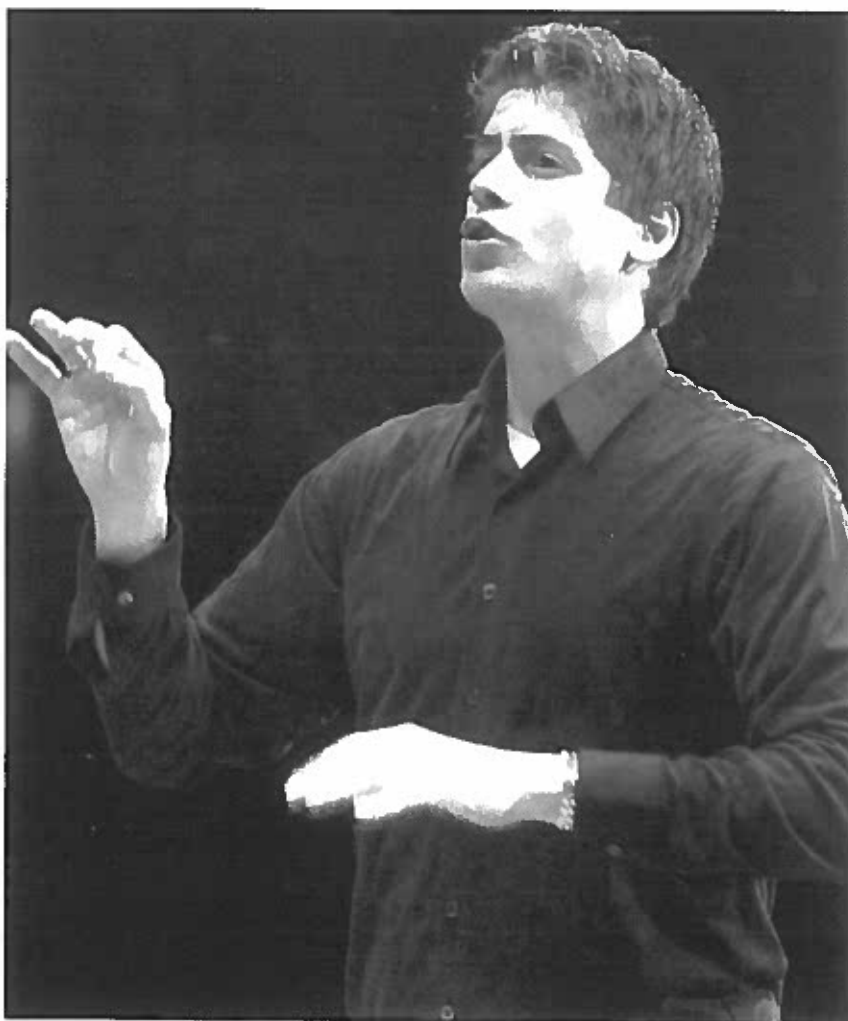
'we've struck gold... we're breaking down barriers'

on all sides, as well as offering everyone a wealth of new perspectives.

'Kurt Masur compared our [education] programme to the youth choirs in Germany,' Núñez recalls. 'He said he'd expect to see something like this in Minnesota, but not New York. John Schaefer from WNYC [New York Public Radio], who was also on the panel, has asked us to be the station's chorus-in-residence, like the radio children's choruses in Europe.'

Future composers who have signed on to the project include Richard Rodney Bennett, Louis Andriessen, Bright Sheng, Judith Weir, Thea Musgrave and David Soyler, the former cellist of the Guarneri String Quartet, now a composer with Universal Edition.

'I'm still holding out for John Adams or Steve Reich, but they're so busy that it's hard to get to them. Right now we have composers set till 2007. Once the money runs out, we'll see where we go from there. We may find a new way of doing it – or maybe we'll stop after 20 or 30 pieces. At that point, someone may want to take over the project and bring it to a different level.' ▴



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