



EDUCATION

A Musical Boarding

At Saint Thomas Choir School, 'a particular kind of education'

By Damian Fowler

IT WAS A MOMENT that changed his life forever. In 2008, eleven-year-old Grant Klinger was a member of the choir at a small Lutheran church in Buck Hill Falls, Pennsylvania. In fact, he was the only boy in the choir. Then he saw the poster pinned to a church notice board: It read, "Do you know a boy who loves to sing?" Yes, he thought to himself, I'm a boy who loves to sing.

The poster was part of a recruitment campaign by Saint Thomas Choir School in New York City, a prestigious ninety-one-year-old institution that selects choirboys from around the United States to sing in the Saint Thomas Church Choir, the well-regarded choral ensemble in the Anglican tradition. Saint Thomas Choir School is unique: it's the only church-affiliated boarding choir school in the United States, and one of only two in the world. The other is the Westminster Abbey Choir School, which, like Saint Thomas, exists solely to educate and care for the boys who sing in the choir. As one of the Saint Thomas boys puts it, "This is a choir with a school, not a school with a choir."

After he saw the poster, Grant convinced his parents to let him audition for the school. An audition involves two visits, which include a day in the classroom with the other boys and rigorous music tests. "Very few children

who come to audition have had much musical experience... and not all have sung in choirs," says John Scott, the director of music at Saint Thomas. "What we're trying to gauge is raw talent, a good ear and an expressive touch on a musical instrument."

Grant entered the school as a mid-year fifth grader in December 2008, just in time to help some of the older boys pick out a Christmas tree for the school. It was the beginning of his initiation into a group of approximately forty choristers, each of whom usually enters in the third grade and stays through the eighth grade. Because it's a boarding school, the boys live, play, work and study together in one fifteen-story school building on West 58th Street.

"It's a rarefied experience," says headmaster Charles Wallace. "Boarding school is a lifestyle and so we're all devoted to it, the boys and the teachers." Many of the teachers,



including Wallace, live in the building and attend to the daily needs of the boys. And the average size of each class is between four and six pupils, with nine full-time and three part-time faculty members. There are also two “house mothers” who are medically trained but deal with everything from homesickness to reading bedtime stories to dispensing matronly advice when it’s needed.

“I can’t tell you how comforting it is to see the headmaster and the teachers take such care of the boys,” says Brenda Klinger, Grant’s mother. “We’ve been really gratified by the balance the school maintains — hard work with fun while being attentive to the emotional and spiritual side of the boys’ education.”

To be sure, the school is very clear about its mission — established by Saint Thomas Church — which marries three traditions: music, education and Christian community. “While a lot of schools are struggling with identity, the nice thing is we’re not navel-gazing,” says Wallace. “Our boys are committed to the daily round of singing and a particular kind of education.”

The boys start their weekdays with choir rehearsal from 8:00 to 9:15 a.m., gathering at the choir benches set on a stage in the gymnasium. The architects of the school building designed the resonant space to evoke some of the sonic grandeur of Saint Thomas Episcopal Church on Fifth Avenue at 53rd Street, where the boys regularly sing.

The choir is led by John Scott, who directed the choir of St Paul’s Cathedral in London from 1990 to 2004 before taking up his role as Saint Thomas’s organist, choirmaster and director of music. The Saint Thomas Choir is very much a part of the Anglican choral tradition, which includes works by Benjamin Britten, William Byrd, Edward Elgar, Thomas Tallis, John Taverner, Samuel Wesley (the nephew of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church) and Ralph Vaughan Williams, among others. Since his arrival, Scott has expanded the choir’s repertoire to include American works by Leo Sowerby (nicknamed “the dean of American church music”) and Ned Rorem (who studied with Sowerby) and



most recently, in 2005, commissioned a mass by the young composer Nico Muhly, *Bright Mass with Canons*.

After rehearsal the boys attend classes, which include English, science, French, math, art and, of course, individual music lessons. (Most of the boys play a musical instrument, too.) The boys also have a good amount of time to play sports and run around the gym or Central Park, which is a block away. But come 4:00 p.m., Tuesday to Thursday, the boys walk two-by-two down the street to Saint Thomas Church, don their scarlet cassocks and become choirboys singing Evensong with the full choir. Performing beneath the soaring arches of the neo-Gothic church would be a memorable experience for anyone, but it’s especially awe-inspiring for an eleven- or twelve-year-old boy. “The music is amazing,” says Grant, who credits Dr. Scott with helping him with his sight-reading. He says he is ten times better as a chorister than when he started. “All the pieces, we all love them — and a few of us even look forward to singing them!”

In addition to Evensong, the choir sings two services on Sunday and services on Holy Days. The choir has been invited to Germany in 2012 to sing at the 800th anniversary of the St. Thomas School of Leipzig, where J.S. Bach once worked as conductor and organist — “a huge honor,” says Scott.

For the families of boys who are accepted into Saint Thomas, the school offers entry into the independent school system. Tuition, room and board are comparatively reasonable; for the 2009–2010 academic year the total was \$12,500, though the majority of boys attend on scholarship determined by financial need.

An educated choir. St. Thomas choristers performing in Washington, D.C. in May, conducted by John Scott.

And because only a few boys graduate each year — in 2010 it was eight, next year it will be two — the headmaster is heavily invested in helping Saint Thomas boys find placement after graduation. Wallace favors small, independent religious schools, and the boys often continue to other boarding schools.

Perhaps surprisingly, not all of the choristers go on to become professional musicians; the school encourages the boys to have a well-rounded high school and college education. But some do become professional musicians: Alumnus Julian Wachner, who attended the school from 1979 to 1983, is now music director of the Washington Chorus, based at the Kennedy Center, as well as an associate professor of music at McGill University in Montreal. “I wouldn’t be where I am now if it were not for that school,” says Wachner, who is on the alumni board. “Not just musically, but as a human citizen.”

This fall, Grant enters the seventh grade at Saint Thomas. He is unequivocal about the virtues of the school and his experience so far. “It’s one of the best things I’ve done in my young life,” he says. He knows that being a treble in the choir has a natural ending; already some of the older boys’ voices have started to break, some gradually, others suddenly plunging two octaves. At that point, the boys become “acolytes” and no longer sing in the choir, but they stay on until graduation. And what would Grant say to someone curious about coming to Saint Thomas? In an instant he has an answer: “Do you know a boy who loves to sing?” ■