

Growing Up Singing

"Alternatives for life"

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On June 22nd 1902, after a bloody civil war called "the thousand days' war," president José Manuel Marroquín decided, with the support of the Catholic Church, to consecrate Colombia to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. However, this was merely a source for scorn and hopelessness in a nation which can give first-hand testimony of the horrors of war, hunger, and social inequality. From that moment on, many generations have come to know our country by the label of "Country of the Sacred Heart."

It is not difficult to find people in Latin America who live in a situation of utter poverty and in social conditions which go far beyond the economic aspect of their lives and also affect the cultural and psychological aspects; and for whom a small drop of art, recreation, and education could become a sea of hope.

In June 2009 I had the good fortune to reconnect with Sandra Liliana González, a friend almost from infancy who was returning from Caracas after five years spent experiencing the use of choral singing as an element of change and social inclusion. The program, in association with the Schola Cantorum of Venezuela under the vision and musical direction of María Guinand and Alberto Grau, sought to integrate children and young people from a background of social risk into a high-level artistic dimension, promoting their

abilities and talents and connecting them with a Venezuelan musical process that has obtained international recognition.

Motivated by her experience, Sandra aimed to replicate the Venezuelan model in Colombia, adapting it to the unique conditions of this country. It was at this first meeting that we decided to work together in order to build our own socio-musical process with willpower, tenacity, and commitment.

So in October 2009, the *Fundación Schola Cantorum de Manizales* (Manizales Schola Cantorum Foundation) was created. Its social goals were to promote choral music and to create choral singing programs which would encourage musical development and social inclusion in this region of the country.

We then created the project *Crece Cantando* (Growing Up Singing) which seeks to integrate children and young people in a permanent cultural dimension combining musical education with the strengthening of a system of civic values such as – among others – participation, dialogue, tolerance, solidarity, respect for differences, and healthy development of languages. The pilot project is being developed in Manizales, a small city located in the center of Colombia belonging to the Coffee Axis; it has a population close to 500.000 inhabitants and is known world-wide for its location close to the *Nevado del Ruíz* volcano. Manizales is nationally recognized as a city for academics with ten higher-education establishments (a large number, taking into account its population). But, like all cities in Colombia, Manizales suffers from social and economic inequality.

We took over funding the first two children's choirs with our own resources. The first of these was linked to an institution that has distinguished itself for being in the forefront of "Inclusive Education" in the country despite its lack of resources. This institution seeks to educate students with learning disabilities resulting from physical, intellectual, emotional, and family problems, by putting them together with

other students who do not have disabilities. The second choir was created in an organization belonging to the Catholic Church, which works with low-income children. This choir has 30 singers coming from socio-economic layers 1 and 2 (the lowest in Colombia) who from the beginning have shown immense motivation and interest in singing.

The work carried out with these choirs has been intense and, for obvious reasons, a little slower in comparison to any other group with different conditions and composition; but if there is anything egocentric in this work it is the personal satisfaction of seeing children with Down's Syndrome, children with severe burns all over their bodies, abandoned children, children abused by their parents, autistic children and disabled children, all singing in unison with a big smile on their faces.

We have been working with them for five months, and the obstacles have been many, for the children are not always in the right mood to sing. The causes of this are numerous, and include malnutrition and personal conflicts driving from attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity. Given these situations, we have occasionally erred (never intentionally) through our lack of understanding of the personal condition of each chorister. This has compelled us to study each singer individually in order to improve shared interaction within the group, and to optimize both individual and group activities. As regards music, we try to use the same methodology because these children have the capacity and the right to be treated as equal, giving them the opportunity to become connected with society. It is a gratifying task, and one which we hope we will continue to perform thanks to the support of both of the institutions that have benefited from the results.

One of the most interesting aspects of this entire process has been the significant progress made by these children in other aspects of their lives. Some of their parents have told us of improvement in many fields: linguistic abilities, academic

achievements, discipline, and interaction with others. These are some of the reasons that encourage us to continue with this process which, we hope, will become our greatest strength as an institution.

In spite of the above, the major difficulty in this work is the acquisition of resources. The support of the private sector has been modest; and there has been no support from the government, which is difficult to understand given that Colombian laws, on paper, promote cultural development and tax benefits for organizations which support education and art.

In any case, without diminishing valuable efforts that have made an impact on our history in some way, it must be said that the development of artistic and cultural traditions in Colombia has been slow. This is another motivation that drives us, because we hope to contribute to these traditions through choral music, which we would like to see become the basis for our country's progress.

In 1994 the constitutional court declared that the consecration of Colombia to the Sacred Heart was unsustainable given the freedom of worship in our country. The epithet is still present on the street, but there are now many Colombians who, through their work and commitment, are seeking to change this state of affairs. The Manizales Schola Cantorum Foundation is working to build a nation through choral singing.

By itself, music is sublime; but through the medium of a human being music is noble, and it is in this second dimension that "Growing Up Singing" operates. It is there that we are promoting social change, where we have the space for music to embrace everyone who wishes to be enfolded by it.

Our project aims to promote all-round development. Any educational practice, any conceptual and cognitive process, is useless when its contribution to the growth of the individual

is limited. This is why we strive to educate true nation-builders through music.

Art must always be a light of hope and an exaltation of the human spirit, in contrast with the developments of a world imprisoned by systems and conflicts; and this is ever more vital in a society so much in need of happiness and hope as ours. We are the artists called to illustrate and encourage this human and social aspect of music; and beyond mere teaching, we have an obligation to show others how to live through music.

Translated from the Spanish by Cristian Grases, USA

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