

What A Wonderful World! Corona Children's Chorus Camp 2010

by Sanna Valvanne, Conductor and Music Director of the Corona Children's Chorus Camp

Nearly hundred children are singing before me with their faces shining, eyes glowing and whole beings fully engaged. People are gathered at the park in front of the Queens Museum of Art, in New York, to hear the first ever Corona Children's Chorus Camp perform. Just 2 weeks ago, when the camp started, most of these children had never sang in a choir before, some had never sung at all. This is the first concert and time ever to be on stage for most of them. The sky really is blue and the sun shining, just like in the song "What a Wonderful World", which the children are singing from their hearts.

The concert and the camp have been like a miracle and a realized dream. Only half a year ago, I made the plan for this camp. My friend, Alvaro Rodas, asked me to create a choir project of my dreams for children and youth in Corona. This was the first step in his El Sistema inspired youth music project, in New York. I had no limitations, since everything had to be created from scratch anyways. It was inspiring to have this freedom, and to plan the best kind of opportunity I could imagine for children who normally don't have it to experience the uplifting and life-changing power of music making.

Corona is a lively, dense and 80% Hispanic neighborhood in Queens, New York. Almost half of all the adults there haven't finished high school, and about 20% live below the line of poverty. No large community music programs oriented to its

youth exist there. Through creating music education programs with youth choirs and orchestras, Alvaro's goal was to transform and improve the life, not only of the kids, but of the whole area. His model came from the Venezuelan Youth Orchestra Movement, also known as El Sistema, lead by Dr. José Abreu, which had succeeded to do this for 35 years in Venezuela and other Latin American countries. Originally a professional percussionist and arts administrator from Guatemala, Alvaro was one of the first 10 people trained last year in the Abreu Fellowship Program, at the New England Conservatory, in Boston.

I was very familiar with the phenomenal Venezuelan Youth Orchestra and Choir movement, and happy and honored to be part of it now through the camp. I knew well the Venezuelan Choral Masters, Alberto Grau and Maria Guinand, and had met Dr. Abreu and Gustavo Dudamel through Erkki Pohjola. I had given workshops in Venezuela. In Guatemala, with Kari Ala-Pöllänen, we had initiated a children's and youth choir movement, inspired by the Venezuelans. I had witnessed the power singing really has, to change lives and make social improvements. The mission was to do it now in Corona.

My plan was ideally to have about 100 kids, ages 9-15, rehearsing for 2 weeks, with enough breaks for playing and eating, as well as a weekend, and some non-choral activities in between. My goals for the camp were the same as what my creative and holistic choral method "Making Music with Body and Soul" is always about:

1. To awaken in the kids the love and enthusiasm for music and singing, by sharing mine with them.
2. To introduce them to songs of different cultures and styles using movement, imagination, drama, creativity and fun exercises in the process.
3. To show them what all they can do with their voice, and how fun it is to sing and play with the voice.
4. To free and open them up, so that they can express

themselves and music freely and happily with their voice and their whole beings.

5. Shining like stars, to share the joy of singing and music making with everyone in a closing concert.

Alvaro really worked hard to make the impossible possible. The first Corona Children's Chorus Camp successfully took place in Corona, Queens, New York, 9-21 August, 2010! All of what I had planned, and much more happened. Approximately 100 singers, ages 6-16, stayed through the whole camp. We had as many boys as girls. In the 10 days with them miracles took place. First, many of the participants were very insecure, shy, and nervous, and I could hardly hear their voices. But each day, moment by moment, these beautiful and totally inexperienced young people opened up, giving their attention, voices, and beings to the music and singing, more and more. They learned 12 songs in 13 different languages from around the world, with different styles, sounds, movement, harmonies, solos, in accapella, and some with different instruments. They learned everything by heart and all by ear.

In such a short time these kids became shining performers and brave soloists singing in front of audiences not only at the final concert. Because the project drew incredible amounts of attention from the media, the choir ended up also performing at a live TV- Show, to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg at an impromptu street performance, and to numerous newspaper and radio reporters.

The singers truly became a team, a real choir, and one voice. They learned, developed, practiced, and worked so hard in the middle of the summer heat without even any air conditioning or chairs. They didn't have any previous knowledge of what a choir is, sounds like, how a rehearsal is, how one behaves at a performance, what musical terms mean, what singing in tune or out of tune means, or about dynamics, silent breathing, making the music and the voice flow, etc...Everything had to be

taught and shown from the scratch. All my experience, method, techniques, tricks, imagination, creativity, patience and faith were put in to test and real use. And they did learn!! Even though I knew children are capable of anything, I still was mind-blown how it all was possible.

Without the fantastic team of 8 music teachers it would not have been possible. They participated in the choir, received training from me, assisted and managed the coordination of the camp, took care of the kids, and enabled the camp to run smoothly. They made it possible for me to attend to the singers also individually. I think why the kids became so engaged in the choir, was partly because during the camp I decided to listen to them all individually and give voice instruction. Just for a few minutes each, but it did the magic. Most of them had no idea until then how good they sounded, and that they actually could sing.

Taking the time to talk with some of the more troubled kids individually i found out how I needed to explain to everybody that each voice mattered, each one of them was equally important to the choir, and to be a choir we needed all of them. Just like in a soccer team. Just like in life. And not to give up. That to become really great in something, one had to work hard, even when it didn't feel fun. It would be worth it and bear great fruit. They needed to hear all this, and that they had all it takes to become great. And they became so great! At the final concert they remembered everything I had taught and gave their ultimate best. Without any previous experience, and in-spite of all the challenges an outdoors concert brings to even experienced performers, they sang better than ever before! I even had 24 soloists from the choir singing fearlessly by themselves to a microphone at the concert, sounding fantastic.

After the concert one mother expressed her gratitude for the kids receiving this chance, in a loving environment, to open their hearts and connect to their feelings. Thanks to the

healing effect of the camp, she said her daughter had for the first been able to cry and express the pain of the parents' divorce. All the parents wanted the choir to continue. It should, and the rest of Alvaro's Music Project should come true too. Just like in Finland and Venezuela, where high quality music education programs have been made available for everyone regardless of their financial or social status, nothing should stop these kids here in the USA, or anywhere, from receiving these opportunities. I am forever grateful and moved by the generosity of Freddie and Myrna Gershon, who donated almost all of the money for the camp. They made it completely free for the kids, gave us hope for the future, and showed us that it is possible!

The effects of the camp were transforming to all of us. Mayra, a little girl at the camp, gave me a beautiful drawing she had made. She had created an image of us, the camp and our theme song "What A Wonderful World". There were hearts, flowers, rainbow, sunshine, and trees flowing out from a brown brick building, exactly like the Louis Armstrong Recreation Center/ELMCOR where we rehearsed. It revealed to me the most important lesson of the camp: The circumstances don't have to be perfect, but we can create a wonderful world with our music, love and play. We have that power. Music has that power. And that's what we did at the Corona Children's Chorus Camp. We created a wonderful world inside and outside us. The kids, their shining faces, pure hearts, innocent spirits, bright voices, the songs, games and making music together generate so much joy, love and beauty, revealing the wonder in everything. What a Wonderful World indeed!