

Dianne Berkun

**Artistic Director,
Brooklyn Youth Chorus Academy**

What happens when your dream is to help others achieve their own? Such is the case with Dianne Berkun, who founded New York's Brooklyn Youth Chorus in 1992 to share her love of music and singing with the children in her community. Now, over 10 years later, her continuous hard work has made even bigger strides, most recently with the opening of the Brooklyn Youth Chorus Academy, where students participate in one of the three training choruses or the concert chorus and can also take piano lessons and classes in music theory, music theatre, and improvisation. This top-quality training has brought the organization much prestige and recognition and has made Berkun's dream come true.

How did you become a choral director?

I was involved in choral singing and piano throughout my entire childhood. It took me a while to decide what I wanted to do for a career. First I thought I would become a pianist. But I had such fond memories of my choral experience that I wanted to start a choral program. During college, I volunteered in a public school where I started one. After college, I taught at a private school in Brooklyn and started [another] choral program there. But I had a desire to reach a broader range of kids and was very interested in developing a community chorus, so that was how I founded the Brooklyn Youth Chorus.

How do you choose the music that the choruses will sing?

I do an awful lot of research, listening, and reading to find things that would be most engaging for them, but there are some general



criteria that I use because there is an educational aspect to everything that I do. I give them diverse musical selections so that they're covering a range of time periods and styles like folk, international, jazz, and spirituals.

What do you find most challenging about your job?

The biggest challenge is to stay really creative in my artistic work, teaching, and conducting, and at the same time, keep the business side in order, raising funds and getting support to keep this going. Having founded the organization, I've had to learn every job and set up everything along the way as we built the staff.

What's most gratifying about your job?

The time I spend directly working with the students—there's no doubt about that. That's the reason why this whole school exists—because of the joy and satisfaction that I get out of bringing [them] the same experience that I've loved. Knowing we provide them with the training,

motivation, and support they need to pursue their interests is very gratifying. They end up [becoming] these tremendous talents. And all that talent was fostered here.

What do the kids enjoy doing the most?

Some get a thrill out of being at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center with a major orchestra. There are kids that like the celebrity thing—like on the *Letterman* show, they backed P.O.D. And, everyone loves to go on tour. We've toured in Germany, Russia, and England. Some kids like the recitals that we do at the school, singing for their families at home.

Tell us some of the most exciting highlights you've experienced.

The biggest one recently was opening up Brooklyn Youth Chorus Academy. Another was when the chorus performed their debut with the New York Philharmonic for the world premiere of John Adams' "On the Transmigration of Souls," which he wrote to commemorate the 9/11 victims.

What does it take to be a good choral director?

You definitely want to train and build your vocal skills because the voice is the instrument of a chorus. You should also have basic piano skills to accompany the chorus in rehearsal. You should have a sense of pedagogy—how and what to teach—and find a quality repertoire of music that's exciting for the students. Most importantly, it has to be something you truly love. You can't fake it, or the students will know. Inspiring teachers are people who really love what they do. **MA!**