

Roxbury Latin

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The Junior Chorus during a rehearsal

Boys and Singing

Another kind of team experience

By Kerry P. Brennan

During the third week of December, America turned its eyes and ears to an unusual four night television “series,” *The Sing-Off*, in which eight finalist a cappella singing groups vied for the grand prize, a hefty sum of money and a recording contract. In the final eight were groups

representative of various demographics—societal and musical. One of the favorite groups was The Beelzebubs from Tufts, an all-male, energetic ensemble whose character and quality would be most familiar to those of us who have regularly heard The Latonics and high-quality collegiate groups. This show is emblematic

of the national a cappella rage in which ensembles are springing up prodigiously on college campuses and increasingly in high schools and in non-academic settings. Why now? Why this choral form?

The week prior to this TV phenomenon, The Sly Voxes, another all male a cappella group that I direct, offered its eclectic holiday repertoire in Rousmaniere Hall. For the first time paired with the Voxes was a community *Messiah* Sing in which more than 250 people of all ages—some armed with well-worn scores—gathered to sing one of the world’s most beloved, and most

frequently performed choral masterpieces. A colleague of mine marveled at the turnout and also the fact that so many disparate people, strangers otherwise, could affirm their neighborliness and their musical solidarity through a piece of music, sung by all of them in other places at other times, but which called them together on 10 December to affirm a kinship with this original, randomly assembled ensemble. What was the draw? Why did these men and women of all ages (many of whom had never before set foot on our campus) bother on a cold night to lend their voices to this choral experiment?

On Friday, 18 December, at two performances, R.L.'s choral forces presented the Annual Holiday Concert. Constituting four singing ensembles, 182 boys opened their hearts and throats for the standing room only audiences that came to cheer them on. Imagine a school in which 62 percent of the student body sings in a choral ensemble. Imagine a school—including behemoth coeducational public schools—in which 182 boys commit themselves to this kind of artistic and fraternal endeavor. No school that I know of does a better job of encouraging boys to sing than Roxbury Latin. Why do we bother? Why is the quality of our groups of such a high standard?

My own view of this, of course, comes not just from my six years as Headmaster, but from an earlier tour of duty at R.L. when I was the director of music. You can imagine with what trepidation I took the job when Tony Jarvis offered it in light of the fact that I was charged, among other things, with directing the Glee Club and Small Group (precursor to The Latonics) and getting boys excited about singing (the only reassuring bit of karma initially was when Tony gave me the School song and suggested "I may have heard of it;" in fact "The Founder's Song" is to the tune of "Lord Jeffrey Amherst," the fight song of my college). I thought at that time that the enrollment of 38 boys in my first Glee Club was unusual and even suspicious. I expected they must have thought they would give this wet-behind-the-ears master a run for his money. Instead, together we enjoyed a gratifying, fun, even uplifting, collaboration to the point that soon I was having to audition boys for the



The Roxbury Latin Latonics in a school day performance

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Glee Club and our ranks swelled to almost 90. In addition to enjoying every minute of that enterprise, I learned a great lesson: boys' schools liberate boys to try things that in typical co-ed settings they would not dare to try. At a good boys' school, there are many ways to be a boy. There is also the absence of cross-gender posturing and a prevailing sense that it is cool to be part of something that aspires consistently to be excellent. Even as boys are going through puberty and are often most self-conscious about their changing voices, canny boys' school music programs find a way to keep them engaged and proud of the sometimes unreliable noises they can make.

Recently, as is periodically the case for each academic department, the arts department was reviewed by a team of three arts educators. These three veteran teachers from other fine independent schools scoffed at my contention that R.L. is a "singing school." And then, fortuitously, they heard the whole School prepare in Hall for Founder's Day. They were blown away, especially at 8:15 in the morning, by the mighty power of 293 adolescents joined in song. (Sometimes,

kiddingly, some of my athletic coaching colleagues suggest that they wouldn't mind it if we were less a "singing school" and a bit more of a this-or-that sport school!). Alumni of recent vintage, especially those since 1995 when the organ was installed, can relate to the great enthusiasm and joy that results from a good belt of "The Founder's Song" or "Jerusalem." Because we are a school that cares about the spiritual formation of our boys, it is always gratifying to witness their inspired singing.

I have told anyone who will listen on the boys' schools circuit that I believe that one of the great opportunities in a boys' school is to offer boys a high quality, sustained singing experience. When boys' schools miss that chance or make it impossible for a choral tradition to flourish, I am disappointed. There are a few keys to ensuring that such an enterprise might thrive. One is to free the venture from any scheduling conflicts. That way *all* boys, regardless of how they might primarily identify themselves or their strengths—nerds, jocks, nihilists—have no excuse not to be interested in participating. At R.L. we believe energetically in the

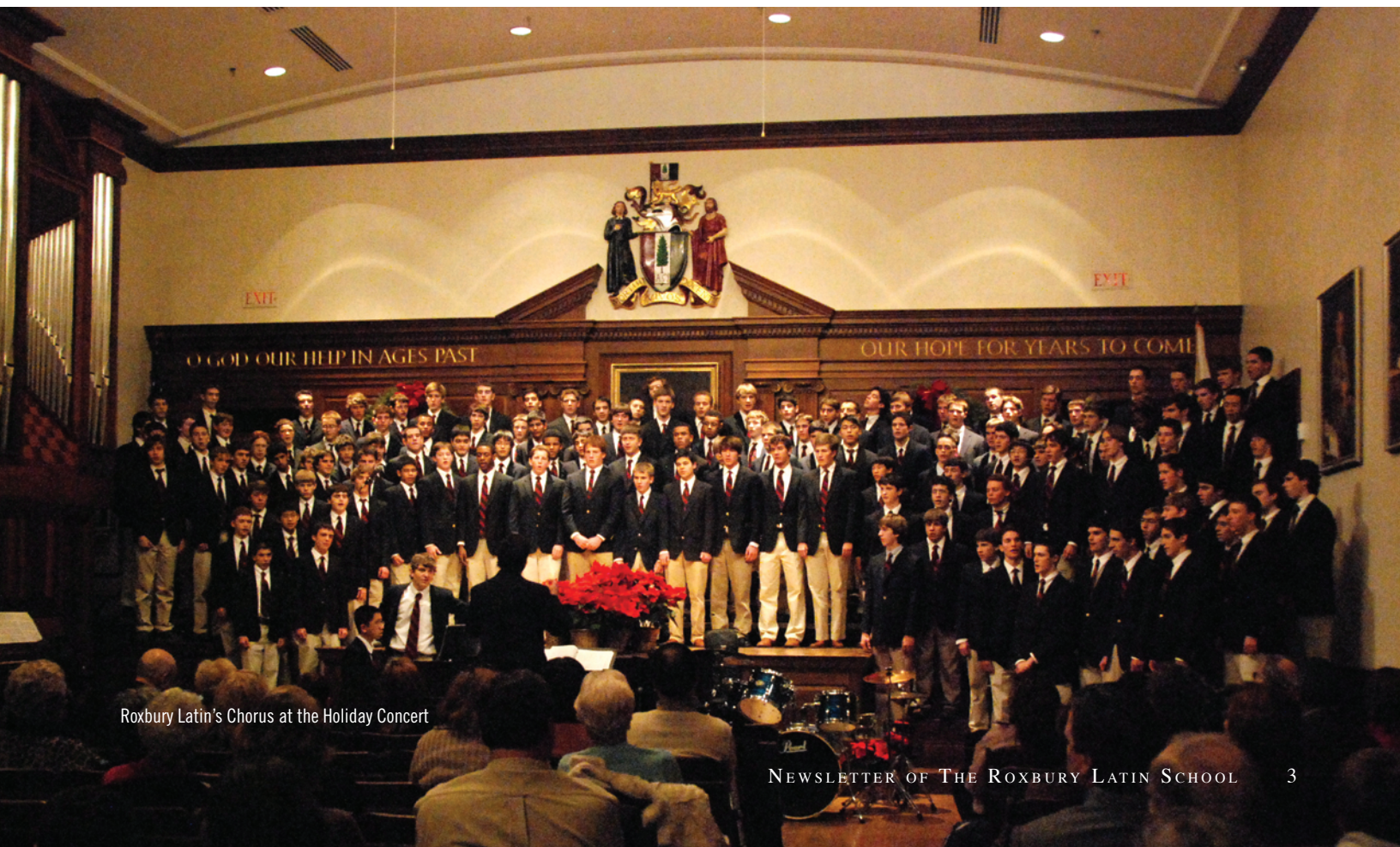
schoolboy generalist and do all we can (and sometimes it ain't easy) to ensure that boys have the opportunity to participate in a broad range of options. The other is to enlist high status, influential boys in the venture. One of my first goals at R.L. was to ensure, for example, that varsity captains sang; in my third year I believe that I had all but three of these opinion shapers singing. Second is to provide talented, committed, charismatic leadership, so that even if initially boys are not drawn to the singing, they will be drawn to the person responsible for making the singing happen. We are blessed to have one such man in Rob Opdycke, and he followed other talented pied pipers like Danny Lichtenfeld and Ethan Sperry. Part of the successful balance the director must strike is between that which is artistically challenging and illuminating and that which

is fun. We also have a responsibility as a school to present on a regular basis fine musicians of all sorts who define excellence in this realm and inspire our boys to aspire to even greater musical heights. Third is to sustain a tradition across classes and even generations of schoolboys that suggests the healthiest kind of fraternity. In that way boys, who already through the Glee Club are exposed to one of the broadest cohorts of singers from various classes (by the time a Glee Clubber graduates he will have sung with seven classes of boys), have a link with generations of R.L. singers, many of whom join the current choral forces on stage at the Holiday Concert and Senior Concert to sing "The Founder's Song."

Why is singing a good thing for boys? Singing, and especially choral singing, provides another kind of team experience:

the whole business is more satisfying when everybody does his part. With most choral pieces relying on four different vocal parts, each boy and each part contributes to a magical collaboration that results in pleasing harmonies, complex counterpoint, and artistic creativity. Because usually in a chorus an individual is relatively anonymous, one can dare to offer whatever tuneful voice he has to the venture without fear of embarrassment (a cardinal sin for adolescent boys!). Given the "game day" goals of most successful choral programs, boys are always working toward improvement and refinement—anxious, of course, to offer their good work for the enjoyment of an audience. Our boys, in particular, love a challenge. Especially during the middle school and high school years it is a pleasure for boys to offer this

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Roxbury Latin's Chorus at the Holiday Concert

very public expression of themselves as they in turn bring joy to their parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, friends, and strangers. As we know from team sports, boys also don't mind dressing in the "uniform," representing their school, reveling in their kinship, and, especially if they are "collaborating" in a concert with another unsuspecting school chorus, "winning" the artistic battle! We also know that certain boys enjoy the spotlight more and are inclined to be tapped for solos. When that happens there is a heartening sense of support and admiration that comes from the rank and file singers, and the soloists develop a performing confidence that will serve them well beyond the choral stage.

Finally, boys who sing can do it for the rest of their lives. Even when men in their thirties can no longer play football or basketball or soccer or hockey because their knees are wrecked or their hips are wobbly, they can sing. This fifty-something correspondent is a case in point. The first male chorus I was part of was in my McKinley Junior High School seventh grade when a brilliant music teacher had the good sense to capture us before we were jaded and offer a repertoire that "only" boys could sing (you can imagine a fair share of sea

chanties, spirituals, and football fight song medleys!). The most searing male choral experience came later at Amherst when at freshman orientation I was floored by

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a performance one day by the Zumbyes, a funny, entertaining 12-man a cappella group, and the next by the all-male Amherst College Glee Club, who, 70 singers strong, opened a welcoming concert with the most inspiring, masculine, spine-tingling version of the National Anthem that I had ever heard. I knew both that I had come to the right place and that I wanted to be part of the magic of those two groups. I went on to direct both groups and male choral singing has been part of my life ever since. Currently I have the pleasure of directing The Sly Voxes, a motley collection of singers of different vintages—some

of whom were my very own students at R.L.—and serving as the associate conductor of Mastersingers USA. The latter group consists of 100 men (mainly who had sung at Amherst and the University of Wisconsin/Eau Claire where our director, Bruce McInnes, primarily taught) strewn across the United States (and a few even farther flung) who assemble for an intense weekend of rehearsing and performing each summer, and which tours every few years, as we will for two weeks this summer to the Baltic States. Through that group I have the most compelling example of how singing can continue to draw men together, in spite of other commitments and priorities, throughout their lives.

In the 1980s, Carol Gilligan inspired feminists to consider women *In A Different Voice*. In conscientious boys' schools, educators ought always to be concentrating on ensuring that boys who are emerging as people, as thinkers, as commentators find their own voices, as well. Thanks to R.L.'s long-standing choral tradition, our boys have consistently found their voices and what a joyful noise they have made!

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