

# ARTS for Youth SPOTLIGHT

## Highlands Youth Ensemble filled with joy of music

The Highlands Youth Ensemble is the Mountain Empire Children's Choral Academy's select mixed choir for singers in grades nine through 12, and changed male voices in eighth grade. The ensemble was formed in 2002 by former Artistic Director, Beth Perkinson McCoy, after "graduating" East Tennessee Children's Choir singers asked her to start a high school group so they would not have to stop singing together.

There are 50 singers in HYE. Jane Morison, director, chose four for A! Magazine to interview: Daniel Lee (tenor), Natalie Lugo (soprano), Nathan Mauger (bass) and Mary Nerren (soprano).

All four began with piano lessons. "Although I didn't necessarily enjoy piano lessons at first, music and piano slowly grew into something that I loved," Daniel says.

"Our singers are passionate about choral music, and they frequently suggest repertoire they have sung in other choirs, or heard other ensembles perform. Some of them also serve as section leaders who can teach the music to the other singers, and they all ask wonderful questions and give musical suggestions. In many ways directing them is like directing a group of young choral directors," Morison says.

Music and HYE are a large part of these teens' lives.

"HYE is a blast! I have met so many fantastic and talented people and had so many amazing opportunities in HYE that I never would have had otherwise (like singing in Carnegie Hall). Music is a way to express myself. I love playing piano for my friends and family, and music helps me become closer to Christ, those around me and myself," Daniel says.

Natalie says, "I remember music always being a part of my life, and I could not imagine life without music. We grew up listening to great music and attending symphony concerts from a very young age. I started piano lessons when I was 5, and then at age 6 I began violin. I now also play the cello. I have sung in MECCA choirs since fifth grade, and choir was very quickly deemed my favorite activity.

"Music is a language – one that can eloquently communicate our emotions and the deepest of ideas. Every culture has used music to express both extreme pain and overwhelming joy, bring healing, convey hope and impart peace. Choral music ties great texts with the language of music, resulting in a form of music that is especially rich and powerful, and that touches its hearers in a profound way. As singers, we have the privilege of performing on the most intimate of instruments — our own voices, and moreover, our entire beings."

Nathan concurs, "Being in HYE is like having another family. Everyone is so close to each other, and the atmosphere is just amazing. I've made lifelong friends in HYE, which I am so grateful for. There's also no real way to describe how I feel when I'm singing beautiful masterpieces with my friends. I almost feel like I'm soaring through the skies. That's the kind of effect that I feel when singing in such a talented, close-knit choir.

"Music is a huge part of my life. It's an outlet, it's how I express myself, it's how I can connect to other people. It has allowed me to do all of those things. HYE has meant the world to me. Whenever I am feeling some emotion, whether it be joy, pain or sadness, I can express it through choral music. We have much repertoire, and there are songs for every person that are each feeling something different."

Mary says, "Being in the Highlands Youth Ensemble is such an honor to me. There's nothing quite like coming together with your peers from all different backgrounds and making beautiful music together. I am so blessed to have been able to sing both for our community and in such exciting places when we travel."

The group has performed at the American Choral Directors Association Southern Division Conference, Carnegie Hall and the Festival of the Aegean. The group was one of only 16 choirs chosen out of 106 who auditioned to sing for ACDA. This spring, in addition to their normal repertoire, the group joins the Symphony of the Mountains and other choirs to perform Dan Forrest's "Requiem for the Living."

Daniel is 16 years old and homeschooled. He lives in northeast Tennessee and is the son of Dane and Cristy Lee. He also likes writing techno music, drawing cartoons and playing video games in his spare time. He isn't

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