

# MECCA has long history with Biltmore

Mountain Empire Children's Choral Academy has a long history performing at Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina. It began when Beth McCoy (former artistic director) took a handbell choir to perform there, and the Biltmore staff invited her to bring her choir. After that invitation, she started taking the MECCA choirs.

"I think they keep inviting us back because the kids do such a beautiful job singing and also have such beautiful behavior," says Jane Morison, director. "I always tell them that they are Biltmore employees for the evening and that as such they are ambassadors for the estate. They behave with dignity going to and from the house, as well as inside the house. They also respond graciously when guests compliment them."

*'It's like singing inside a Christmas card'*

The East Tennessee Children's Choir and Highlands Youth Ensemble have both performed for the Candlelight Christmas Evenings since 2003. This year marks their 16th consecutive year. Singers from the Highlands Youth Ensemble have also performed in Biltmore's Antler Hill Village and were invited to perform during the summer. In July 2012, they sang for a conference, and W.A.V. Cecil, the grandson of George and Cornelia Vanderbilt (builders of Biltmore) was there. "We sang patriotic music, and I am proud to say our singers received a standing ovation before their performance was over," says Morison.

Biltmore restricts the group to 25 singers at a time for each of their two performances. MECCA can take half of the Highlands Youth Ensemble and less than one-third of the combined East Tennessee Children's Choir and Emory, Virginia Children's Choir. Morison's primary criterion is the balance of vocal parts. She also considers seniority, attendance and attitude. She says that it is a very long evening for the younger singers.

"Performing at Biltmore is like singing inside a Christmas card," she says. "We usually have our performances at a time in our season when

we have already had multiple concerts. So for us, it's like an end-of-season party with performances interspersed. It is also an incentive for our singers to be chosen, so the group that goes is happy to be there, and they really have great performances. We encourage our younger singers to stay in our choirs, and they will certainly get to go at least once in their MECCA careers."

The choir members also consider singing at Biltmore an incentive.

"It is a beautiful place, and I love watching all the wonderful people. It is a beautiful experience," says Luke Cottrill.

"When singing at the Biltmore (house), we have the opportunity to share our music with a very different

audience than normal, including people from all over the region and from various backgrounds. So many people walk by the Winter Garden as we sing, and many will stop to watch and even record us. Often patrons will stop us to tell us how much they were blessed by the sound of children's voices drifting through the house as they toured.

"The beautifully decorated Biltmore House is stunning in itself with all the Christmas trees and flickering candles. But music really sets the atmosphere, and it is an honor to be providing that and exciting to be a part of the whole festive setting," says Natalie Lugo.

"Performing at Biltmore was a once in a lifetime experience. There was nothing like singing under a huge Christmas tree and decorations in a legendary mansion with so many people watching. You just truly feel the Christmas spirit. I also loved touring the Biltmore while drinking hot chocolate with my friends. If I could go back and do it all over again I truly would," says Isiah Porter (alumnus of the choir).

The group performs songs from their holiday concerts plus familiar traditional Christmas songs. They receive an honorarium from Biltmore. "As a



**East Tennessee Children's Choir singers perform at Biltmore Estate, Asheville, North Carolina.**

small non-profit we really appreciate any monetary offering," Morison says.

MECCA's holiday season includes performing with the Symphony of the Mountains Dec. 1 and 2 at 3 p.m. The Dec. 1 concert is at the Eastman Employee Center, Kingsport, Tennessee, and Dec. 2, they perform at the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, Abingdon, Virginia.

The Highlands Youth Ensemble performs a concert featuring Vivaldi's "Glo-

ria," at Gray United Methodist Church, Gray, Tennessee, Dec. 8 at 3 p.m. The choirs join the Johnson City Symphony Orchestra and East Tennessee Ballet Academy's performance of "The Nutcracker" Dec. 8 at 7:30 p.m. in Seeger Chapel, Milligan College, Johnson City, Tennessee. MECCA's Christmas concert is held Dec. 15 at 7:30 p.m., at State Street United Methodist Church, Bristol, Virginia.

For more information about MECCA, visit [www.meccacademy.org](http://www.meccacademy.org).