ELEMENTARY HARMONIES SECOND TO NONE

NY TIMES

ELEMENTARY HARMONIES SECOND TO NONE

By TOM CALLAHAN

Published: March 9, 1986

* FACEBOOK
* TWITTER
* GOOGLE+
* EMAIL
* SHARE
* [PRINT](http://www.nytimes.com/1986/03/09/nyregion/elementary-harmonies-second-to-none.html?pagewanted=print)
* REPRINTS
* [](http://www.nytimes.com/adx/bin/adx_click.html?type=goto&opzn&page=www.nytimes.com/yr/mo/day&pos=Frame4A&sn2=72270860/53be7632&sn1=5a19c592/eb50b8e1&camp=FoxSearchlight_AT2015-1977431-Dec&ad=Joy_NYT_120x60_trailer_PG13_XMAS.jpg&goto=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Efoxmovies%2Ecom%2Fmovies%2Fjoy%3Futm%5Fsource%3DNYTIMES%26utm%5Fmedium%3Dpaid%26utm%5Fcontent%3Dmain%26utm%5Fcampaign%3Djoy)

EVERY Wednesday evening, long after the final classes of the day have been dismissed, the deserted corridors of the Springhurst Elementary School in Dobbs Ferry echo with the sounds of lush three-part harmonies as the best elementary school vocal group in the United States prepares for its first national appearance.

In the green-painted second-floor room of choral director George Swietlicki, the Harmonaires stand at perfect attention, hands clasped behind their backs, in a neat semicircle around Mr. Swietlicki, intently watching his hand signals as they sing.

While the 25 students, aged 9 to 11, often break out in giggles or laughter when they're off tune, Mr. Swietlicki never stops admonishing and encouraging them. ''You've got to get it right the first time,'' he told them on a recent Wednesday. ''You're performers, that's your job.''

Another job of a completely different nature was being done in a classroom several doors away as 24 parents met over coffee to discuss how to raise the money needed to send the Harmonaires to Anaheim, Calif., in April. When the group was selected as the best elementary school vocal group last fall by the National Music Educators Association, it won the distinction of being the only elementary school unit chosen to perform at the association's annual conference.

The conference, to be held at the Anaheim Convention Center from April 9 to 12, will feature performances by 60 groups from around the country, most representing high schools and colleges. The Harmonaires was the only group chosen from New York State.

So far, the parents' group has raised $7,500 of the $13,000 cost of the California trip by using a variety of fund-raising methods, from raffles to direct- mail appeals to fliers placed in the mailboxes of all 3,200 Dobbs Ferry households during the first week of January. The Harmonaires are also performing at benefit concerts this month; one was scheduled at the Dobbs Ferry American Legion Post 1048 last week and another will be given at a flea market to be held at the Dobbs Ferry Middle School on Saturday.

In addition, the group has been added to the bill of performers appearing at the Paramount Center in Peekskill on March 22. Supporters are planning to solicit contributions for the group during the intermission of that performance.

''We're a small community, but we're really seeing both the parents and the community pull together to help these kids,'' said Larry DeFranza, whose 11-year-old daughter, Kristen, is in the group. Mr. DeFranza, along with Karen Hamborski, mother of 10-year-old Steven, are serving as informal chairmen of the organizing efforts.

Mr. Swietlicki, who was trained as a concert pianist at the Vienna Academy of Music, created the Harmonaires five years ago. All of the 400 elementary students at Springhurst School are involved in the chorus, with Mr. Swietlicki choosing ''the best and those willing to take part'' for the Harmonaires. While membership is typically limited to fourth and fifth graders, sixth graders are involved with the California trip because they were on the tape, made last spring, judged to be the best by the music educators.

That tape, according to Mr. Swietlicki, was judged anonymously along with ''hundreds of entries'' nationwide. ''This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing for these kids,'' he said. ''It's unusual for kids at this age to be so good. But even so, when I got the letter saying we'd won, I thought I'd faint.''

For most of the Harmonaires, though, the excitement of the California trip seems to stem as much from a planned visit to Disneyland as it does from singing before a national audience.

''It's going to be fun going to California,'' said 11-year-old Emily Fall.

''We'll be going to Disneyland because we're the best group in the world,'' 12-year-old Daniel Tarplin boasted breathlessly.

Krista Halpin, a sixth grader, wouldn't go that far, but conceded that ''we're pretty good singers.''

As to the pressures of performing for a live audience, 11-year-old William Know dismissed it with the cool detachment of a professional. ''It's not really that hard,'' he said. ''We've done it before.''

In the two years the students have been working together they have assembled an array of songs that extends from a 16th-century Italian madrigal, to a Christmas song written by Mr. Swietlicki, to an upbeat rendition of the Marvelettes' top hit, ''Please, Mr. Postman.''

As to the difficulty of learning elaborate harmonies, 11-year-old Jeff Jee described the teaching method of Mr. Swietlicki. ''He gives us tapes and the parts that we have to sing and the sheet music. He shows us exactly what we have to do.''

While most members of the group are content with the success and celebrity of being a Harmonaire, at least one member views it as a stepping stone to something greater. ''I like singing and performing,'' said 11-year-old Linsay Firman. ''I want to be a performer and actress someday.''

A dozen hands shot instantly into the air at a recent practice when Mr. Swietlicki threw a quarter on the floor and bet the students they couldn't identify the next song in one note. According to many parents present, the intensity with which the Harmonaires approach music spills beyond the weekly sessions.

''The kids come home after school and practice,'' Karen Hamborski said. ''It ends up that their little brothers and sisters learn all the songs and then want to join the Harmonaires.''

At the end of the session, half of the Harmonaires crowded around Mr. Swietlicki and bombarded him with questions concerning the music they had just worked on. While proud of his students, Mr. Swietlicki was less than thrilled by their performance on this evening, noting that they shouldn't be making mistakes on songs they've done for so long.

He defended his tough-minded approach to teaching by saying that there was ''no excuse for wasting time.'' He then conceded with a smile, ''I love these kids. They make all the work involved in organizing this trip worthwhile.''

Those wishing to make a tax-deductible contribution to help the Harmonaires can get in touch with the group at the Springhurst Elementary School, Walgrove Street, Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. 10522, or call 693-1503.

Photo of the Harmonies (NYT/Alan Zale); Photos of George Swietlicki leading rehearsal