

HARD WORK, DISCIPLINE  
AND TOUGH LOVE HELP  
INNER-CITY CHORISTERS  
ACHIEVE LOFTY GOALS

IT IS FRIDAY AFTERNOON AT the Choir Academy of Harlem. Leaning against a grand piano, director Walter Turnbull surveys the bleacher of boys in the school

gym. A big, barrel-chested man in suit pants and suspenders, dress shirt and tie, he exudes a starchy, old-world formality mixed with the sternness of a country preacher.

"There's too much talking," Turnbull bellows, eyeing the boys sternly. He scans the rows, then points.

"Who's missing there? David? This is a problem for me because David is never dependable," he snaps. "I don't care if you sing like the angel Gabriel," he adds with agitation. "If you can't be depended on, what good

# THE BOYS CHOIR

BY ANDREA BARNET

# OF HARLEM

are you?" Turnbull's fingers sail along the piano keys and the boys begin to sing.

"Focus, please!" he barks. The 40 boys are working on Handel's *Messiah* for a concert they will give in two days, one of more than a hundred they perform each year. In addition to classical music, their eclectic repertoire includes gospel and spirituals, Gershwin show tunes, Duke Ellington jazz, Scott Joplin ragtime and a pop medley.

"Stop!" Turnbull shouts suddenly. "It really sounds kind of wimpy, boys. Some of you aren't taking this very seriously."

The youngest boys are fourth-graders. Some still have baby fat. They stand rod straight, as they have been taught, arms at their sides, looking earnest beyond their years in burgundy ties and vests, gray pants and white dress shirts—the school uniform.

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD HOWARD**

Before performing, the director and the choir meditate (top right) and later conclude the concert with a rousing gospel.

"Fortissimo!" Turnbull shouts exuberantly. "Very good soprano!" He sings a few bars and the boys repeat. Suddenly he hurls out his arms. "I want a deeper sound," he cries. "That's what makes the Boys Choir of Harlem different."

What makes the Boys Choir of Harlem different is not just their sound. It is an educational philosophy that stresses discipline, hard work and responsibility as well as musical mastery—what Turnbull calls a classical education. "A choir is a good starting point for building character," he says. "Since the 14th century, choirs have been used to educate boys. What I am doing is adapting that concept to a 20th-century inner-city model.

"What we're trying to teach these kids is to take responsibility for themselves," he adds. "I say to them, 'To be successful, you must work, you must be responsible for your own education. If you don't do it, who will?'"

Turnbull speaks from experience. Reared in a fatherless, financially strapped family in rural Mississippi, he overcame a substandard segregated school education to graduate from the state's Tougaloo College. In 1966, he moved to New York to earn his master's degree at the Manhattan School of Music. He dreamed of a career as an operatic tenor and landed several roles, but ultimately found theater work too erratic and racial barriers in the opera world insurmountable. Eventually, he took a position teaching music at a junior high school. Full of energy and ideas, and with religious roots since childhood, he also volunteered as music coordinator at a Harlem church.

Turnbull's love of music soon inspired him to start a youth choir. In 1968, on a Saturday afternoon, 20 boys came to the basement of Ephesus Church for the first rehearsal. Early on, the sweet, angelic sound of the boys choir was greeted with enthusiasm. But the brutal realities of being poor and black and living in the inner city were never far from the rehearsal room. For many boys, crime and drugs were more familiar than bicycles or schoolbooks. Most came from families on some type of public assistance. Some had fathers they had never seen, or brothers in jail. Few had ever had a man they could look up to.

Incorporating the choir as a nonprofit organization in 1974 increased donations and enabled Turnbull to address these issues with counseling and tutoring programs. The



Walter Turnbull (left) teaches voice at summer camp; (above) Christian Jackson, front, and Stephen Hill listen attentively.

choir grew in size and artistic achievement. But each year promising boys slipped through the cracks, their progress undermined by inadequate schooling and mean streets.

Turnbull's solution, after many years of struggle, was the establishment in 1987 of a special school for members of the choir. Part of the New York public school system, the academy offers a rigorous education combined with conservatory-quality artistic instruction for grades 4 through 12. (A girls choir was started in 1979 and girls were admitted to the academy in 1993.)

Today, that modest ensemble of 20 boys has grown into an internationally acclaimed choir that boasts 250 members and has performed around the world, including concerts in Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Israel and eight tours in Europe. The choir has sung at the White House for the past four Presidents, at the 50th-anniversary celebration of the United Nations and for Pope John Paul II's sunrise mass in Central Park. It was the subject of an Emmy Award-winning television documentary, featured on two Grammy-winning albums and the recipient of President Clinton's 1997 National Medal of the Arts award. It is a success story with few parallels. Yet, during a break in a recent rehearsal, Turnbull demurs. "There are no miracles here."

As the rehearsal gets rolling again, Turnbull's concentration is palpable. He raises his hand. Silence. Then the sound of violins plies the air, followed by the first seraphic strains of the *Messiah* from the throat of a soloist. The notes flutter and rise, then suddenly the room is filled with music as the rest of the choir joins in, their voices weaving a complicated fugue, building into soaring columns of pure sound.

"Bravo!" Turnbull cheers, at the end of the first passage. "That's it. That's good!"

When you step from the subway at 125th Street and 8th Avenue, you enter the heart of Harlem. Boarded-up brownstones share the block with secondhand furniture shops, small grocery stores, seedy bodegas. Street vendors fringe the sidewalk. Door stoops are edged with debris.

Walk two blocks north, however, and the scene changes. At the corner of 127th and Madison sits a modern building with polished linoleum floors and sleek tiled walls, crayon-colored stairwells and spacious classrooms. Home to the boys choir since 1993, it feels like a refuge.

A hall door swings open on a typical school day, revealing a room full of boys wearing headphones and practicing keyboarding. Next door, students wielding drumsticks

tap out rhythms on rubber pads, creating a patter like rain on a roof. Down the hall, ninth-graders struggle with the German pronunciation for Brahms' "Zigeunerlieder" (gypsy songs). Theory, composition, sight reading, voice and more are also part of the music instruction, which lasts 90 minutes a day. Academic subjects include math, science, history, English and computer class. Each day ends with a choir rehearsal that runs from 2:30 to 6:30.

Turnbull's theory is that music can lift people above particular circumstances and inspire the heart. "To change behavior and bad attitudes," he says, "this is where we need to be—inside the heart."

Recalling an 11-year-old's comment after rehearsing a passage from a German opera, Turnbull adds, "They feel it. He said, 'Oh, Dr. Turnbull, the Gluck is so beautiful, it just gets to your heart.' If something reaches them that way, they will return to it."

While music is the motivation, the road to success for these boys is paved with tough love and unrelenting discipline. Conformity is the rule at the choir, hard work the currency.

"There is a Boys Choir of Harlem way of doing things," says Turnbull. "We want our kids to carry themselves in a dignified way, to be concerned about how they look and how they dress. We want them to feel good about themselves. There's a way to act in public, and at table, a code of manners just like any mom or dad would want. We take on that role because in so many instances kids come to us without any sort of social awareness."

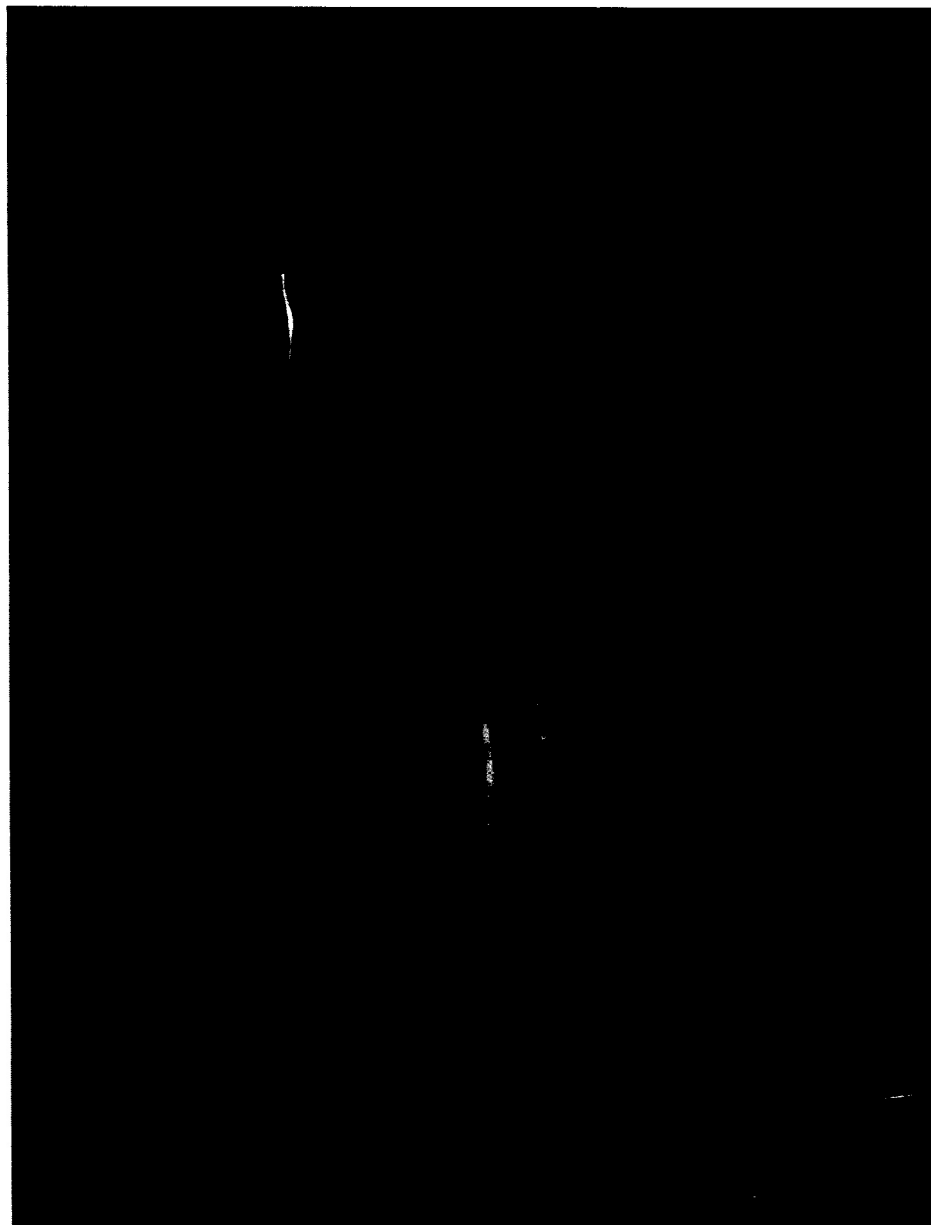
The choir's mandate is to "reinvent lives" and give boys a "chance to shed that former skin," says Frank Jones, head of the counseling department. The process starts at summer camp, during a three-week retreat to the rolling hills and bowered walkways of the Skidmore College campus in rural Saratoga Springs, New York.

It is 8:30 on an August morning. In a cool, dew-sodden meadow, worlds away from the blistering summer streets and illegally tapped fire hydrants of central Harlem, about a hundred inner-city boys, dressed in shorts and nylon jackets, break into jumping jacks. They run in place, shaking out their arms until they dangle.

An hour later, the group assembles in a small auditori-

um for voice exercises. Dr. T, as the choristers call Turnbull, moves through the rows, tilting his head slightly, listening intently to each voice. He touches his hand to the back of one boy, straightening his posture. He smooths a collar, adjusts a shirt, mothering as he moves down the line. Sometimes he leans in so close, his ear nearly brushes a singer's face. Suddenly, his hand thumps down on the head of a boy who isn't projecting. "Why aren't you singing tall?" he chides. He grins at him devilishly, as if to say, I caught you, I caught you unprepared. The rigorous musical training is the blueprint, but the lessons imparted apply to every aspect of the boys' lives.

After lunch and a swim, 60 boys assemble for choreog-



Accompanied by his father, Clark, fourth-grader Chandler Higgins walks along Harlem's East 127th Street to the Choir Academy.



the end, the boys give them a standing ovation. Turnbull steps to the stage and compliments the boys on how well they've spruced themselves up. He praises them for refraining from hooting, "unacceptable at a music concert," he tells them. Then, abruptly, he stops. Someone, it seems, has rustled a program. Spying the perpetrator, he orders him forward. He's a young, pudgy boy with glasses. As punishment, Turnbull orders him to sing a hymn. The boy opens his mouth, stammers, but nothing comes out. "Go on," Turnbull exhorts. "Sing! Sing!" As the others file out, they seem unfazed. Clearly it's a moment of public mortification most know firsthand.

But if Dr. T is a formidable disciplinarian, he is also playful and very loving. During a rehearsal he clowns around, miming a slouchy character en route to his seat. If the boys reach a high note especially well, he'll call out gleefully, "Don't goose me!" A student who recently made the national honor society is singled out. "James," Turnbull says proudly, "you knew you could do it, didn't you?" He wraps his arm around the boy's head, chucking his chin affectionately.

"When I first came in the ninth grade," says Rosson Cundiff, a tall, self-possessed young man with a crinkly-eyed smile who now attends Virginia Union University, "everyone tried to scare me about Dr. Turnbull. But I love him. He's the most dignified person I've ever known. He's always got his head high, no matter what. Everyone makes mistakes: he taught me that. You

own up to your mistakes, then you move on. But you keep your head up. You have a commitment. You don't give up."

And they don't. When the choir tours, wake-up calls are at 6 A.M. Sometimes in a single day, the boys rehearse, perform, meet and greet the audience, and board buses to another city, arriving after midnight. Classes, conducted by tutors, are held every morning in hotel conference rooms.

Camp is also a time to solidify the list of hopefuls for the touring choir. "It's really about how hard you work," says 15-year-old Matthew Gadsden, a member of the performing choir. "If you always give your energy on stage, if your schoolwork is good, if you don't miss rehearsals, you'll get picked."

Only certain types of boys can take the pressure. The choir tries to audition every third-grade boy in the academy's school district, as well as many older children—approximately 3,000 each year. Of these, fewer than 150 make it. No formal musical training is required.

In the evening, after dinner, there is a magnificent Schubert piano concert performed by two of the teachers. At

The auditions at P.S. 197 in Harlem begin moments after

the morning school bell. Frank Jones, tall and athletically built, stands before a class of third-graders. "I'm going to give you the opportunity to demonstrate your musical talent," he tells them. "I'm going to ask you to sing. Now, no Puff Daddy, no Brandy," he adds knowingly.

For the next few hours, groups of three and four boys are summoned to the hall. They wear Day-Glo sneakers, oversized shirts, baggy pants. Their faces are eager, open. Many have big new teeth, gaps where others are missing. Jones stands them in a row, then demonstrates three simple notes. "Ah, ahh, ahhh," he sings.

One by one, each child is told to mimic what he hears. Some giggle, and one won't sing—he smiles shyly, twining his legs. A second starts to moonwalk as he waits. Jones stops him and gently sends him back into class.

Each audition takes about two minutes. Jones scribbles a notation on his clipboard and it's over. He is looking for potential, nothing more.

The next step takes place at an evening informational meeting for parents the following week. More than 15 letters of invitation have been sent out. Five parents—all women—show up. Four have never heard of the choir. As they sit listening to the speaker, however, they become visibly excited.

One of the parents, a handsome woman with braided hair, raises her hand, her face concerned. Her three children sit beside her, fidgeting. "What about costs?" she asks.

There is an annual choir membership fee of \$475, the woman is told. And the boy's family must buy his uniform. The rest is provided. Choir families don't have to have much money, and most, in fact, don't. Seventy percent are single-parent households headed by women; 55 percent live below the poverty level.

"If a parent shows up at this meeting, that's a good sign," Jones explains later. "What we're looking for is some sort of support." The choir also looks for extroverted children. "In most schools, these are the troublemakers," he adds. "But these are the kids with fire and energy."

The carrot that keeps the boys motivated is the glory of performance. "After the show," says recent graduate Rosson Cundiff, "to see someone smiling, and then have them come up to you and say that you made them really happy, that makes you feel really good. Once you get that feeling, you don't want to let it go."

Even so, despite the choir's best efforts, some boys still don't make it. "It's hard," says Jones. "We lose some. Even the most dedicated and musically gifted youth are still at risk. These kids live with the knowledge that taking to the streets

could happen to any of us. Our message is that you don't have to succumb to these pulls."

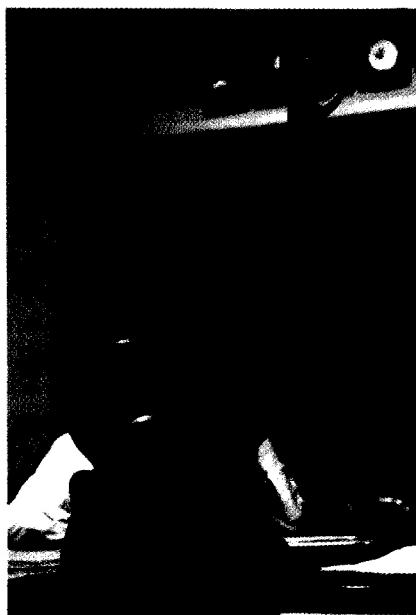
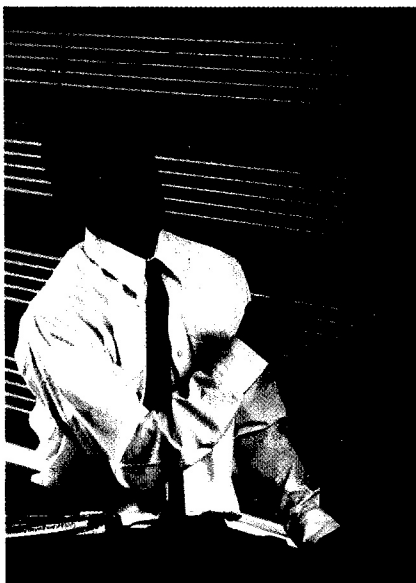
To this end, on school holidays, the academy becomes a community center to help keep the kids off the streets. Scheduled activities address a range of social issues, from substance abuse to responsible sexual behavior.

On Veterans Day, a reformed drug addict—a young black actor the boys recognize from his role in the 1992 movie *Malcolm X*—comes to perform. Pacing the starkly lit stage, dressed in baggy pants and a stocking cap, he reenacts his dead-end life as a junkie. He tells them about squandering every cent to score a fix, about living filthy and homeless in a subway entrance and nearly losing his fingers to infection. "Never think that getting high is an option," he cautions them.

The counselors work diligently to break down images that link drugs and violence with masculinity. In the boys' milieu, explains Jones, "going to jail is held as the ultimate expression of manhood. At the choir we don't tolerate fighting. We're trying to supplant the community of the streets."

For a 14-year-old named David and many other boys, the choir is a second family. "Dr. Turnbull has been a father to me," David says. "My real father is locked up upstate."

For single mothers like Yolanda Toby, the choir provided a support system during the difficult years of her son's adolescence. "Kids don't come with manuals," jokes Toby. "You need to talk to somebody. Frank was always



Kamel Carzan (top) and Barry Green-Hunt learn Dutch and music theory.



Eleventh-graders Jetaime McFadden and Hector Mendoza, Jr., engage in a momentary tête-à-tête in math class.

available. There were many times when I just called and cried. Frank always gave me a lot of insight. Plus he and Walter reinforced the values I was trying to teach my son."

"This place is about more than just the music," says Cundiff, who also grew up fatherless. "It's about being a decent human being."

The boys see the message reinforced by the alumni, 98 percent of whom go to college. They see it in the professions they enter, in their increasing mobility. They become teachers, doctors, lawyers; their lives expand far beyond the threshold of their old neighborhoods.

Surprisingly, only one percent pursue careers in music. "You really have to want music," explains Turnbull. "It doesn't pay anything, and in this society it isn't revered."

Among the few who see music in their future is 15-year-old Kevin Miller, who wants to be a composer. He has already written his first symphony, and one summer he sang with New York's Lake George Opera orchestra, which also performed his *Symphony #1*.

Another chorister, Sean Guerrier, links the discipline of music to other professions. Sean wants to be a surgeon. When a visitor observes that medical school involves a lot

of difficult memorization, he answers without missing a beat: "Memorizing Vivaldi's *Gloria* is a lot of work, too."

One somber note in the choir's message of hope is the group's precarious finances. With no endowment and less than half its \$3 million annual budget covered by concert receipts, the choir depends on private donations, which must be raised each year. Sometimes finances are so tight the staff goes on four-fifths salary.

In many ways the choir is a victim of its own high profile. The polished performances "lead people to believe that the choir is rolling in dough," Turnbull says. "The fact is, it's an ongoing, day-to-day struggle."

It is a Sunday in December, the afternoon of one of the choir's most important concerts of the season. One hundred and ten boys are assembled backstage at Lincoln Center, where in an hour they will perform in Avery Fisher Hall with the New York Philharmonic orchestra.

The room is crowded. Near the door, trays of Chinese food are laid out on a table, the remains of a dinner the boys ate earlier. A woman from wardrobe fits two choir members who have jumped a jacket size. Boys tap their feet, smooth their hair. Most sit in their seats, talking. One



Garbed in red gown and ruff, worn for holiday performances, soprano Malquan King prepares Mozart's *Coronation Mass*.

pulls out a small pocket mirror. Another whispers into a walkie-talkie to a friend two rows back. A third furtively plays with a yo-yo. Turnbull gathers the sopranos around the piano for some quick voice exercises. Outside the open door, a boy with a handheld gadget steams a hangered white shirt he holds in the air. Another table is laid out with 50 black bowler hats draped with white gloves.

"Mr. Jones!" calls Turnbull, glancing at his watch. "I need time now. I need to gather my energy. I need everyone here to gather energy," he adds. "Soloists, I'll see you in my dressing room, please."

A bit later, looking dapper now in bow ties and blazers, the boys gather in the green room.

"The next voice I hear gets sent home," booms Jones. "Now I've asked twice for prayer places." There is silence. The boys form a large circle, cross their arms and take each other's hands. Turnbull, elegant in black tie and tux, joins the circle. Heads bow. "We thank you, God, for giving us the gift of voice," he says.

"Amen," respond the voices. Hands drop.

Turnbull walks down the line. He pats cheeks, offers

words of encouragement. "Smile," he says to one boy. "You sounded really good earlier," he whispers to another.

Minutes later they are backstage. Two boys creep up to the curtain and peer out. "There's my aunt right there!" whispers one. "I see my mother," hisses the other. Several horse around and exchange high-fives.

"This is a two-minute call," comes a voice from the intercom. The boys don't appear nervous, though several kick each other's shoes. Herman Shockley, who is 17, is the last in line. He has a broad animated face and is a bit of a cutup, a boy with enormous spirit. The signal is sounded and the boys begin filing onstage. Herman does an abbreviated shuffle, a quick truncated breakdance, stopping just a nanosecond before he steps into the lights.

Over the next two hours, the boys perform Monteverdi and Vivaldi, spirituals, Christmas carols and gospel music. They slip backstage and return in striped vests and bowlers, white-gloved hands pumping the air. They sing a ragtime medley, then strut to a lively Duke Ellington doo-wop, "It Don't Mean a Thing." They slip off-

stage again, returning in long red robes with ruffled white collars, the picture of pious choirboys. Another costume change, and they break into a jivey hip-hop for the last number. As the curtain falls, the choir gets its usual standing ovation. As always, the charm and musical virtuosity of the Boys Choir of Harlem have won every heart.

Much later, stage lights behind them, jackets returned to their racks, 110 tired boys file onto buses parked at the curb. They ride back to Harlem, past pawnshops and crime-ravaged housing projects and litter-strewn lots, to the Choir Academy. Near the back of the school, commuters on the rail lines pass overhead, shuttling back to the suburbs from the city, "seemingly oblivious of the lives underneath the rusty trestles. If [those] passengers only knew the joy of Harlem," Turnbull has written. "We are a song of hope. . . . We know that these children, who walk past drug dealers, murderers and prostitutes every day, can be anything they choose." ❧

Andrea Barnett lives in New York City and writes about the arts. Richard Howard has shot more than 50 stories for SMITHSONIAN.