

BY LEAH DENNISON

Tagg, She's It

Syracuse Children's Chorus mounts a concert in honor of their founder, Barbara Marble Tagg

Barbara Marble Tagg's charges have traveled the world, performed at Carnegie Hall and commissioned songs from some of America's most distinguished composers—all before graduating high school. The Syracuse Children's Chorus, which Tagg founded in 1981, comprises auditioned singers 8 to 17 years old and has become a model for other community-based youth choirs throughout the United States.

"We did a lot of historic work because we were one of the early choirs in the country," says Tagg. After 29 years as the artistic director, Tagg is passing the baton to a successor, the search for whom is under way. To celebrate her years of commitment, SCC is holding a concert in her honor, titled "Encore: A Tribute to Barbara Marble Tagg," on Saturday, March 6, 7:30 p.m., at Most Holy Rosary Church, 111 Roberts Ave.

Courtney Chiavara, vice president of the board of directors and an SCC alumna, has been coordinating the concert since last spring. She says it started with the question, "What can the alumni do to give back to the chorus and Dr. Tagg?" Since "an encore by nature is a tribute," Chiavara says, an alumni concert seemed a fitting answer. The performance will include current and former members, with representation from each class in SCC's history.

The closing piece, "My Own Song," is a sentimental tradition at SCC. "It's the first song that you learn in the chorus, and the last song you perform in May," Chiavara says. As a special treat, Crystal LaPoint, who wrote the piece for SCC in 1982, will be returning as the piano accompanist.

Tagg will conduct a few of the pieces in the concert, but many other details remain a secret to her. Some of it, after all, is a surprise. "I'm very excited about it," she says at her office in Crouse College, on the Syracuse University campus. "I can't wait to see what's going to happen." Tagg is an instructor in the Music Education department in SU's College of Visual and Performing Arts. She also is the conductor for the Syracuse University Women's Choir.

She is eager to catch up with the SCC alumni after the concert. "I can't wait to sit back and talk to them and hear the stories about what they're doing," she says. "Some of these children are 8 years old when they start, and then by the time they leave, they're 17. You watch them grow, and you always wonder what they go on and become. What do they do with their lives?"

She looks forward to finding out. "These children are bright, they are gifted. These are kids that are going to make a difference in the world."

Research reinforces Tagg's optimism. According to a 2009 study by Chorus America, child choristers—of which there

are 10.1 million in the United States—reap many mental, social and emotional benefits, including improved memory skills, discipline and self-esteem. Forty-five percent of parents whose children are in a choir—compared with 38 percent whose children are not—report that their child earns "all or mostly As" in math and 54 percent (versus 43 percent) excel in English and other language arts. Furthermore, 90 percent of educators agree that chorus "keeps some students engaged in school who might otherwise be lost."

The study also supports Tagg's belief that choral singing is "a lifelong art." An estimated 32.5 million adults participate in choral music today—up from 23.5 million in 2003. In the 1980s, there weren't many community-based children's choirs anywhere in the country. In fact, Tagg says, "You could count them on one hand."

The Syracuse Children's Choir "started at my kitchen table with a typewriter and a dream," Tagg says. That dream was to "give communities a vision of what the potential was for young singers—that they could share that stage with an orchestra, as equals in terms of artistry."

Music played a formative part in Tagg's own childhood; she began singing in choirs at age 5. "Mom and I used to go to concerts all the time," Tagg says. "I grew up listening to the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra; I went to every concert. I sang in church choirs and in school choirs. When I did All-City Chorus, that's when I decided I want to do what that conductor was doing."

Years later, a young Chiavara remembers a similar scene—this time, with Tagg as the conductor. "I remember watching Dr. Tagg when I was 7 years old, before I auditioned

for SCC," Chiavara recalls. "I remember saying to my mother, 'I want to do that. I want to sing for that lady.'"

Since its early days, the SCC has come a long way—and gone a great distance. Travel has been an integral part of the choristers' musical education, though, Tagg says, it's always with a purpose. "Not just traveling for traveling's sake." For example, when SCC went to Wales for their first international tour in July 1988. "I wanted to go because there were many children's choirs involved from all over the world, and it would give us a global view of what children do in choral singing," says Tagg.

She has made sure that her choir experiences not only new places, but new music. "Since the second year of the choir I've been premiering new music every year," she says. With four premieres scheduled for May's concert, "this year is no exception." The SCC has received recognition for its diverse repertoire, including the ASCAP Chorus America award for Adventurous Programming, both in 2002 and 2007.

"I think it's important to do many styles and many kinds of music, but always music of the highest quality," Tagg says. "For chil-

dren, only the best is good enough." And the best, says Chiavara, is what Tagg has consistently delivered.

"Working with Dr. Tagg helps you understand not only music, but emotions and making sense of life around you," she says. Tagg's legacy at SCC will be "her artistry, hard work and dedication to the children and the community."

Other former choristers share Chiavara's gratitude and respect for Tagg. There is even a Facebook group titled "I Love Barbara Marble Tagg!" "After June 1, when I have more free time, I'll have to go check it out," Tagg says with a laugh.

She has a few other items on her to-do list as well. "I have some writing I want to do, and I want to do more guest conducting," she says. "Also, more time to read, and adding exercise to the list would be a good thing." Tagg will still be plenty busy teaching on the faculty at SU. "The 'retirement' word is not in my vocabulary," she says. "I still have a lot of work to do."

And she is still loving every minute of it. "I get to make music every day. That's such a joyful thing to me."

Tickets for "Encore: A Tribute to Barbara Marble Tagg" will be available for \$18 on Saturday night at Most Holy Rosary Church. Advance tickets cost \$15 and are available by calling 478-0582, or online at www.syracusechildrenschorus.com. □



MICHAEL DAVIS PHOTO

A song in her heart: A tribute concert by the Syracuse Children's Chorus (below) for Barbara Marble Tagg, photographed inside Syracuse University's Crouse College, takes place this Saturday.

