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The more than 100 participants in the 2024 New England Pueri Cantores Youth Choir Festival held at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross on March 9 pose for a photo with Bishop Robert Reed. Pilot photo/Wes Cipolla

Cathedral hosts New England Pueri Cantores Youth Choir Festival

Wes Cipolla Pilot Staff [LOCAL](#) FRIDAY 15TH OF MARCH 2024

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BOSTON -- To Richard Clark, music director of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, few sounds are as joyful to hear as over 100 children singing in unison.

Clark got to hear that sound all day on March 9, when 108 young singers came to the cathedral for the New England Pueri Cantores Youth Choir Festival. After a day of rehearsal, the students sang a Mass celebrated by Bishop Robert Reed.

"It's been a real honor for me to be able to help pray and sing with you," Bishop Reed said at the end of Mass. "The 'Ave Verum (Corpus)' was spectacular. Thank you very much for

this honor."

He quoted the famous saying attributed to St. Augustine: "When we sing, we pray twice."

Pueri Cantores (literally "children singers" in Latin), the official student choral organization of the Catholic Church, provides religious education through the performance of sacred music. The singers came from schools and parishes from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Maine. Their repertoire on March 9 spanned centuries, from Gregorian chants to Bach and Mozart to living composers.

"Part of what we need to do here is model liturgy," Clark told The Pilot. "And part of the mission of Pueri Cantores is not just music, but it's about spiritual formation through sacred music."

Clark was the organist during the 2018 Pueri Cantores festival, held at St. Cecilia Parish in Boston. This was his first time playing the organ for the festival in the cathedral, which he called "a gorgeous place to make music." He said that performing in the mother church of the Archdiocese of Boston, with its stellar architecture and acoustics, would be inspirational for the students.

"You take a little bit of that back home to your parish," he said, "to bring some of that prayer and beauty back home."

The choir was conducted by Alfred Calabrese, director of music at St. Rita Parish in Dallas, Texas. It was his first time conducting a Pueri Cantores festival in Boston, and he told The Pilot that it was "wonderful" to be conducting in "such a historic and beautiful cathedral."

"These choirs are really well-prepared," he said. "They sound great."

The Archdiocese of Boston was represented by choirs from St. Agatha Parish in Milton, St. Columbkille Partnership School in Brighton, St. Paul's Choir School in Cambridge, and Mary Queen of Peace Parish in Medford.

"It's a pleasure, first of all, because not many other schools can do this," Tin Lam, an eighth grader at St. Paul's Choir School, told The Pilot.

Tin enrolled at St. Paul's when he was a sixth grader, and his love of singing "sprung immediately" from there.

"It's a way to praise the Lord and also it's a way to express oneself," he said.

The boys at St. Paul's rehearsed for a week to prepare for the festival. Tin said that the

school's typical repertoire, a heady mix of complex pieces by the likes of Vivaldi and Pergolesi, prepared them well.

"It's almost quite easy music to us," he said. "With this music, it's simmered down. It's fun to cool down a little bit."

Francesca Oddi, a member of the St. Agatha Parish Youth Choir and an eighth grader at St. Agatha School, felt more nervous than Tin, but also excited to perform in the "amazing" cathedral.

"It's very incredible having this opportunity because not that many people have the chance to do this," she told The Pilot. "So I'm very lucky. And also, it helps me have a better understanding of God."

Francesca said that she was confident in her "great director," St. Agatha Parish Music Director Julie Fay.

"We have been rehearsing for months and months, as has everybody here," Fay told The Pilot, "and it's really very exciting to see it happening, to be a part of it."

St. Agatha's Youth Choir entered the Pueri Cantores festival with Clark's encouragement. Fay explained that the choir did not have enough singers to enter in previous years, but due to a post-pandemic "rebuilding phase," the choir finally had 15 singers -- enough to perform at the festival. She said that the large size of the cathedral, and the mixed choirs, allow the students to learn a large-scale repertoire that they couldn't sing by themselves.

"We sing at St. Agatha's, which is a wonderful church and we love it," she said. "But it's really a different experience to be here in the cathedral."

It was the third Pueri Cantores festival for St. Columbkille Music Director Kiara Zani, and the second for three of her students.

"It was incredibly rewarding to see them feel comfortable in the massive cathedral and help the younger students feel right at home, too," Zani told The Pilot in a March 11 interview.

Zani added that she was "filled with gratitude" while watching her elementary and middle school students sing together.

"I am truly grateful for the support my school provides for our students to participate in the festival and Mass," she said. "They have helped us build this wonderful tradition and I look forward to making new memories next year."