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Youth Choral Academy members practicing with Bach Festival Conductor Helmuth Rilling.

BACH FESTIVAL

VOICES RISING

The Youth Choral Academy gives teens a chance to sing with the best in the world.

UO FRESHMAN LISA FORKISH REMEMBERS the moment that changed her life. The young chorister was singing in a performance of Johannes Brahms's imposing *German Requiem* at the UO's Oregon Bach Festival in 2001, and as the last notes of the seventh and final movement of the hour-long hymn of consolation faded, conductor Helmuth Rilling raised his hand one final time, seemingly suspending the echoes of the final chord in the air. For more than a minute, hundreds of listeners in Eugene's Silva Concert Hall held their breath, not daring to spoil the moment with applause. Standing in the alto section, gazing at Rilling silhouetted against the stage lights, Forkish felt tears streaming down her face.

"There was a hush over the entire hall," she recalls. "Rilling kept his hand in the air so long it was like we were all frozen in time. It's the only time in my life I could have had an out-of-body experience. I was standing there thinking that this was it for me—when I became a new musician and a new singer."

It's the kind of moment all musicians strive for—the culmination of weeks of study and rehearsal, years of practice, a lifetime of dedicated effort. But few have the opportunity to perform such a challenging choral-orchestral masterwork at the highest level, surrounded by some of the world's finest musicians. Even fewer achieve such an epiphany when they're only sixteen years old.

Forkish was then a member of the OBF's Youth Choral Academy, a group of young singers so highly trained and skilled that Rilling deemed them qualified to perform alongside the seasoned professionals in the Bach Festival chorus and orchestra—a rare opportunity for any young musician. Now in its fifth year, the YCA has given hundreds of teens, the vast majority from Oregon, this unique opportunity. Dozens of YCA participants have subsequently enrolled at the UO.

Rilling and OBF Executive Director Royce Saltzman had wanted to establish a youth choral program since the early 1970s. But it wasn't until 1998 that a grant from the Hult Foundation arrived to underwrite a one-year summer program for high-school-age youth. The grant allowed the festival to engage one of America's most celebrated youth choir directors, Anton Armstrong of Minnesota's St. Olaf College Choir. That first summer, singers from throughout

Lane County auditioned for eighty available slots.

What they found when they arrived at the UO's Barnard Hall dormitory for their weeklong stay looked less like a traditional music camp than a boot camp—what Saltzman and Academy Director Richard Clark considered the ideal training program for young singers. "We call this an 'academy' because there's not a lot of non-music-related fun and games," explains Clark, a UO associate professor emeritus of music. On a typical day last summer, after finishing breakfast at 8:30, Academy members took a forty-five-minute workshop in movement for singers (incorporating yoga and dance), followed by a class in vocal technique. Then after a quick lunch they regrouped for a rehearsal, then a lesson in musicianship skills (sight-singing, music history, music theory), then more rehearsal, dinner, then yet another rehearsal, and finally back at the dormitory for lights out at 10:45—a policy enforced by both staff members and sheer exhaustion.

The payoff is worth it, though, says Forkish, a three-year participant. In return for their intense effort, the students receive instruction and mentoring from the Bach Festival's singers and players from around the world, performers at the pinnacle of their professions, including guest artists such as singer Bobby McFerrin. "The kids get a chance to be active musically at such a high level and in a responsible way," explains Clark.

The exposure to professional standards can have a lasting impact on YCA participants. "I know I'd be barefoot and pregnant if not for YCA," says Rachel Wierichs, another three-summer participant who's now a UO junior. Impressed with the teaching at the Academy, Wierichs made the decision to teach music herself. She realized that if she wanted to do that, she'd have to hold herself to a higher standard than before, become a better musician, and get an advanced education. The winner of a scholarship to the UO, Wierichs is the first female in her family to attend college.

"Even though it's been three years since I've been in YCA," she says, "it still affects my life because even if I'm having a bad day in school, I feel like I owe so many people who are rooting me on," including Clark and Saltzman and the many friends she made in the Academy, several of whom sing with her in a UO

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choral ensemble, including Forkish.

When, at the Academy's conclusion, its participants perform in the Bach Festival's renowned Discovery Series and also in a culminating concert at the Hult Center, "their eyes are sparkling, their faces are bright," says Clark. "They're beautiful kids doing something they love."

If you have questions about the Youth Choral Academy, e-mail obfyca@oregon.uoregon.edu.

—BRETT CAMPBELL MS '96

OREGON BACH FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

This year's Oregon Bach Festival, June 25–July 11, will include more than fifty performances and involve nearly 700 performers.

Among the highlights:

June 25

Bach/*St. Matthew Passion*

July 2

Mozart/*Requiem*

July 3 and July 7

Baritone soloist Thomas Quasthoff in recital

July 5

Youth Choral Academy with guest conductor Maria Guinand of Venezuela

July 8

Bach/*Mass in B Minor*
Krzysztof Penderecki/*Flute Concerto*
and Beethoven/*Symphony No. 6*

July 11

Mendelssohn/*Elijah*

For more details about these performances or other aspects of the 2004 Oregon Bach Festival, go to oregonbachfestival.com or call 800-457-1486.