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# ‘Above all, our concern is to improve this world’

Ana Linda Ruiz, Choral Director

*Ana Linda Ruiz, director of the Schiller Institute Children’s Chorus in Ciudad Obregón, Sonora, Mexico, participated in the Schiller Institute’s 2003 Summer Camp, a children’s program held annually in Virginia. This interview was conducted at the conclusion of the camp season.*

**Fidelio:** On May 29, the Businessmen’s Council in the city of Mexicali, Baja California, announced that their festivities this year to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of Mexicali, would culminate with a great concert in mid-October, in the impressive Laguna Salada area of the Mexicali desert, with the participation of Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti, the Schiller Institute choruses, and the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico. How was the Schiller Institute chorus selected to participate in this important event?

**Ana Linda Ruiz:** First of all, the choruses that are going to participate are the three children’s choruses of the Schiller Institute of northwest Mexico, two from the state of Sonora—one from Ciudad Obregón, which I conduct, and the other from Hermosillo, led by Tania Pérez—plus the one from Mexicali, which is the one that was initially invited, and which is led by maestro Alejandro González, with Patricia Ortiz at the piano.

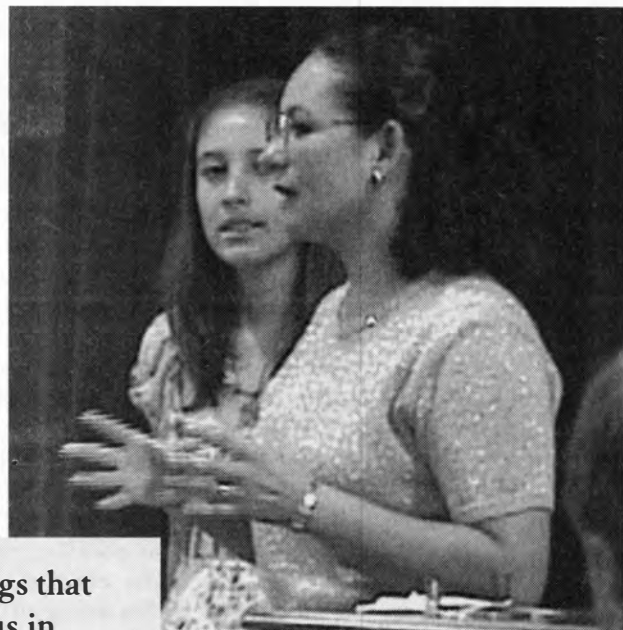
We were invited to participate because there is no other chorus in the entirety of northern Mexico which could represent the *bel canto* style in a worthy

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manner, at an event of this magnitude. We were invited to audition before music authorities who came from the capital. The choruses in combination have 70 members, and on the day of the concert, we are going to reinforce it with adults, bringing the total to 90. The audition before the three judges from Mexico City included several Classical choral pieces of our repertoire, such as the chorus of the Hebrew Slaves from Verdi’s opera *Nabucco*, called “Va Pensiero,” and also the “Ode to Joy” from the final movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. The judges were stunned by the choruses’ discipline and the singing technique the children displayed.

**Fidelio:** When were the choruses first launched?

**Ruiz:** Approximately 12 years ago. In



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the beginning, I started a chorus in Mexicali, with children of Schiller Institute members, but we issued an open invitation to the public at large. And nine years ago, I began the chorus in Ciudad Obregón, Sonora, where we also issued an open invitation to the public to join, along with children of Institute members. After the first concert, of course, the enthusiasm caught on, and the chorus grew to where we now have 35 children at the advanced level, and 15 at the beginner level.

In Hermosillo, the chorus is just two years old, and at this moment, has 20 children singing in it. And always, from the very beginning, the intention was to organize free concerts and to make parents aware of the importance of surrounding their children with Classical culture, with good music. And this was moving ahead, to the point that the parents, truly concerned about their children’s education, began to turn to our institution to register their children, so that, whether in Sonora or in Baja California, when one talks about the choruses, one is talking about the choruses of the Schiller Institute.

**Fidelio:** If there are no choruses in northwest Mexico, apart from those of

the Schiller Institute, and there weren't any before the Institute choruses were formed, where did the idea come from? And who trained you?

**Ruiz:** The Institute is part of the international movement of Lyndon LaRouche and his wife Helga Zepp LaRouche, the founder of the Schiller Institute. It is part of our goal, on an international level, to promote a cultural renaissance through Classical art. In the case of our country, we had the good fortune to have found the great singing maestro José Guadalupe Briano, a follower of the founder of the choral movement in Mexico, the Spanish educator Juan D. Tercero. He works with the *bel canto* technique with adults, and we have one of his best students, Alfredo Mendoza Mendoza, who is committed to developing the technique of *bel canto* singing directly with children. Maestro Mendoza has founded several choruses on the national level, and has worked for years with the Schiller Institute, going on international tours and promoting the formation of children's choruses across the nation. The chorus leaders in Mexicali and Hermosillo, as well as myself, are all students of Maestro Mendoza, and from the training he imparted to us, we made the decision to form our own choruses.

**Fidelio:** Did you go to study with him in Mexico City, or did you attend the classes he gave during his tours of the country?

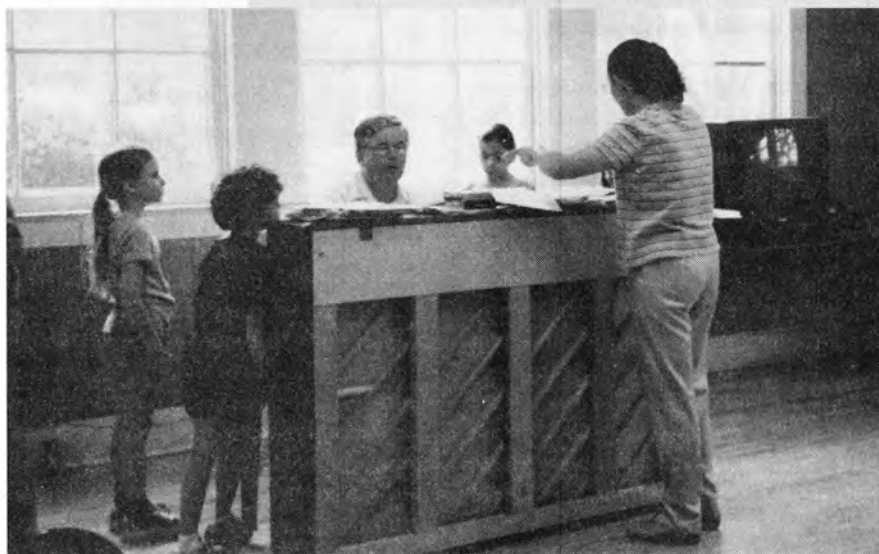
**Ruiz:** We often went to Mexico City. I was personally trained as part of a chorus of children that we had in Ciudad Obregón at the same time that he was giving classes, and a teacher who was a collaborator of his in Mexico City, Esthela Bastida, came to Ciudad Obregón and started a chorus, and that is when I began to train with her. When she left, I took over direction of the chorus, although I was only 14 years old at the time. At that point, we invited Maestro Mendoza to give courses in Sonora, and we also travelled to Mexico City, to observe the work he was doing with his group there, the Schola Cantorum.

**Fidelio:** I attended the closing festival at the Institute Day Camp this past summer, and the children with whom you had worked for a month demonstrated a superior quality, a sound that is hard to find even among established choruses. To what do you attribute the difference?

**Ruiz:** The difference is in the method, in helping children to discover the beauty of their own voices, that beauty which we all carry inside. It's very easy for a child to find this. The point is that the director must know the pedagogical tools to help the children discover this as soon as possible, and for the child to have fun doing so. The other point lies in how the children

**Fidelio:** Now, to form a chorus, one needs not merely to join together a group divided by voices and make it sing, but also the technique of *bel canto* requires a different concept. When one listens to the children's choruses around here, not just in Mexico but in the U.S. and throughout the world, they interpret polyphonic music paying attention only to the linear development of a more

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*Voice and instrument lessons, Schiller Institute summer camp, July 2003.*

are treated, the challenges which they must be presented with. You need a pedagogy for making tangible to the children those technical aspects of the *bel canto* method which, probably, in explaining it to an adult, one would use more scientific words or terms. But in the case of the children, they only have to do it. One need only orchestrate it, demonstrating the principle to them in practice.

or less agreeable melody. But the performance of the chorus you led in Virginia, which is not even an established chorus but a group of children who came together for just one month, they demonstrated a highly superior quality. How do you explain this?

**Ruiz:** First of all, it is the technical aspect that must be explained and made tangible to the children; this is important because it is the basis upon which they

are going to perform. This includes correct breathing as well as the correct formation of sound. And once this is achieved, and the children understand, for example, what a “head voice” is, then you can put together a musical piece, putting all they have learned into practice. They have the score in front of them and they sing the piece, but if one limits oneself only to this, it simply becomes a more or less faithful performance of a page, or of a technique, and no more.



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**When one works with children who have never sung before, and you show them the sound you want from them, they understand that singing and speaking are not the same. Once they understand this, they enjoy producing a beautiful sound. On a second level, one tries to establish a dialogue among the voices; with the same sound, one can have a dialogue.**

But there is a whole other aspect, which has to do with the intellect of the children and with their character, which involves discovering the intention of the composer in writing his piece, and this is not annotated in the score, but is embedded in the music itself.

**Fidelio:** Would this be called reading “between the notes”?

**Ruiz:** And also between the words of a song—in the silences.

**Fidelio:** There also exists a school

opposed to *bel canto*, which bases everything on breathing technique, whereas, as I understand it, the technique of *bel canto* has primarily to do with a concept of the beauty of the voice, and the technical aspects are only there as a means of coming to dominate the physiology of the vocal instruments—the cavities, the position of the glottis in the throat, of the mouth—in order to achieve an intelligent result. Correct me here if I don’t understand this well, and explain to me how

you see this?

**Ruiz:** Yes, it is true that breathing is important, because the column of air that is produced in singing is the medium for transporting the sound, but the other aspect which is very important is to bring the voice

up into the head cavities, which make possible a greater volume, a greater resonance; that is why they are called the resonators. The voice passes through the vocal chords and is sent to the middle section, which is the mouth, the nasal resonators situated on either side of the nose, the frontal resonators in the fore-

head and upper part of the head. It is the position of the mouth which enables the voice to be elevated to the resonators. So the column of air carries the voice, but one must seek the means to have it enter these resonators.

**Fidelio:** And once this technique is mastered, one reaches the point at which the beauty of the voice is located?

**Ruiz:** Exactly. The beauty of a voice which is “well placed.” A voice which is “well placed,” means that one has mastered use of the organs of vocalization:

the position of the mouth is open, relaxed but in a round shape, always keeping this position, such that the higher the sound, the more open the mouth. It is at this point that one can achieve the most beautiful voice of which a human being is capable.

**Fidelio:** How do you teach this to children?

**Ruiz:** Well, the most important thing is how children learn to use sound in the highest part, from the nose upward into the forehead. The first vocalization exercises we do with the children are intended to help them discover how to elevate the voice. Then we teach them to discover how to place the voice in the nose, to achieve a certain nasality. And from there, to make the leap into the head tone.

**Fidelio:** Everyone knows how difficult it is to teach children a rigorous discipline, and what children must go through until they can achieve a result that rewards them for their efforts. I can only think of the horrible sound produced when a child is first learning the violin, for example.

**Ruiz:** It is a very interesting process. What we do with the children, in the beginning, are exercises which we call vocalization, with some consonant such as “n” or “m,” followed by different vowels, and thus they begin to discover that there are some vowels that are placed more easily into a head voice. From these vowels, which make placing the sound easier, one begins to work with the rest of the vowels. Once the image is in the mind of the child, that child then discovers that there is a little path to follow, which is a lot of fun to do, and he or she wants to try it over and over.

And once this is achieved, and the child’s attention is captured, it then falls to the teacher to determine what new challenges to present in producing one or another new sound properly. The children achieve this at times by imitation: The teacher sings the sound and the children imitate the teacher; at other times, it is that one of the children has the sound properly

placed, and the others are challenged to imitate that child. Thus, one can create a process in which the child associates the *bel canto* technique with a passionate game, which is going to lead to learning something new, to a new discovery.

**Fidelio:** But, how can repetitive vocal exercises be fun, when the child is singing, for example, singing “no, no, no, no, no, no”?

**Ruiz:** What is fun here is that one is working with sound in motion, that moves. They see that the piano can make that motion, and want to imitate it.

**Fidelio:** Do you have to know how to read music to learn this?

**Ruiz:** Not necessarily. It is good to know how to read music, because that way, one can know the relationship of the sounds—when there is a third, or a fifth—with regard to the different voices of the chorus. But it is not a prerequisite, such that if one can’t read music, one cannot sing. No, one can always sing.

**Fidelio:** At the same time that the child is learning all this, the child is also learning to listen to musical examples that they are being asked to reproduce. What effect does this capacity to listen have in the context of the chorus?

**Ruiz:** In reproducing the sound, the child discovers that there is another voice that will harmonize with his or hers, that there are other different voices. He is reproducing just one voice, and what he will hear is the combination of the voices at different “heights,” and that it is these differences that make the piece of music truly beautiful.

**Fidelio:** The individual voice of a chorus member is beautiful in itself, but

combined with other voices, it produces a superior beauty.

**Ruiz:** That’s right. Because, for example, when one works with children who have never sung before, when you show them the sound you want from them, they understand that singing and speaking are not the same. And once they understand this, they enjoy producing a beautiful sound. But this is just the first level. On

sound properly, and to listen to the rest of the chorus, all at the same time. This is something that the human mind is capable of doing. A human being can reproduce a sound as an individual, and also be part of a whole, in which their voice is a small, but important, part.

**Fidelio:** It is clear that this makes all the difference between a mediocre and a



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**The children must learn to listen, to hear their own voice, to place the sound properly, and to listen to the rest of the chorus, all at the same time. This is something that the human mind is capable of doing. A human being can reproduce a sound as an individual, and also be part of a whole, in which their voice is a small, but important, part.**

*Camp festival, July 2003. In costume for Cervantes’ ‘The Pageant of Marvels.’*

the second level, one tries to establish a dialogue among the voices; with the same sound, one can have a dialogue. One group of voices sings it first, then a second group, and so on. This is a canon, where, although the same melody is being sung, one goes before the other. And this produces greater satisfaction, because there is a greater challenge for the child. But it is also the case that in a single piece, the voices are sung at different elevations, and the child must thus have a greater capacity for concentration, to be able to reproduce what is the totality of the piece.

Thus, the children must learn to listen, to hear their own voice, to place the



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superior chorus. But in the chorus that you led, we could hear something even more interesting, which I’m not sure how to express in words. What was palpable to the audience was, that the beauty of the performance reflected that something more profound was going on. Can you explain this?

**Ruiz:** Well, this is a very important thing for a chorus, the emotional element. When a child understands a

piece and has mastered it, and the chorus as a whole can sing a song well, well tuned, what is important here is the emotional relationship between the singer and the director. The child learns to have confidence in the director. He recognizes that the director knows very well what he wants, in a concert or in a specific piece. What the director must accomplish is to transmit

you can achieve this with children.

**Ruiz:** Of course. This creative process is understood by the child, who has every ability to reproduce it. The child also has a fresher memory, a more open mind, and can do this with the greatest facility.

**Fidelio:** So, the child isn't simply imitating the instructions of the director, like a parrot, but is participating in the creative process?

**Ruiz:** Absolutely! This is reflected in the faces of the children, when they are singing. First, they are worried about technique, that their mouth is completely open, for example. The director corrects them if there is one voice

or another that is out of place, so that it comes out well; but what you can see in the expressions on their faces is a liveliness, a complete liveliness in the eyes, that shows that they are concentrating, and happy.

**Fidelio:** It's said that the eyes are the mirror of the soul.

**Ruiz:** And, the children know what is happening. For example, if the director makes a sign that there is some voice out of place, they will immediately seek out which voice it is and try to correct it while they are singing. They are always awake and alert to what the director wants.

**Fidelio:** And this creative process is very different, because it is collective.

**Ruiz:** That's right, because choral work is done as a group. From the very beginning, the children must work collectively. This is important, because children tend toward egocentrism, they are the center of the universe from the moment they are born, and it is the process of education which helps to socialize them, so that not only can they learn to live

with others, but as they learn new things, new discoveries, they can truly enjoy transmitting that knowledge to others, socially. Group work, as in a chorus, helps them not only to learn music, but to improve their ability to perform so that they can pass that learning on.

**Fidelio:** It is notable that in working with non-professional musicians and children, the Schiller Institute choruses have reached a level of competence rarely seen in established choral institutions. You yourself did not have professional music training—you didn't go to a music conservatory—and yet you demonstrate a competence beyond that of many professional choral directors. How is it possible to achieve this?

**Ruiz:** One of the things that most concerns us in musical work, is how to ennoble the character of the youth with whom we work. This was the primary motivation in forming the Schiller Institute choruses. Yes, there is a technical side to it, which requires much study and preparation, but above and beyond all that, is our concern to improve this world. In the field of education, it is crucial for our children to receive a good education, and that they be enabled thereby to discover their own creativity. This is something that the world has been losing; the creativity of children is not encouraged. And music is one of the best tools to encourage the creativity of children.

The tradition of Classical culture is what enables us to accomplish this. From the founding of the choruses, we have always used a Classical music repertoire in preparing our programs. And in the concerts we give, we always explain the content of the Classical music that the audience is going to hear, and why it is important. Thus, both the children and the audience are situated in a broader historical-cultural context, which is always very important. And that, I believe, is why there are more and more people attending Schiller Institute concerts all the time.

**Fidelio:** Thank you, Maestra Ruiz.



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that security of knowing what he or she is doing, while creating enough interest so that the child enjoys singing, and this is immediately transmitted to the public, which is immediately recognized by the child and makes him or her very happy.

The director, therefore, at the moment of the performance, has to manage all of these emotions of the child. He has full confidence in you, in how he will guide you and in how the piece will come out well, because the director is completely certain and has the character to take you wherever he wants. This is the point at which the child truly begins to enjoy himself, feeling a great confidence because everything is okay, and he will try to do the best he can. And this brings great joy to all.

**Fidelio:** It's like Wilhelm Fürtwangler described it, with regard to music performance. You can teach a piece of music all you want, but at the moment of performance, the performers must recreate the creative process of the composer. Now, what is fascinating is that