



Music OVER EVERYTHING

by Cassidy Clevenger

The MusicianShip Washington Youth Choir (WYC) is a year-round performance ensemble that is dedicated to providing disadvantaged young people with opportunities in the arts, education, and performance.



Photo courtesy Washington Youth Choir

These student vocalists in the DC Metropolitan area utilize music as a means to develop core values and prepare themselves for higher education—an opportunity that many of these students would not otherwise be exposed to, had they not been involved in WYC.

The goal of the Musicianship youth choir, according to their mission statement, is to use the influence of art to “build character, boost confidence, and inspire them to lead purposeful lives.”

Leadership, teamwork, and appreciation for education are not always the focus of performing arts programs, but WYC aims to ensure their students are as prepared for the world post-graduation as possible. Additionally, students are given a platform to explore their personal passions, while still striving for the greater good of the group and community.

How WYC Impacts Students

The program includes students from 7th through 12th grade and teaches the students to value art and education in tandem. As the students study music and other arts, they also prepare for higher education in a myriad of disciplines.

For example, MusicianShip offers students opportunities to practice for college auditions, aids them in preparing for college applications, and provides students with references for their applications; many students graduate from WYC and go on to receive handsome collegiate scholarships.

WYC is a progressive, competitive, after-school program that brings the power of community and creativity to the forefront of their students’ education. Due to the high expectations MusicianShip places on their “scholarship” students, the kids involved in the program begin practicing skills such as work-life balance, time management, and expectation management, while also cultivating a strong sense of self and community.

In short, each student in WYC leaves the program with a different experience, due to the highly individualized training and attention they receive from the program directors and instructors.

The Performances

The amount of soul these young people bring to the stage is palpable and awe-inspiring. Every single student involved in the WYC radiates pride during their performances in

the purest form. Truly, their talent and emotion are enough to move an audience to tears, and then to their feet. There are not enough words of adulation to properly express how well the students deliver the program’s messages of love, peace, and togetherness. Videos of some of their songs can be found on both Youtube and MusicianShip’s WYC website.

WYC travels regularly to perform at galas, private events, community events, showcases, and festivals; on average, the students perform 12-15 external events annually. Of course, this is quite a high demand for some of the younger students to undertake, so WYC developed a junior member program, which allows the younger performers to attend fewer events—the older students, however, are expected to attend every event. By taking on this responsibility, they are learning early and often the value of integrating and balancing duties.

Behind the Scenes

Artistic Director Gregory Watkins is a former show choir performer and a longtime arts enthusiast. His dedication to his students and positive energy is as captivating as it is contagious. He expects excellence from his students in both academics and performing

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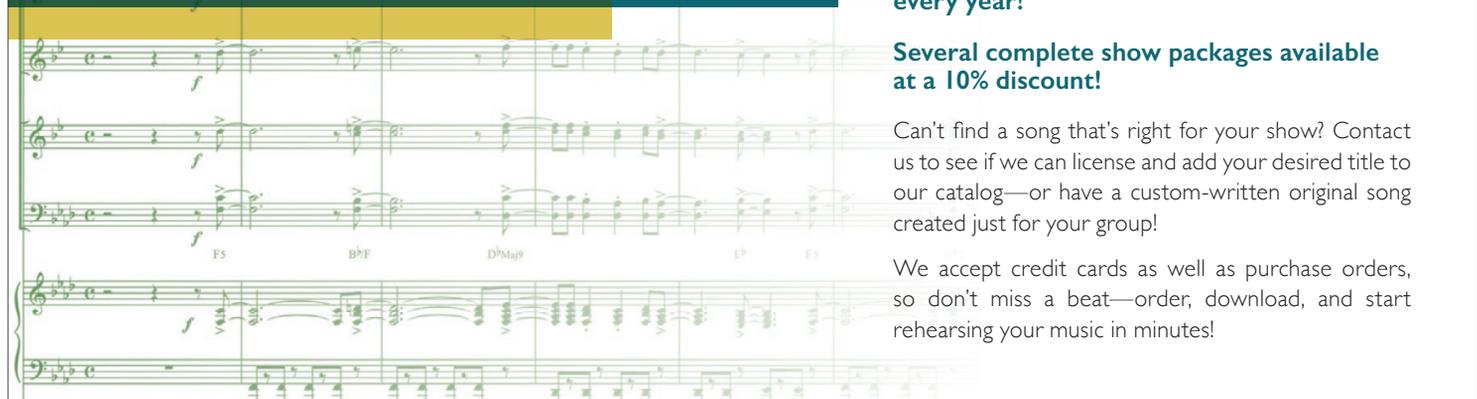
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Photo courtesy Washington Youth Choir

arts. His show choir background really shines in the way he composes the musical pieces and incorporates “choralography” into the productions.

As Amber Pannoccia, Director of Youth Programming, noted, the movements in the performances are meant to be engaging and aid in the emotionality of the pieces. Similarly, when putting together an ensemble, Watkins strives for diversity; he pulls pieces together across decades and genres.

WYC and Involvement in DC

Washington, DC, has a long history of appreciating the arts and promoting a thriving music scene; bands, drum lines, and choirs used to be staples of the city. However, until recently, there were diminishing funds for all of these programs.

Luckily, DC may be regaining its love for self-expression through music. Pannoccia noted that more DC schools seem to have a stronger sense of school pride through the love of music and performance, and there is hope for more programs in the future.

One of many aspects of WYC that instills the importance of being well-rounded is their emphasis on students being active members in the arts. Students not only perform at local events, such as the DC Performing Arts Festival or at the

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Photo courtesy Washington Youth Choir

African American History Museum, but they are also taught the importance of supporting and consuming other forms of art, such as literature and theatre.

By studying the wide array of art DC has to offer, the students are able to incorporate different lessons, techniques, and skills into their performances; a well-rounded performer is also a good patron.

One of the taglines for MusicianShip is *music over everything*. This concise message highlights the goal of the program, because music is a part of everything.

By mastering music, someone learns values such as dedication, teamwork, listening, confidence, and appreciation. The young people in WYC, despite whatever previous circumstances life may have dealt them, are given the opportunity to pursue whatever dreams they may have.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Cassidy Clevenger is a Samford University alum. She is currently in graduate school at Samford in the MSW program, while working as a staff writer for Flaherty Media.

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