

The singers at Royal Albert Hall



ANIMA

Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus:

Creating community through a unified voice

BY DEBBIE VENEZIA, A.C.E. REPORTER

Think back. Did you ever have one of those teachers who impacted your life? You know the kind – the one who challenged you, encouraged you, and inspired you to be better than you ever thought you could be? Evan Bruno is one of those teachers.

Bruno, the creative director of Anima - Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus (AGECC), an organization that offers world-class choral music programming tailored for children in kindergarten through high school, has devoted his life to music. In 2022, coming off a 12-year stint as a conductor and faculty director of the Chicago Children's Choir, he brought his talents back to Glen Ellyn where he had previously

served as the director of music at First United Methodist Church of Glen Ellyn.

Rebuilding the declining enrollment and restructuring the programs to accommodate the students' demanding schedules were Bruno's first priorities. "We are entering a new age of the way young people approach activities," said Bruno. "Twenty or thirty years ago, the approach was to dedicate your time to one or two activities you were incredibly invested in. Now, kids are invested in extremely rigorous studies at school, which limits their ability to participate in extracurricular activities. However, they want to do more: they want to participate in the musical, and the fall play, and the winter sports..."

Realizing that the amount of time required to participate in AGECC's offerings was a challenge for the overly busy students, Bruno broadened his class model and endeavored to start kids on their musical journey at a younger age when their participation commitment wasn't as great. To facilitate this, AGECC applied for and received a grant from DuPage Foundation's Community Needs Grant Program that will help support a pilot expansion of its newly reimagined KidSingers class, a course developed for kindergartners and pre-schoolers who have completed at least one semester of official preschool sessions.

Based on the philosophy of the Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály, the KidSingers program introduces "children to the foundations of musicianship through the known, going from the known to the unknown through the three pillars of preparation, presentation, and practice. So, breaking it down into layman's terms, we are singing songs, dancing dances, and playing games," said Bruno.

His next step was to become more integrated into the community. "It was important to me to get to know the music teachers in District 41 and District 89 and establish a mentality of 'the rising tide lifts all boats.' AGECC is not here to take your students. We strongly believe that if a child is participating in our program, they should be lifting up the academic music department, as well," Bruno explained. To ensure students have equal access to both, he redesigned AGECC's schedule so it doesn't conflict with the district schools' musical offerings.

"The other thing that was very important to me is to reinvest our time and energy into the community. AGECC is famous for its collaborations with large musical institutions in Chicago, like the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Music of the Baroque, and those are significant institutions to remain related to; however, when the Cosley Zoo wants me to perform for their fundraiser, we are going to do it. When Cantigny wants me to perform at their Christmas concert, we are going to do



Phil Barnett, Judy Barnett, Christ Lovely, Maggie McCoy, and DuPage Foundation Trustee Megan Shebik



Anima's Treble Chorus at AGECC's Winter Concert



Anima at the Albert Memorial



Artistic Director Evan Bruno

it. When Jennifer Whiting wants us to collaborate with Glen Ellyn-Wheaton Chorale, we are absolutely going to do it because the relationships within our community are just as important as the big star-struck ones in the city.”

Looking ahead, AGECC has a full slate of performances rounding out its 59th season. Next on the calendar is “Gwendolyn Brooks Setting,” a premiere co-commission with the Illinois Philharmonic by Pulitzer Prize finalist Augusta Read Thomas using poems from Poet Laureate Gwendolyn Brooks’ “Bronzeville Boys and Girls” at Ozinga Chapel in Palos Heights on March 16. Next on the calendar

is “SingFest,” an annual free concert scheduled for April 19 that unites local choirs who will learn from both Bruno and special guest conductor Dr. Marcela Molina, director of the Tucson Girls Chorus. The concert will feature music from Latin America and honor Molina’s Colombian ancestry while recognizing the growing Hispanic population in DuPage County. The season closes with AGECC’s Spring Concert, which showcases several of its highly regarded ensembles on May 18.

June marks the launch of AGECC’s 60th season, which starts with a performance at one of the finest settings for artists and audiences. “This

year, we accepted an invitation to a concert tour by Manhattan Concert Productions, and we will be performing at Carnegie Hall in a festival conducted by former AGECC artistic director Emily Ellsworth.” Bruno added that in celebration of its 60th, AGECC “will probably do another international tour since it is a big year for us.”

As AGECC continues its uphill growth trajectory, Bruno is committed to providing opportunities to expand AGECC’s reach and community impact. “If someone wants to do a vocal Jazz workshop and there is enough interest, I would contact a friend and say, ‘I am not equipped to teach vocal jazz technique; could you do it?’ That is what I want AGECC to be able to offer kids. When the students come to us to say, ‘This is what is important to us,’ we will make it happen.”

Anima – Glen Ellyn Children’s Chorus
anima-singers.org
630.858.2471

Debbie Venezia is the director of Arts DuPage, a countywide arts council under the umbrella of DuPage Foundation that supports, promotes, and advocates for the arts in DuPage County. Best known for artsdupage.org, its comprehensive event website for arts and entertainment, Arts DuPage showcases the vibrant local arts community, which generates cultural, economic, and social benefits for DuPage County and its residents.