

REFLECTIONS FROM THE 2024 NYCC COHORT: MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS

By / Par Hilary Apfelstadt



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The year 2024 marked the 40th anniversary of the National Youth Choir of Canada. NYCC is a unique entity in Canadian choral culture, an ensemble that meets biennially and comprises auditioned singers from across the country, ranging in age from 19 – 26. This year's group met in the province of Québec, led by Roseline Blain, a Francophone conductor who received all of her musical education in her home province. Mme. Blain is the first NYCC conductor to have applied for the position, the previous leaders having been invited through a nomination process. As a member of the committee who reviewed applications from aspiring conductors, I was struck by her focus on the singers' welfare and her relative lack of self-promotion in the interview. It was clear that for her, choral community is paramount. This was evident in a conversation we had in the spring of 2023 which was recorded in an article in *Anacrusis* 41(2), 17–20, 2023. At that time, I thought it would be interesting to do a follow-up article in which singers reflected on their experience in the 2024 choir, so sent an invitation through their manager, Émilie Versailles, seeking six to eight participants, and was pleased to have eight volunteers. In addition, I contacted staff members including the conductor, apprentice conductor, collaborative pianist, and manager, and will report their thoughts in a follow-up report in the next issue of *Anacrusis*.

In the meantime, this article will summarize responses of the singers who communicated with me both via e-mail and also on Zoom during the month of June 2024. Each person received a set of prompts to consider prior to our conversations:

1. Tell us about your history with NYCC – is this your first time or is it a repeat experience? What were your expectations – musical and otherwise – coming into NYCC 2024?
2. How has the experience affected you as a musician? What are some of the most powerful moments of this experience?
3. Please share some takeaways about rehearsal, music-making, or any part of the professional experience that will affect you in the future.
4. How did being a part of this community affect you personally?
5. What would you tell a prospective singer about considering NYCC in the future?

6. If you have additional thoughts you would like to share, please do so.

Of the eight singers who volunteered to participate in the project, five identified as female and three as male; three were from NS, and one each from AB, SK, MB, ON, and NB. Three were in the choir for the second time; five were first-time members, with two of those at the upper age limit, meaning that they cannot audition again. One of the first time members was the youngest singer, at age 19. Depending on the singers' backgrounds, their expectations differed somewhat.

Having heard his brother sing twice in NYCC, Josiah had "incredibly high expectations in terms of music making, and most of those were met." His expectations were so high in fact, that he didn't audition for NYCC until his final year of eligibility, citing conflicting choral commitments and a feeling that he was "not good enough," despite having extensive choral experience, including professional singing in Edmonton. Although he has aged out and cannot audition again, Josiah would be interested in applying for the apprentice conductor position, inspired by his experience as a singer in NYCC. Josiah also said that he "didn't expect to be changed on a personal level as (he) was" but he "connected more quickly with people in this group than he expected," contributing to a richer experience.

Will expected "a very fulfilling and busy two weeks," and knew he would make lasting friendships. He anticipated "an experience that would not only deepen (his) love of choral singing but also give (him) space to learn unique skills and approaches to choral music that can be achieved" only with an advanced and passionate group like NYCC. Emma expected "everyone to have the same passion and love" for singing, "strong musicianship skills," and readiness "to make great music." Elisa, who moved to Canada from France five years ago, was eager to meet other Canadian singers, and curious about "how this conductor would make a choir out of us."

Carrie, whose father sang in NYCC in 1988 and 1990, returned for the second time, and looked forward to the lack of Covid restrictions that were imposed on the 2022 NYCC members. She enjoyed "more freedom," from masks and from social barriers. Patricia, a returning member, expected some things to carry over from 2022 but was also happy with the

increased freedom. She noted that "the community came together very quickly because there wasn't the fear of Covid." Because the choir was younger than the group in 2022, she noticed the "sound was younger," and thought her returning peers were equally surprised by this. Maiti, who is pursuing a doctorate in medical physics, sings for pleasure in several choirs in Halifax, and had met someone from a previous NYCC in one of her choirs and noted their excitement about the group. She expected "a group of people who were passionate and capable of doing challenging music," with "greater technical difficulty" than she typically sings. This is similar to Max's expectation of a music making that was "the next level above" his previous experience.

Each of the singers described how they were affected as musicians by the experience. Josiah said NYCC left him "with a desire to further develop (his) voice, to gain more knowledge and expertise about (his) craft and to search for opportunities to audition and perform in high-level ensembles." He mentioned increased confidence as another outcome. Max said that "this program felt like a culmination of my music journey so far." Maiti said that NYCC "definitely reinvigorated my musical spirit" and said she would "like to bring more energy to (her) choral experience" in the future and "be helpful with the people who have less experience." The idea of energy sparked by competence and shared passion is easy to understand if one is an accomplished choral musician, but for someone with less experience and perhaps meeting only once a week for rehearsal, this level of intensity would not be familiar or easy to duplicate. The fact the NYCC is such a condensed experience with multiple rehearsals daily makes it unique and especially inspiring. Will mentioned that this experience "makes it almost hard to return to regular rehearsals," as they seem so short.

Emma mentioned how her sight-reading skills improved, partly because "in choir you have to be on your game all the time." She also appreciated the variety in repertoire, especially all the French music, which she found challenging. In addition, Emma noted that the conductor "set great expectations from the beginning" by starting to make music immediately, and making it enjoyable. Elisa said: "we were making music." Josiah expressed a similar

feeling: “we were making art; we weren’t just singing.” Max said he feels as though he “can tackle any sort of piece now” and has grown in his confidence.

Almost without exception, the singers described the impact of the first concert on them as a group and as individuals. Carrie spoke for the group when she said “one of the most powerful moments ... was our first performance as a choir. We were in Les Bergeronnes and had such a lovely concert with great reception from the community. That was the night the northern lights were supposed to be seen across the country... we were so excited and started taking pictures and singing as we experienced this incredible moment.” Josiah mentioned that this experience “bonded” the group; it was a highlight for Patricia as well, and Carrie described the northern lights “as the most magical thing I have ever experienced.” Max mentioned that “the stars had aligned” at the first concert and after this experience, everyone felt they could continue to excel.

Other highlights of the NYCC residency occurred on tour. Besides the Podium performance, which was the culmination of their time together, the singers enjoyed hearing other choirs perform at the conference, and also appreciated the conducting master-class opportunity where they served as the demonstration choir. In this context they experienced “a new way of seeing Roseline work,” as Elisa said, and it was “interesting to watch the conductors.” Being at Podium enabled the singers to feel connected to the larger choral community in Canada. The outreach events had an especially strong impact on the singers, particularly the performances in a women’s prison and a visit to a palliative care centre. For two singers, it was a way to see a part of the country new to them, and for another, an insight into the conductor’s roots in the province. Carrie said she “loved hearing (Roseline) in the small towns in Québec,” and although Carrie could pick up “the gist not the nuances,” she felt Roseline could be “fully herself” when she was leading in her native language.

Several people described the prison visit in detail. Because security was tight, it was somewhat daunting, but once inside and making music, the singers saw the full impact of their presence. Carrie said, “They (the inmates) appreciated us so much. We

overlook people in prison and think they don’t deserve these things. But we don’t know their stories. There were people struggling with mental illness so (they) didn’t always get to do things together. Some people cried; they were so moved.” Will described the space: “The chapel felt like a regular community chapel; the prison was white everywhere but the chapel had color in it. Once we were on risers and singing, it was ok. (We were) in choir mode (and) it felt like a regular performance.” He noted that it was “moving for some of the people. They rarely get to experience something like this. If they weren’t in prison, they might not choose to go to a choir concert, but they were so moved. It made me think about the power of music; the human connection aspect of choral music is unique.” Josiah agreed: “These people need the connection more than anyone. For some of the pieces we knew best, a few of us sang from memory, giving us an even better opportunity to connect with our audience. They needed to be seen. There were so many tears.” The palliative care centre was also moving for the singers. Again, at this point in their lives, the patients do not necessarily get exposure to live music, but it may have been a big part of their lives before. Music is comforting and therapeutic for people.

Max thought the workshops added to the uniqueness of the NYCC experience in that the group performed not only in standard performance venues but also sang for “everyday” people. He was struck in particular by how deeply the prisoners were moved to experience something so removed from their daily life in isolation, and said “I really want to keep doing this to bring people together; it’s really compelling.” “We need to perform in places where people don’t hear choral music often.” If even a handful of these singers are able to initiate similar efforts in the future, in their own communities, it could have a powerful impact on many people.

Several singers commented on the wide variety of repertoire, with a heavy concentration of French music. The fact that the conductor sent them marked scores well in advance was very helpful in their preparation and saved considerable rehearsal time. Different singers had various favorites but there seemed to be consensus that the Rachmaninov held special significance for the group. Patricia said that

the Podium performance of this piece was “one of the biggest musical moments” for her; “we finally got every single nuance.” Maiti thought that the conductor’s personal investment in this piece made its impact especially strong; by sharing her perspective as a mother, Roseline Blain personalized the text. NYCC overlapped with Mother’s Day, which heightened attention on the maternal role referenced in the text. Learning over sixty minutes’ worth of music made for very intense rehearsal periods. The singers noted the conductor’s excellent pacing, the ability to keep things enjoyable, the use of movement, and the personal level of energy she displayed. Josiah said “Roseline was very expressive, and it took a little while for the choir to follow her musical direction as she intended. In rehearsal she frequently used count-singing to learn our pieces, which was especially helpful for the polyphonic sections.” Maiti said “Roseline is so energetic – always dancing. She is a “physical presence” in the room, moving “to the choir and amongst them.” In turn, the singers’ physical involvement helped them embody the music. Will credited Roseline Blain with exploring the context of the repertoire and focusing on the “composers’ intentions,” especially with the older pieces.

Elisa noted that Roseline exemplified “what to do” (in rehearsal); her love of music and approachability “help(ed) a lot in making connections and making music together.” This inspired Elisa to create “safe spaces” in her own teaching. During our conversations I noted how all the singers spoke with excitement about the rehearsals, saying these seemed to go quickly, and praising the conductor’s energy, passion, and commitment to the music and to building community. Elisa thought “(Roseline) gives sense to everything,” because she loves music, not because she operates out of obligation to lead the group. Patricia said, “Roseline makes everything fun.” No wonder rehearsals seemed to move quickly.

In addition to musical cohesion, the group jelled as a community linked by their similar passion for music, and their access to social interaction in a friendly rehearsal environment as well as after hours. In addition, the conductor’s “approachability” facilitated a comfort level that encouraged “a feeling of family,” as Will said. Max said “people were so supportive, all wanting it to be really good.” Josiah wrote this:

“being part of a choir of young, passionate singers brought me hope for the future of choral music, and encouraged me to improve myself as a musician.” He cited their “emotional connection” to the music and noted that the singers formed “an intense bond” over the music. Will says, “We will be lifelong friends connected through choral music; shared experiences link you.” For Will, the “community aspect of choral singing is one of the main drivers for me.”

Without exception, all the respondents heartily endorsed the opportunity to audition for NYCC. Several mentioned that even if a person auditions and does not get in the first time, they should try again. Josiah believes it is vital to “get in as soon as you can,” rather than waiting until you reach the age limit. For him, NYCC has been “life changing – it changes your whole perspective of not just music but also gives you a broader view of society.” Elisa valued the chance to meet many other people who share the love of singing, and to develop professionalism. She also appreciated the travel and the chance to meet the families with whom the choir stayed on tour. Patricia responded to this question with an enthusiastic “yes!” saying that “everyone leaves a different person.” Josiah suggested that “NYC is what the singers make of it” and encourages people to connect before, during, and after the NYCC session ends. “There are few experiences like NYCC ... it’s invigorating to be around such talented and musical people.”

As a group, these singers were highly enthusiastic about the NYCC program and believe it is of great value to anyone who participates. One of the major assets is the opportunity to make music with people who share the same love of and passion for choral music, and to share that with audiences who are moved by their music making. Many of them spoke about the ongoing benefits of the experience that will affect their own ensemble work at home, thus influencing choral ensembles throughout the country. Max said, “If you come back from this program with unwavering certainty that you want to continue pursuing all kinds of music-related dreams, I think you did it right.” The singers also valued the opportunity to meet people from other parts of the country and to travel to parts of Canada they might not have visited before, all as musical ambassadors. One singer mentioned that the level of support from her provin-

cial choral organization in 2024 was half what it was in 2022, raising the issue of financial access. There are likely fine young singers in Canada who cannot afford the cost without significant help. Whether through grants, individual donations, or business sponsorships from their communities, many singers may need assistance in order to participate. NYCC has a forty-year history which must continue uninterrupted and it will take a solid financial commitment to assure that. In speaking with these singers, I was reminded of the central role that NYCC plays in the life of Canada's choral culture and the breadth of its impact, and recall my experience as conductor of the 2014 version of the choir as one of my own musical highlights.

NYCC singers:



William Austin



Emma Proctor



Max Eyre-Wilkins



Carrie Schulz



Josiah Maxfield



Elisa Soucaille



Maiti McGrath



Patricia Wigglesworth