

# REFLECTIONS FROM THE NYCC 2024 STAFF: HIGHLIGHTS

By / Par Hilary Apfelstadt



## Hilary Apfelstadt

Hilary Apfelstadt is Professor Emerita of Choral Music and Elmer Iseler Chair of Conducting at the University of Toronto. She is a frequent guest conductor and clinician as well as a prolific author. Her book on Canadian composer Ruth Watson Henderson won the 2018 Choral Canada prize for outstanding publication. The recipient of several leadership awards, Hilary Apfelstadt served ACDA both as National President and also Interim Executive Director.

In the last issue of *Anacrusis* (Fall 2024), we printed an article summarizing the musical highlights of several NYCC 2024 singers. Their glowing commendations of the experience were a delight to read and I enjoyed meeting the singers over Zoom and through email. In addition to needing stellar choristers, however, NYCC flourishes when the artistic and management staff members are equally committed and invested in the event. The conductor, of course, takes centre stage, literally and figuratively, in driving the overall artistic inspiration for the choir's development through the process and product as presented to its audiences. Roseline Blaine conducted NYCC 2024. In addition, there was an apprentice conductor (Kitbielle Pasagui), a collaborative pianist (Pierre McLean), an on-site manager (Émilie Versailles), and the Choral Canada office staff liaison (Collin Frotten). Each of these people corresponded with me about their experiences and this article is an attempt to compile their thoughts for another perspective on the NYCC 2024 choir.

The process began with an interview with Roseline Blain, who says that conducting NYCC 2024 is one of the “stronger artistic experiences” in her life, surpassing her expectations. She said rather than having expectations, she prepared herself to “go with the flow.” Most of the singers were very well prepared and helped the few who needed some assistance catching up to the rest. As it was her first experience with this kind of event (NYCC is quite unique in its process of meeting for a short time before performing multiple concerts), she felt it was “like a mission: we had to make a choir in a small amount of time. It became a choir soon.” This supports what the singers said in their recognition of Roseline as a community builder.

Kitbielle Pasagui said that “Roseline created a very encouraging environment” both through her manner and the content of what she said. Roseline told her that it's vital “to treat the singers as people first.” With a “motherly” approach, coupled with positive energy, Roseline provided an example of a conductor who values the individuals in the group while inspiring a high artistic level. In addition, Kitbielle appreciated Roseline's “generosity” in terms of the time spent with her in the preparation stages, talking about the music; the amount of rehearsal time given for the four pieces she was assigned; and the regular conversations after each rehearsal amongst Roseline, Kitbielle, and Pierre McLean, the collaborative pianist.

Kitbielle observed that “(Roseline) is a kind human. There is so much humility there. A big takeaway is that you need to leave that thinking (I am going to be the best at something) behind. Every opportunity is a learning opportunity. It’s not just you teaching stuff; the singers are also teaching you. That was very transparent. We learned from each other. I am glad the whole country has finally met her. She doesn’t just belong to Québec only.”

I asked Pierre McLean about Roseline’s working style with NYCC in comparison with how she interacts with her usual choirs, as he frequently accompanies those groups. He said, “She worked exactly the same as she does usually. One of her main goals is always to make sure that singers don’t sing without being totally involved in the phrasing, shapes, and meaning of the text. This choir being so responsive, she was able to dig even deeper into these aspects. I think those singers learned that you cannot give up as an artist, that you have to be unbelievably present to the music and the audience... She also made them sing as real soloists. I was impressed by the quality of the sound, their blend, their “togetherness.” They sounded like a professional choir.”

In the past, some Apprentice Conductors have been previous members of NYCC, but Kitbielle, being relatively new to Canada, had not been. She is from the Philippines where she sang with the Philippine Madrigal Singers, a highly accomplished university choir that was the first to win the European Choral Grand Prix twice (in 1997 and 2007) and is a UNESCO Artist for Peace. As a voice major, she learned about the singing mechanism, and was also interested in conducting. When she came to Edmonton to join her mother, who had previously moved there, she was fortunate to connect with Scott Leithead and become involved in his choral program, Korora, which comprises eight ensembles. Kitbielle is an associate conductor and social media coordinator. Until Scott mentioned the NYCC opportunity to her, Kitbielle was unaware of it and had limited time to put her materials together but fortunately, she did and her application was successful. One of her roles with NYCC was to do warmups with the choir. Several of the singers I interviewed for the first part of this article specifically mentioned how enjoyable these were and how they energized the singers in a playful context. Kitbielle noted that she wanted to “loosen up” the singers because they were under performance pressure and it was important to make

them comfortable before the hard work of rehearsals began. Another contribution of hers related to voice placement: what was the best position for each singer in terms of the group sound? She likened it to “flower arrangement” which she and Roseline initially began together as they listened to the voices and collective sound that changed with the placement of people in various seating/standing locations amongst the ensemble members. Some voices are simply more compatible together than others.

As a non-French speaker, Kitbielle was “very nervous” to work with the singers in Québec so she brushed up on her university-level French study but credits Roseline with helping to make it easy to communicate in French. Again, the mentoring offered by Conductor to Associate Conductor was invaluable. Kitbielle also complimented the singers on their openness to learning, their commitment to the NYCC shown through various means – their maintenance of vocal health, their work ethic, their preparation level, and their collaboration. Indeed, relatively new to the country, she felt accepted and comfortable, and learned to “stop the self-doubt and be brave.” She said that rather than thinking she is not good enough, she now focuses on what she can “bring to the table.” Pierre, too, said he was “extremely impressed by (the singers’) maturity and discipline,” mentioning that they rehearsed on the bus in their free time. He noted that “the relationship with Roseline was one of respect and collegial hard work ...as they really “embarked” on her proposal.”

The singers told me in their interviews that the music was very challenging and there was a lot of it. This was corroborated by the staff. Kitbielle noted the variety and difficulty level of the music but felt the singers succeeded in bringing it to life because of their work ethic and Roseline’s encouragement and planning. Pierre felt the music presented “an immense challenge” not only to the singers but also to him as the collaborative pianist, especially given the “very tight schedule.” Roseline noted there was a lot to cover in a short time between the first rehearsal Sunday morning and the first concert Friday night. With seventy minutes of music, NYCC had relatively little rehearsal time. Roseline felt that although they needed the preparation time of the evening rehearsals, they also needed a break, so one night they had off and another was devoted to a Talent Night. In addition, the amount of travel coupled with the performances was “too compressed” and she

would have preferred “more balance between the singing and the travel.” Perhaps this recommendation could be taken into account for NYCC 2026, together with planning a slightly shorter concert program.

Roseline chose repertoire with a wide variety of styles, and with a lot of French music, which provided a challenge for the Anglophiles as did the English music for the Francophones. She thinks that NYCC should always include French language repertoire, aided by language coaches as needed. She believes strongly that music from France is “polished and elegant” and deserves more performance in this country.

During the tour, NYCC performed in a number of locations in rural Québec. A crucial concern for any pianist is about the quality of the instruments. “Strangely, I had rather good instruments everywhere, even in small villages,” Pierre said. His concern was about “having enough energy to survive such a tight schedule” but he did, buoyed by the energy of the singers and conductor. Initially, he helped the singers as much as necessary during rehearsal on the a cappella pieces, too, but “it became very clear in the first minutes that these singers had amazing ears so ... I played less and less during the process.”

The impression I received after interviewing singers and staff both was of a very focused and committed group of musicians fully engaged in the experience that NYCC provides, even with all of its challenges. The rewards seemed to greatly outweigh any shortcomings. Behind the scenes, there is a tremendous amount of work that begins well in advance and is handled by Choral Canada staff. Émilie Versailles served as Tour Manager; they sang in NYCC 2014 when I conducted the group. Colin Frotten, Choral Canada’s Programs and Communications Manager, was instrumental in organizing many of the aspects of the program, working with Meghan Hila, Executive Director. Colin provided an excellent overview of the NYCC planning process:

“In the early planning stages (starting mid-2022), Choral Canada staff began liaising with Alliance chorale du Québec” and then searched for a Guest Conductor and Tour Manager. “With Roseline Blain (Guest Conductor) and Émilie Versailles (Tour Manager) on board for 2024,” program planning began. After “mapping out a residency and tour, we announced auditions in April 2023,” later engaging

an Apprentice Conductor (Kitbielle Pasagui) and a Collaborative Pianist (Pierre McLean).

“With a robust tour plan in the works, we started the process of selecting singers for the 2024 choir in October. An anonymous national Selection Committee of choral and group singing leaders” reviewed audition materials and selected thirty singers to take part. “We set up virtual meetings starting in January 2024, providing singers the opportunity to work with the Artistic Team on certain passages of the repertoire and to ask questions about the program and tour... Along with Choral Canada staff, Émilie continued coordinating with community groups, local presenters, and venues across Québec.”

Another feature of the NYCC 2024 experience was online professional development sessions, where the participants learned about contemporary choral career avenues, Estill Voice Training, and strategies for managing performance anxiety and honing mental focus on stage. The first occurred before the singers met for rehearsals; the other two took place during the residency:

April 14, 2024 – Roundtable: *Contemporary Career Avenues* with [Marie-Annick Béliveau](#), [Steven Bélanger](#) and [Jennifer Tung](#)

May 6, 2024 – Workshop: *Estill Voice Training* with [Julie Cimon Racine](#)

May 15, 2024 – Workshop: *The Performance Handbook* with [Claude Webster](#)

The singers and artistic team met in person for the first time during their week-long residency from May 5–9, 2024, at Université Laval, marking the beginning of an intense period of rehearsal, bonding, and musical discovery. The tour (May 10 -14) included concerts in Les Bergeronnes, Jonquière, Rimouski, and Montreal, concluding with a final performance at PODIUM 2024. Colin noted that “in each town, they were welcomed by enthusiastic audiences, experiencing the thrill of performing together and sharing their music with communities across Québec—many of whom may otherwise never have had the opportunity to hear the choir.”

As I write in November 2024, the call for NYCC 2026 conductors has already gone out and applications are closed. Podium will take place in Victoria, BC, in May 2026. Once again, the NYCC planning and

implementation process takes nearly two years.

Colin's role also involves fundraising and he reported that although they did not make their goal of "\$40,000 for 40 years," they did raise over \$30K. NYCC is a vital part of the country's landscape and this funding is essential.

Émilie Versailles was the Tour Manager whose role also began long before the tour. They were responsible for many of the logistics, including travel, rooming and housing, troubleshooting, daily communication with the singers and staff, setting up workshops, and miscellaneous other duties. Organizing the flights to Québec was especially complicated even with the help of travel agents. Coordinating billets for homestays was a major part of their tasks and 2024 was the first year in which the staff had a billeting guide. Because none existed prior to this year, it was a major undertaking to prepare this, but given the fact that many singers were Anglophones needing to travel and live among Francophones, there were specific challenges. Émilie suggested that in the future, the manager should meet on Zoom with the billets prior to the tour. Potential billets had to complete a lengthy form, answering questions about their preference for gender, for example. One family whose children attend a girls' school wanted to house only girls. Everyone needed to indicate if they were comfortable housing LGBTQ singers, or students who spoke only English. As well as housing, Émilie had to coordinate meals that accommodated various food restrictions and allergies. This was the case both in the cafeteria at Laval University and also in the communities with homestays and/or communal meals.

In the months prior to the NYCC residency, Émilie met on Zoom with Choral Canada staff and had multiple exchanges with Roseline. In addition, they were part of the preparatory meeting with the artistic team and singers before they arrived in Québec City, and handled many emails. In retrospect, Émilie said they "underestimated language obstacles. As a bilingual person living in Montreal, (I know that) the two solitudes in Canada still exist and the obstacles are real. Plunging some unilingual English individuals into a unilingual French environment (had) consequences" that might have been altered with prior planning. When I asked Émilie to elaborate on that, they said that "a glossary would have been good. Roseline suggested one but it was too close to time to get

it done. It would be better to talk to the singers more before they get on site to know about them." They specifically mentioned the awkwardness that arose when people didn't know the language, both singers and hosts. To avoid isolation, they always tried to place a French speaker in homes with an Anglophone singer; some people used Google Translate to help, but it was difficult "being dependent on people who don't share the language."

One of the privileges of being Tour Manager is sharing the travel experiences with the singers, ranging from the Northern Lights after the first concert in Les Bergeronnes, to the rousing enthusiasm of the audiences in the small communities, to the visits to the prison and hospice settings. Émilie said the prison visit was "an exceptional moment." They had to make very detailed arrangements beforehand: little could be taken into the prison – "only the sheet music, keyboard and music stand were cleared." To expedite the process, Roseline decided to perform only a cappella music. The singers had to fill out background check information, which was a tedious process, but the prison staff "complimented NYCC saying it was the most organized group they had collaborated with to date." Both the prison visit and the palliative care visit were common initiatives from Meghan Hila, Roseline, and Émilie.

Émilie's perspective was somewhat unique in having experienced NYCC from two sides – that of a singer and now the Tour Manager. "It was a truly enriching experience for a past NYCC chorister to be on the other side of a tour operation." They firmly believe it is a Canadian choral institution that must remain: "it changes lives. It changed my life and career and it's inspiring to see that it is still doing that. I hope it will continue for years to come (and I am) excited to see what these singers do in the future."

Pierre McLean concurred: "It was a fantastic experience. Again, I reiterate how wonderful those singers were, both musically and humanly! It goes completely against what the media say about that generation always being on their phones ... They never complained, they always seemed to enjoy the singing, they were good to one other. I think this program has to live at any cost."

Kitbielle Pasagui summed things up from her viewpoint at the Apprentice Conductor: she, too, found it "life changing" and unique, saying "there

is no other opportunity in the country as intensive and hands on that gives young conductors the chance to work on all aspects of their conducting and rehearsal techniques. This program promotes an immersive, collaborative and supportive space that makes it (an) ideal learning environment for any conductor planning to work in community, youth and/or professional ensembles.”

Roseline Blain said this: “They (the singers) will be in my heart forever. It’s a circle – they gave me so much. It was inspiring. Everyone contributes. It is life changing for singers and conductors.” She also said that “human experiences make us better musicians.” If there was a common thread in all of my reading, listening, and interview content in preparation for these articles, it is that everyone came out of this a better musician and person for having been associated with the National Youth Choir of Canada. May the future of NYCC be long and healthy.

Canadian Music Festival  
**CMFAA**  
Adjudicators’ Association

- Music Festival Adjudicator Directory
- Resources for Festivals and Adjudicators
- Adjudicator Travel Assistance Program
- Duet Challenge Prize

*A national organization of experienced music festival adjudicators with proven records of success.*

