

General Assembly 2003



Children's Voices

A Promise in That Song

By Maggi Smith-Dalton

"I had dropped the mail and saw the postcard lying on the path and then went screaming into the house," fifth-grader Grace Newman, of Oak Hill, Virginia, remembers. "I was so excited." Grace's successful audition for the 2003 Unitarian Universalist Children's Choir expanded an already rich musical life—she composes and plays cello and piano.

Eleven-year-old Amber Wilson-Daeschlein of Williamston, Michigan, felt "confident" on hearing the news. Ten-year-old Hannah Nyhart of Durham, Connecticut, reports that she "whooped!" Hans Richard Foster, a sixth-grader from Lansing, Michigan, was excited and a bit nervous. Elizabeth Field of Fairfield, Connecticut, "jumped around the house," and "couldn't wait to get the music!"

See also **A Record-Setting Return to Roots** by Donald E. Skinner, **Tighter Belts and Modest Growth** by Donald E. Skinner and **Global Thinkers and Local Activists** by Sonja L. Cohen

Last winter, children from congregations coast to coast submitted audition tapes and waited hopefully to see if they would be Boston-bound by summer. The prize: to perform in this year's largest-ever General Assembly.

When their packets of music arrived, bound in a black binder and accompanied by a practice CD, it was up to each chorister to practice at home until the entire choir assembled in June for rehearsal camp at the Governor Dummer Academy in Byfield, Massachusetts. Many, like thirteen-year-old Rebecca Snelling, from Newbury, Massachusetts, are musically active. She benefits from an unusually strong youth music program at the First Religious Society of Newburyport. A church choir member since first grade, Rebecca plays piano and saxophone, and participates in school bands and choruses. Others, like Elizabeth Field, had

the assistance of their church choir directors.

It's hot at Governor Dummer Academy, powerfully hot, the mid-90s. And oppressively humid, too. The heat doesn't seem to daunt the members of the choir, 133 singers strong, drawn from twenty-three states and provinces, as they sit in a semicircle, rehearsing music to the accompaniment of whirring fans. Sixty-two congregations are represented among the choristers, chaperones, and other participants.

Chicago-based director Emily Ellsworth propels the choir through a setting of "For the Beauty of the Earth," blended choral sounds arising from flushed faces and toasted throats. A Nigerian folk song has the children moving, with hand motions and simple choreography; a modern gospel song encourages them to "Feel Good." The mention of an air-conditioned afternoon rehearsal draws spontaneous applause and cheers.

At lunch, nine choristers gather around a table to speak with me, their trays piled high with the absolute staples: hamburgers, hot dogs, and other picnicky foodstuffs. "The food's good here," I'm told, as they hungrily dig in.

So what do they think of New England, of the choir, of the camp? "It's so *green* here," comes one response. "In Arizona, it's brown, brown, *brown!*"

It's a high-energy group. Most children seem comfortable even though they have had only a day or so to adjust to camp. Anne Jones, an open, friendly, twelve-year-old soprano from Tucson, Arizona, sits across from me. She loves to read, and likes being a Unitarian Universalist since you "don't have to worry" about what to believe.

Effervescent Grace Newman's take on explaining what a Unitarian Universalist is to others makes me laugh out loud: "If you don't want a long lecture, don't ask."

Danielle Stein, eleven, of Nashville, Tennessee, loves soccer and Irish step dancing and works in clay. Hans Foster draws animals, makes mazes, likes to read, and tells me his favorite animal is a penguin. Amber enjoys math and science and holds a first-degree black belt in tae kwon do. She aspires to be "a

singer, a scientist, an astronaut, a teacher, a lawyer, or someone who tries to find cures for various diseases.”

Vivacious alto Katrina Turner, of Newburyport, Massachusetts, invigorates the atmosphere with cheerful, running-full-throttle conversation. An anime enthusiast, she acts, dances, bikes, reads, and wants to be a band conductor when she gets older.

Hannah Nyhart gives me great hope for the future when she tells me she intends to be president some day, because “I think the world’s a big mess and someone’s got to go in and clean it up.” The Connecticut chorister displays a striking range of enthusiasms, from wishing for the Green Party’s rise to prominence to hating skirts and dresses (“Phooey!”) and has a penchant for no-brakes-fast-bike riding and reading “all the time.”

Most children at the table thought they were doing less singing at the camp than they expected—but that rehearsals were a lot of work. Extracurricular activities were declared the most fun. Asked what they didn’t like, they told me having to stay in their rooms for quiet time was boring. Camp stuff.

Interviews with the children were most notable, however, for thoughtful awareness of and lively involvement with the world at large. Asked, for instance, to name three wishes, children responded with “world peace,” “no more world hunger,” “end to global warming,” “enough money for everyone,” “having enough books,” “no racism, no sexism,” and “no diseases.” Happily, I also note some important childhood wishes: wishing that Hogwarts really existed, the ever-popular wish for magic powers “to make my brother disappear when he gets annoying,” and “a hundred more wishes, magic, and a thousand cats.”

In matching blue-and-black, the choristers rise to sing at Sunday’s Service of the Living Tradition. In the cavernous FleetCenter arena, before more than 9,000 fellow Unitarian Universalists, their joined voices float like a remembered dream, singing of “the beauty of the Earth”—these bright, wonderful children are embodiments of our ever-evolving, organic living tradition.

“Oh let us sing our song, and let our song be heard,” they sang,

fittingly, in performing "Promise of Living" by Aaron Copland and Horace Everett, "Let's sing our song with our hearts, a promise in that song."

Maggi Smith-Dalton, a vocalist, writer, bard, and teacher, is a member of the North Parish of North Andover, Massachusetts.



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ABOUT JIM & MAGGI

Jim and Maggi Dalton perform music of popular/vernacular, folk and cultivated traditions, covering time periods from the Middle Ages to the present, focusing largely on American, Celtic and British Isles repertoire. They specialize in music of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instrumentation: mostly plucked strings and voices.

Concerts and programs contain commentary designed to place the music performed in historical context for the audience. Programs reflect the continual and ongoing research in which the two delight. They also perform original songs and compositions.

Jim and Maggi have released two recordings to date, and have designed a full spectrum of programs which they present nationwide. They have been featured often on radio and television. (PBS, ABC, NBC, CBS affiliates, Cable Networks; NPR stations, NewsRadio, interview programs across the USA; feature stories in newspapers and magazines, i.e., *The Philadelphia Inquirer & Courier-Post*) They have performed at nationally-known venues (i.e., Colonial Williamsburg, Seneca Falls, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House) and countless local and regional venues nationwide.

They have served as artists-in-residence at various colleges, public history sites, community and educational centers, presenting series addressing American history and other topics in the humanities, using music as the core of each session.

Previous audiences and sponsors have said:

"engaging, scholarly, delightful, warm, intelligent, flexible, humorous, talented, versatile, enthusiastic, personable, joyful ..."



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in our "sunny yellow folder" for
descriptions of our programs, classes,
and concerts ~

Multi-instrumentalist *Jim Dalton* is an educator, conductor and award-winning composer and arranger.

As a performer, he specializes in historical and ethnic playing styles on a variety of plucked string instruments including guitar, mandolin, banjo, mandocello, Renaissance lute, bouzouki etc.

He also plays piano, organ, recorder and tin whistle.

In addition to duo performances with his wife, soprano and guitarist Maggi Smith-Dalton he maintains an active career as a freelance musician -- playing in chamber music ensembles, jazz and world music groups and in opera/theater and symphony orchestras.

He is a member of the New England Mandolin Ensemble.

His compositions have been performed across the U.S. and Canada and in Europe.

His choral composition, "The Rocky Road to Dublin," won first prize in the 1997 Toronto Camerata Competition. Two of his pieces for carillon have been published in anthologies by Fenwick Parva and the Friends of the Albany Carillon.

His composition for solo mandolin, "Gifts of the Bard," is published by Wolfhead Music.

His works are available through these publishers and Singing String Music Publications.

Jim is on the faculty of The Boston Conservatory, teaching music theory, ear training and world music courses for both the Music Theory and Music Education Departments. He has written articles for Blues Revue Magazine and is the author of *Mandolin for Beginners*, published by Workshop Arts, Inc./Alfred Publishing.

He is a frequent guest lecturer on topics such as composition, choral arranging and Irish traditional music. In the 2004-2005 year Jim received a MACRO research grant (Univ. of Wisconsin) to study and analyze palindromic compositions in concert music repertoire and presented this work at the 2005 Macro Musician's Workshop in Madison, WI.

Singer and musician, independent scholar, author and educator, *Maggi Smith-Dalton* has sung as a soloist with choirs and choruses both here and abroad, acted and sung in professional theater productions and produced/participated/performed in radio and television projects and programs.

She is a frequent guest lecturer -- on the integration of humanities and the arts, on folklore, and on American music and history, to name a few topics.

She has given lecture/demonstration programs at the college level (i.e., The New England Conservatory, The Boston Conservatory) and in numerous professional-development courses for educators and teachers at all grade levels.

Maggi enjoys an active performing career, which, after eleven years of work in cabaret, musical theater, and nightclub singing, has included more than two decades of concert performance nationwide and abroad, in partnership with her husband and as a soloist with choirs and in concert.

In addition, she authored a prize-winning short story and writes often for newspapers and magazines (including history and cultural/arts/educational feature articles, and a regular history column for the *Salem Gazette*).

Maggi's work in mainstream media included producing a cable TV series and programming and hosting musical theater, arts interview, and classical music shows for NPR public radio, commercial, and community stations.

A former Chairperson of the Haverhill Cultural Council, Maggi served as Musical Theater Director at Hill House (a community Arts Center) in Boston's Beacon Hill; as Director of "Adventures in Art," a summer arts program; and as a director of children's choirs.

With a background in teaching multiply-handicapped children, Maggi continues interest in and study of music therapy. She is working on a children's book; and is always working on a variety of writing projects.