EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

# Everyone Is Able to Sing

*Dr. Dawn-Marie Schafer, artistic director of the Austin Children's Choir, on 40 years of young voices, why she won't audition kids, the night a nonverbal nine-year-old heard his own story sung back to him, and her hope to help bring live music in Austin back from the ground up.*

**Interview by Christine Thompson · AMFM Magazine**



The Austin Children's Choir in holiday Santa hats against the downtown Austin skyline. *Photo courtesy of the Austin Children's Choir.*

Ask Dr. Dawn-Marie Schafer who should be singing, and her answer is simple: everyone. Not the gifted few, not the kids who already read music, not the ones a teacher once singled out as "so good." Everyone.

It's a belief she has built a choir around. The Austin Children's Choir was founded in 1986, and this season it is celebrating its 40th anniversary. Schafer joined in 2023 as assistant director and stepped up to lead the following season. In that time the choir has grown from about 25 singers to around 60, kids from ages 6 to 15 currently enrolled (the choir accepts singers ages 6 to 18) who gather on Saturday mornings at Hillcrest Church in northwest Austin.

I first heard about the choir from Julia, whom I met at an event for new mothers with my daughter. She asked whether AMFM would give the choir a shout-out. I said absolutely. I work with artists, and these are budding artists.

## FORTY YEARS OF SONG

The choir's own history page tells the origin story. The Austin Children's Choir was founded in 1986 by Dr. Bernard Gastler, a professor of music at Concordia University, with the university's support. Gastler served as its conductor, artistic director and a board member. In 2008 the Austin Critics Table named its world premiere of "The Odyssey" the Best Choral Performance of the Season.

She is busy well beyond Saturday mornings. According to the choir's leadership page, she is the music specialist at Blanco Vista Elementary School in San Marcos, where she conducts a choir of 60 singers, and she is assistant director of the Hays CISD Honor Choir. Over a 27-year career she has taught in New Jersey, Georgia and Texas, and she holds a Doctor of Music Education from Liberty University.

## NO AUDITIONS, NO BARRIERS

I had heard that no child who wants to sing with the choir is turned away. I asked her what that was about.

"I don't believe in auditioning kids," she said. "I think it just sets up a barrier for entry, right? Children, in general, love to sing. And they only encounter barriers, and then either stop singing or get discouraged from singing. So I firmly believe that if you leave it open, then the burden is on me to teach them, and to make them sound as good as they can sound, together, while continuing to feel the joy and the excitement of singing."

> *"If you leave it open, then the burden is on me to teach them." — Dr. Dawn-Marie Schafer*

That freedom, she said, is what lets her singers thrive. "It's not school. We're not trying to live up to some impossible standard, or do some competition. We're just trying to sing music that is going to bring happiness and joy to the audiences that are listening to us, as well as to ourselves."

So it's not about perfection, I said. It's about participation. And so often people are told they can't sing.

"Right," she said. "That's exactly where I'm coming from. Everyone is able to sing. If we never put any qualifier on it, if we never said whether someone was good or they weren't good, then everyone would sing, because it really is a joyful thing that we all really do enjoy doing. But a lot of people tell themselves the story that someone else told them. Someone else was elevated and always told they were so good, and they felt they weren't, so they put themselves down. However it happens, the vast majority of people believe that they can't sing, unless they're told that they can."

> *"The vast majority of people believe that they can't sing, unless they're told that they can." — Dr. Dawn-Marie Schafer*

She has nothing against excellence. "The people who excel in music can do the excellent music and sound wonderful," she said. "But that's 1%. The other 99% should just be singing, because it's something that we're all able to do. And it's a joy."



Dr. Dawn-Marie Schafer leads an energetic Saturday rehearsal. *Photo courtesy of the Austin Children's Choir.*

## FROM THE FOUR SEASONS TO THE CAPITOL

The choir's season follows the school calendar, starting in late August and wrapping by the end of April. The early finish is practical: "A lot of our members are swimmers, and swim season starts at the beginning of May," Schafer said.

Within that season, the choir gets around. Every year it sings for the tree lighting at the Four Seasons in Austin, a semi-private event the hotel brings them in for. It usually gives an outdoor caroling concert at the Umlauf Sculpture Garden. Sometimes it sings at Austin Spurs games up in Cedar Park, performing at halftime or singing the national anthem before tip-off.

In late April, the choir goes on tour. "We sing in multiple places," she said. "H-E-B is our huge sponsor, so we make sure to do a concert at the Central Market off of Lamar in Austin as a way to thank them, but it's also a really great opportunity to sing where there are families." Other years have taken the choir to a hospital and to the Texas Capitol. "It just depends on what we schedule for that year," she said. The season closes with a final concert back at Hillcrest for families and friends.

## SIXTY VOICES AND GROWING

When Schafer started in 2023, the choir had 25 singers. This year there are around 60, and she said the choir keeps more than half of its singers from year to year, closer to 60%.

With growth came structure. Everyone rehearses together for an hour. Then a select group of 25 or so older, more experienced singers stays on as the advanced choir. "They do a little bit of music that's just a little bit more along their level, a little more challenging," she said. "But not super challenging, again, because we're not trying to be impressive. We're just trying to do things that people love."



Schafer works with younger singers during rehearsal, with piano accompaniment. *Photo courtesy of the Austin Children's Choir.*

## SIMON'S MOMENT

Teaching can be so hard, and it can also be so rewarding. I asked her for a moment she looks back on and thinks, *wow*.

She told me about Sing Me a Story, an organization the choir has collaborated with for the last two seasons. "They're essentially like a Make-A-Wish Foundation, but for musicians," she explained. The organization finds a child in the area who is living with a medical condition or another challenge, and has that child write a story. The story is handed to a local composer, often an up-and-coming student composer, who writes a piece for a performing group.

Last year, the choir's piece was for a boy named Simon. Simon has Sanfilippo syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that Schafer described as "basically a form of childhood Alzheimer's disease." He was nine. He had been able to speak when he was younger, but by then he was nonverbal.

His mother was worried. The concert would run 30 or 40 minutes, with his piece at the very end, and she wasn't sure how he would manage. "She was concerned about his ability to regulate himself while the concert was happening," Schafer said. "And he came to the concert, and we did our whole concert, and then his piece was at the end. And he was engaged the entire time, by the music, by the kids."

When his piece began, he wandered, watching the singers. "But you could tell he recognized the story as his own story," she said, "and the characters that he had put in his story."

The piece builds to a big ending. "The audience, of course, erupted in applause, and he turned around, and again, his parents were completely amazed. He turned around and just kind of put his arms out, as if to recognize that this was his moment. Everyone stood up and erupted in applause."

> *"It wasn't just music, it wasn't just good teaching. Everyone in the room was on the same level." — Dr. Dawn-Marie Schafer*

"It was no longer about how good our performance was, or about how sad it was for him," she said. "It just became a moment where everyone in the room had experienced something new for the first time. We recognized how profoundly human that moment was. It wasn't just music, it wasn't just good teaching, it wasn't just neurodivergence or medical issues. Everyone in the room was on the same level of enjoying something that had been made new for him."

The choir's website records that world premiere: "Simon's Song," by the choir's collaborative pianist, Nicholas Jimenez, performed at Hillcrest Church on December 13, 2025. Schafer said a similar performance is planned for the choir's gala, with another child and a different composer. "I'm equally as excited to see that little girl's response," she said.



The choir performs in matching teal shirts for a church audience. *Photo courtesy of the Austin Children's Choir.*

## A PLACE FOR EVERY CHILD

That openness extends to every singer in the room. Schafer mentioned one boy who has been in the choir for seven years and is autistic. "He engages with the choir a little differently than everyone else, but he loves choir, and he participates in performances," she said. "He's another member of the choir."

Having no barriers means any child can find a place to sing, and it means navigating the child who isn't matching pitch or the one singing very loud. "Even though we're not about perfection, we also want to be achieving at the highest level that we can for the children that are in front of us," she said. "And it's very, very heartwarming to see those children happy and smiling and singing, and enjoying every minute of it."

## THE HARD PART

Every nonprofit has its struggles, and Schafer was candid about hers. The first is maintaining an effective board that can manage a growing organization. "We do have some really fabulous and devoted board members," she said. "But sharing the work, and building a group of people who understand what their roles are, is a challenge."

The second is money. The choir typically receives one grant each year, and it offers scholarships where they're needed. "Again, reducing as many barriers as possible," she said. "Finding funding without fundraising from our families, who are already paying tuition, is probably the biggest challenge."

Space is not the problem. In fact, she said, the choir is looking at expanding next year to a second location. Most of its singers live in the far north, between Leander and North Austin, near the choir's home base by Anderson Lane. Since she joined, she has hoped to bring the choir closer to the center of the city, "because there are so many schools in Austin that don't have music programs or elementary choirs." I noted that many of those programs were cut in the early 2000s. "That's right," she said. "And even middle school choirs are

beginning to go away. Some of the community choirs in Austin have also gone away, some very large, reputable ones have folded."

> *"There are so many schools in Austin that don't have music programs or elementary choirs." — Dr. Dawn-Marie Schafer*

She doesn't want to lose the 60 kids she has up north, so the plan is a new location in central Austin with a second group of singers. That means a second director, a second accompanist and more funding. Part of the hope for the 40th anniversary gala, she said, is to reach people who might commit to ongoing support, through yearly donations or corporate sponsorships.

"We've been around forever," she said, "but the dip after COVID was long enough for the choir to have kind of gone out of view." Above all, she doesn't want cost to become a barrier. "I would hate to raise tuition any more than it already is. It's very reasonable right now, but if we raised it, it might stop being as reasonable."



Schafer conducts the choir outdoors on the steps of a limestone building. *Photo courtesy of the Austin Children's Choir.*

## THE LIVE MUSIC CAPITAL, FROM THE GROUND UP

Austin has long been known as the Live Music Capital of the World. I was part of that scene for a very long time, so I asked whether the choir works with local musicians.

Not yet, she said, and she traces that back to the enrollment dip around COVID and a slow recovery. "Up until when I took over, and then it started to snowball over the years. It's taken four years to where now I feel that we have a sound that is worth putting out," she said. "I had 6-year-olds that have now stayed with me for three years, that are 9-year-olds, and now they sound the way I want them to sound. It just takes time to develop that."

There are signs of what's coming. Local talent Jeska Bailey Forsyth is a featured speaker at the gala, and Schafer said she may sing with the children on one of their songs. In the spring, the choir has been invited to perform with the Texas State University Chorale, on April 25, singing the children's choir part in Dan Forrest's Requiem. "That's exciting," she said, "but that's very much San Marcos, removed from the main Austin scene."

What she really wants is a bigger connection to the city's own music. "Austin is the live music capital, or at least has been known as that," she said. "And part of my heart and mission with this choir is, if we can continue to get out in front, and maybe make some collaborations and connections with some of these local, up-and-coming groups, could we not kind of break that back open again? Where we have more live music happening in Austin from the ground, with children, with adults, with professional musicians. I hope that is on the horizon for us."

> *"Could we not kind of break that back open again?" — Dr. Dawn-Marie Schafer*



Choir members and leaders gather for a holiday portrait downtown. *Photo courtesy of the Austin Children's Choir.*



The full choir poses with its directors against the Austin skyline. *Photo courtesy of the Austin Children's Choir.*

After 40 years, the Austin Children's Choir is still doing what Dr. Bernard Gastler started in 1986: gathering kids on a Saturday morning and teaching them to sing together. Under Dawn-Marie Schafer, it's doing it with the doors wide open. Every child gets a voice. And if she has her way, the rest of Austin will be singing along.

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## FIND THE AUSTIN CHILDREN'S CHOIR

**Website:** austinchildrenschoir.org

**40th Anniversary Fundraising Gala:** Saturday, November 14, 5:00 to 9:00 p.m., Omni Hotel, Downtown Austin. A 21-and-up cocktail-attire evening with a performance by the choir including the premiere of "When I Grow Up" by local composer Kyra Hong, keynotes by Artistic Director Dr. Dawn-Marie Schafer and local talent Jeska Bailey Forsyth, and a silent auction. The choir posted on October 27 that a limited number of extended tickets are available; check the website.

**Join the choir:** The choir is open to singers ages 6 to 18. The full choir rehearses Saturdays from 10 to 11 a.m. at Hillcrest Church on Steck Avenue in northwest Austin, and the advanced choir continues to 11:30 a.m. Full-year tuition (August to April) is $600, or $300 per semester. New singers may attend one rehearsal before committing. Register at austinchildrenschoir.org/join.

**Donate:** The Austin Children's Choir is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and contributions are tax deductible. Donate online at austinchildrenschoir.org/donate, or mail a check payable to Austin Children's Choir, P.O. Box 29452, Austin, TX 78755, with "Donation" in the memo line. A $700 Angel Program gift covers one child's tuition for a season. For corporate sponsorship, email info@austinchildrenschoir.org.

**Serve on the board:** board@austinchildrenschoir.org

**Book the choir:** The choir performs for weddings, benefits and sporting events. Contact info@austinchildrenschoir.org.

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