

Coffee Break

with Josh Pedde and Amy Hughley
of the Indianapolis Children's Choir



Josh Pedde



Amy Hughley

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Indianapolis Children's Choir, an organization that has grown to reach around 2,500 young singers. I spoke to Josh Pedde—only the second artistic director in the choir's history—and associate artistic director Amy Hughley.

ALEX HODGKINSON

Josh: In 1986, Henry Leck, my mentor, launched the ICC after a visit from the Chicago Children's Choir, who were performing at a regional ACDA conference in Indianapolis.

Henry was a choir director at a Unitarian church, and the Chicago Children's Choir asked to be placed with his congregation for home-stays. Because this was before the internet, Henry said, "I don't know much about you—can I come to Chicago and check you out first?"

He drove up and visited their church, which was in the middle of a kind of rough neighborhood. He watched those kids walk in off the street and sing Bach as beautifully as he'd ever heard it. Right then he saw the power of music to shape a community, and he thought: Indianapolis needs this. Henry came home determined to start a children's choir here. He launched a summer camp of about 200 singers, and that was the beginning.

The mission was always to be part of the community, and we are proud and privileged to feel that we're part of the DNA of Indianapolis. We're one of the few organizations that bring students from all sides of the city—north, south, east, west, inner city, suburbs, and beyond—and they meet together to create a community. That's our big thing. Over the years, we've been part of governor's inaugurations, mayoral inaugurations, the Super Bowl in 2007 (when we sang the national anthem with Kelly Clarkson), Olympic trials, and state funerals. We are proud to be the voice of Indy.

In my second year as director, in 2019, Senator Richard Lugar passed away. He was a major national figure, head of the Foreign Relations Committee, the kind of person whose funeral normally would have been at Washington National Cathedral. But he specifically requested that it be held in Indianapolis [where he had served as mayor from 1968 to 1976], and the ICC was invited to perform.

Everything for a funeral happens quickly. We got the phone call and said, "Great, we'll make it happen." But I was actually on vacation with my family at Disney World at the time! And this is where our amazing team comes in. My advice to anyone in this profession: Surround yourself with incredibly talented people you trust. Amy is one of those people. I trust her implicitly—she's an amazing colleague. She ran all the dress rehearsals while I was gone. Then I flew back, landed, got put in a black SUV with sirens blazing and the Secret Service on hand, conducted, and flew back out. It all worked because of our incredible team.



Amy: It was a remarkable occasion, attended by many dignitaries, including then-vice president Mike Pence. The service was about three hours long, and our kids—fifth- through ninth-graders—sat perfectly still and poised the whole time. Afterward we said, “You could have laughed at the jokes,” and they said, “There were jokes? We couldn’t hear anything—they never turned the monitors on for us!”

Over the past four decades, we’ve also had many great tours. One moment I’ll always remember was at Canterbury Cathedral in 2023. We had about 40 of our singers joining David Flood and Henry Leck for the International Children’s Choir Festival. Our singers performed the responses and the psalms alone, which they did amazingly, even though very few of them had Anglican backgrounds. Listening to them in that space was overwhelming—I couldn’t talk afterward! It was emotional to watch them experience a tradition that has meant so much to me in my own church life.

We are a large organization, and there is a lot of thought and careful planning behind how we structure our programs. Up until third grade, anyone can join, and the sessions are half singing, half music class. We use Kodály and combine that with lots of movement and games. After two years in the preparatory program, they audition. We check vocal health and pitch matching, and we see how easily they take instruction. Placement is ability-based, not age-based. A fifth-grader might be advanced because they play violin and have strong reading skills; a sixth-grader might still be learning to read music. We place each child where they’ll get the best instruction. There is a small cost for membership, but money should never be the reason a student can’t join. Financial assistance is open to every single family.

We have about 2,500 singers involved in total. About 2,000 are preschoolers in early-childhood programs, where our teachers visit weekly. Around 500 or so are in our structured choirs, from kindergarten right through tenth, eleventh, twelfth grades. We also have alumni who come back and sing with us for special events. We have outreach programs too—neighborhood choir academies, summer camps, and affiliate groups in Columbus and Anderson. We try to come together about once a year as one large organization to showcase what we do.

Josh: With any major anniversary, we want to honor the past and also look forward. Our first concert this season celebrated tours of the past 40 years. We’ve sung

on every continent except Antarctica! We programmed some of our hardest music in the first eight weeks: Joan Szymko’s *Nada te turbe*, Ola Gjeilo’s *Ubi caritas*, Schütz’s *Cantate Domino*, Paul Halley’s *Untraveled Worlds*, and pieces from Australia and Hawaii. Lots of foreign languages right out of the gate, but the kids always rise to the occasion. We also appeared on TV for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day—as we do every year—on a program called *Holiday Memories*.

Looking forward, our March concert features Dan Forrester’s *Jubilare Deo*, written for ICC’s 30th anniversary. Our May concert is titled “At the Corner of Bach and Broadway,” combining favorites from the past. It showcases the artistry of children and the versatility of their voices, one of ICC’s defining traits since Henry began: being able to sing authentically in many styles. Our 40th-anniversary celebration will culminate in a concert at Carnegie Hall on June 24 (right in the middle of the World Cup). We’re taking almost 200 singers—from kindergarten through alumni—to perform onstage at Carnegie Hall, and we’re so excited!

Ultimately, our impact is about using music to build a better community in central Indiana and beyond. Kids come here and make incredible music and lifelong friends. I always wondered why Henry picked me as his successor—I felt like nothing special. He simply said, “You showed up. Every time I put a challenge in front of you, you showed up. You showed up for the students; you showed up for me.” That has stayed with me.

Amy: My advice to anyone working with young people is to be passionate and present in everything you do. The children choose to be here. The presence and passion we give them, they give back tenfold—musically and personally. You can see the power of that music in every performance, regardless of each singer’s background. And, as Josh said earlier: surround yourself with talented people you trust. We are so lucky to have such a great team here; we all work together so well, and we learn from each other every day.

Josh Pedde’s book, Showing Up, is available for purchase at beckenhorstpress.com/showing-up.

Alex Hodgkinson, FRCO, is director of music at St. Theresa’s Church, Trumbull, Conn., and co-dean of the Greater Bridgeport AGO Chapter.