

La Nell Martin leads Oakland Youth Chorus in 40th anniversary celebration

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La Nell Martin was a shy kid. She loved to sing, but did her best work alone in the kitchen, using a broomstick as a makeshift microphone stand.

"I would be thinking, 'Oh, yeah, I am Diana Ross!'" the Oakland native laughs. "I was very much a closet singer."

Then in 1986, Martin joined the Oakland Youth Chorus -- and her world changed. She was 15 and petrified of singing in public. In her three years with OYC, she was able to face that fear and embrace the joy of making music.

"This is where I opened up," she says. "OYC is where I began to get my confidence."

Now the 43-year-old alum is helping others do the same at the acclaimed youth arts organization. In 2012, she took the reins at OYC as artistic director. It's been her chance to give back, she says. And she will be busily doing just that this holiday season, leading the OYC and its many musical offshoots in multiple performances -- at tree-lighting ceremonies, toy drives and other community events.

The marquee event is the Oakland Youth Chorus' 40th anniversary concert on Dec. 13 at First Presbyterian Church in Oakland. The organization will celebrate the occasion with the kind of diverse program it has become known for, built from songs from around the globe and highlighted by a newly commissioned piece by Bay Area bassist-bandleader-composer Marcus Shelby.

"I like that we can do different things," Martin says. "We don't just do classical (repertoire). We do music from all over the world. We speak to what Oakland is."

Martin is adamantly proud of her roots -- what she calls her "East Oakland-ness" -- as well as thankful for all the music training she received in the Bay Area. She was part of the Young Musicians Program at UC Berkeley, studied music at both Holy Names High School and Holy Names University, and earned a B.A. in voice at Cal State East Bay. She's taught voice for several local institutions over the years.

She first returned to the Oakland Youth Chorus in 2004, working part time as the conductor of OYC's Middle School Magic Chorus, supplementing her income with a night gig at FedEx. She quickly took on more responsibilities at OYC, which didn't surprise her colleagues.

"I have watched La Nell grow as a choral director," says OYC teacher Rhonda Crane. "She has continued to keep the quality of our singers at a high standard, thus keeping the legacy of Oakland Youth Chorus alive."

Crane says it's Martin's "delightful personality and interesting repertoire choices" that keep her students engaged. And that's no small accomplishment these days. Perhaps the most significant of the challenges Martin faces is recruiting in an era when many young singers prefer posting YouTube videos. Parents say Martin is the right person for the job.

"I love watching La Nell with the kids," says Cynthia Freeman, whose 14-year-old daughter, Caitlyn, has

been in OYC for nearly 10 years. "She makes choir fun. La Nell uses her great sense of humor, patience and work ethic to make beautiful music with the kids."

Freeman notes Martin's gift for making choir a safe place to learn, as kids explore their musical gifts and make mistakes.

"La Nell talks about the choir being a family, and I know for my daughter it is."

And it's a mighty big one, at that. OYC attendance is on the upswing, and last season the organization served more than 600 students, held 54 performances and entertained more than 10,000 people. Martin has played a big part in this renaissance.

"La Nell's commitment to her singers and the focus on a welcoming and inclusive community breathes life into our mission and changes lives through the power of choral music," says Keri Butkevich, OYC's executive director. Plus, Martin's passion for choral music -- and for OYC -- definitely translates onstage.

"La Nell has a sparkling way of presenting quality music with her kids," says Terrance Kelly, artistic director of the Oakland Interfaith Gospel Choir. "You can tell that she pours herself into their music through their commitment and the obvious joy they have when performing."

Follow Jim Harrington at [Twitter.com/jimthecritic](https://twitter.com/jimthecritic) and www.facebook.com/jim.bayareanews.

Biography

Name: La Nell Martin

Age: 43

Residence: Oakland

Claim to fame: Artistic director of the Oakland Youth Chorus

Concert: The Oakland Youth Chorus performs its 40th anniversary concert at 6 p.m. Dec. 13 at First Presbyterian Church in Oakland. Tickets are \$5 to \$20 at www.oaklandyouthchorus.org. The program includes a new work by composer Marcus Shelby, commissioned by Composers and Schools in Concert.

Quote: "It's about the kids. I just want them to have a good experience."