

# Hallelujah... did they sing

By Deede Cuddihy

IT COULD have been a disaster. As part of their summer holiday programme, the YouthWorks department at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow decided to offer 11 to 17-year-olds the chance to create a youth gospel choir from scratch – in five days. Actually, it was four days because, on the fifth day, participants would be required to put on a “rafter-raising” show for family and friends in the concert hall.

Leader of the “Good for the Soul” project was Bonnie Johnson-Williams, a 37-year-old music educator and professional gospel jazz trumpeter from Sierra Leone who has been studying for an MA in Arts in a Social Context at the RSAMD since September. As part of his course, Bonnie has run a 10-week gospel choir project for primary schools in the city and will be helping schools in East Renfrewshire set up a steel band after the summer holidays.

YouthWorks were delighted with the response to Good for the Soul, for which four boys and 13 girls, aged from 10 to 18, paid £180 each.

On the first day, Monday, it becomes apparent that, although the aspiring gospel singers are supposed to have fun (at least, that’s what Bonnie tells them), they are going to have to put in a lot of hard work too. They’ll be in the YouthWorks rehearsal room for five hours a day and will have to practise at home to get the playlist of eight songs memorised in time. Bonnie is adamant the choir will be singing, as he puts it, “without paper”.

After lunch, Bonnie assures the singers: “You are gradually coming out of your shells.” But he tells them they’re going to have to work on volume and breathing. “Don’t

depend on the microphone because if it doesn’t sound good without a mic, it won’t sound good with one.”

Although none of the participants has sung gospel before, most are members of school, church or youth choirs. Very few have sung solo, however, but that is about to change as Bonnie reveals that he wants each of them to sing, in turn, the six lines of a very short song.

By day two, the singers are looking more relaxed. Bonnie gets them warmed up with a fast and furious version of the “Bingo” song (“There was a man who had a dog and Bingo was his name...”), where you substitute a clap for the letters in “Bingo” until only claps are left.

Then it’s on to “This Little Light of Mine”, with Bonnie pounding out a raucous accompaniment on the piano. He tells the singers they’re going to have to start work on the body movements that go with the songs. “I don’t want to teach you dance movements, I want your individuality,” he says. “I want you to perform in your own style, your own groove. There are some songs that, when you hear them, you just can’t stand still. Cick your fingers and move your feet.”

He points to the flat screen monitor which is displaying the words: “If you can talk, you can sing. If you can walk, you can dance.” Then, in case they’ve forgotten, Bonnie reminds the aspiring gossellers: “We now have to think about the song that we’re going to write”

Thanks largely to some after-hours work by their choirmaster, the new six-line song, “God is Good”, is on the screen the following day and, by Wednesday afternoon, Bonnie tells the singers: “The song is yours – it’s ready for Friday.”

Young people who were strangers at the start of the week are talking



Bonnie Johnson-Williams, music educator at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. Photograph: Tom Main

to each other and the group is bonding. Bonnie tells them to practise their singing, moving at home in front of a mirror and “be your own judge of what should be improved.”

On Thursday, the choir discusses

costume (blue jeans, black YouthWorks tee shirts), practises walking into the concert hall, gets lessons in clapping techniques, and is reminded to smile when singing and on no account to look at the floor.

And so to Friday – and a brilliant

performance. Not only does the choir look and sound good, it seems to have developed some highly professional microphone-handling techniques along the way. Hearing 17 different voices with their different strengths touches the heart.

## Turning ideas into reality

By Douglas Blane

WHY HAS a charity which supports disadvantaged and disaffected schoolchildren suddenly begun working with sixth-year students in independent schools – who are in general neither?

It’s a story with two threads that has come together in the Scholar’s Challenge, a new initiative from The Prince’s Trust which sees senior students at eight Scottish schools, three from the independent sector, aiming to raise £20,000 each for

charity. “We know it can be done, because last year we set five firms of solicitors the same target, in a challenge called the Lion’s Den,” says Alison Taylor, the trust’s corporate fundraising manager. “In the end, they turned £3,000 each, which we gave them at the start, into a total of £300,000.”

It is certainly impressive, but it’s surely asking a lot of schoolchildren, no matter how senior, to match the fund-raising exploits of commercial operators with well-heeled contacts?

Not at all, says Ms Taylor, which

is where the second thread of the story comes in, with a trust-supported project at Bishopbriggs Academy, in which a dozen third-year pupils have taken an ambitious concept through to rewarding reality: “They designed and built a nine-hole adventure golf course behind the school.”

That combination of business savvy and youthful enthusiasm worked so well that the trust realised it was a learning model with legs. “In the Scholar’s Challenge, we put inspirational entrepreneurs together

with groups of 16 to 17-year-olds,” she says. “Then we provide project managers to teach techniques for turning ideas into reality. What a dynamic combination that is going to be.”

The Prince’s Trust is giving teams of 10 to 15 senior pupils at each of the following schools six months to turn £3,000 into £20,000: Bishopbriggs Academy, Broughton High, Dollar Academy, Larkhall Academy, Lenzie Academy, Lomond School, Madras College and Merchiston Castle School.