

Music man: Kevin Zakresky is at the helm of the new MYVoice program, a Chor Leoni initiative that's introducing teenage boys to the world of choral music. Registration is underway for sessions beginning in the new year at Douglas College.

Photograph by: submitted , for New West Record

Whatever you do, just don't tell Kevin Zakresky that you can't carry a tune in a bucket - or any other combination of words that might imply you can't sing.

He'll roll his eyes, sigh a little and pronounce to you the truth that he's making it his mission to share with the world.

"Everybody can sing," he'll declare, in a tone that brooks no argument.

And if you're smart, you won't argue. Because, let's face it, Zakresky may just know a thing or two about the whole singing business.

He's managed to pack a lot of musical experience into his 28 years of life, with master's degrees in music from both Yale and UBC, and a doctorate nearly completed at Yale.

He has an extensive resumé as a performer - yes, he belongs to that much-sought-after species of the choral world: tenor - and as a teacher, adjudicator, keyboardist and music director, plus a host of awards to his name.

In his current incarnation, Zakresky is the assistant director of the Chor Leoni Men's Choir and a choral music instructor at Douglas College. Now, he's leading a new Chor Leoni initiative to get young men involved in the world of choral singing.

Zakresky is taking the helm of the choir's new MYVoice program.

MYVoice, for Mobilizing Young Men's Voices, is a four-month-long program that gives teenaged boys a chance to come together in an all-male choir to explore the world of choral music.

Registration is open now for the program that starts in January.

Two choirs are being offered in the Lower Mainland - one at Charles Tupper Secondary in East Vancouver, led by Carrie Tennant; and one at Douglas College here in New West, led by Zakresky.

"Chor Leoni, being a men's choir, feels the need to help get young men singing," Zakresky explains.

The choir already offers a PROMYS (Program for Mentoring Young Singers) program for select, experienced young male singers.

The difference with MYVoice, Zakresky notes, is that it's open to absolutely everyone - no experience required. It's for all boys with changed voices, right up to the end of high school, and there's no requirement to know how to read music.

All that's needed is an interest in learning and the ability to commit to 11 weekly sessions (with two weeks off for spring break in March). At the end of that time, the boys will come together for a combined retreat and concert that will include participation by singers from Chor Leoni.

Over the course of that time, the boys can expect to be introduced to a little bit of everything - classical, jazz, world music, "as many different things as a group of human beings can sing," Zakresky says.

"Most of us when we were younger, we have that one piece that grabbed us and made us want to stay with choir," he says.

By exposing his young singers to multiple styles, he's hoping to provide that moment for as many boys as possible so that they will then return to their high schools and want to join choir.

"Once they're in high school choir, then we've got 'em," Zakresky says with a grin.

He points out that, ultimately, the hope is that the boys will go on to sing in choirs at all levels in their adult lives.

This is the first time MYVoice has been tried, and Zakresky admits it's an experiment.

But he's confident it will fly. He points out that the timing is good, with the success of what he calls simply "that television program" (that being, of course, Glee, Fox's breakout hit comedy about a high school show choir) making choral music popular for teenagers.

He's also keen on the idea of having an all-male choral environment, rather than a mixed choir with girls.

"Having teenage boys and teenage girls in the same environment changes the whole dynamic of the rehearsal," he points out with a wry grin.

In an all-male environment, he's hoping to see boys come into their own as singers.

"Maybe some of the stigma of choir will be removed," he says, "particularly for the guys who are just trying it out."

He's eager to work with the young singers, noting it's very different conducting teens as opposed to adults.

"There's way more energy," he says. "There's nothing more formidable than teenagers having fun. That entity, it's powerful. That collective energy is what makes all of us want to direct youth."

Zakresky notes that teens, unlike adults, haven't yet fallen into the trap of believing that they "can't sing." (Has he mentioned that everybody can sing? Because if he hasn't, he'll say it again: "Everybody can sing.")

Teenagers, he says, don't have the reluctance of adults when it comes to just giving it a shot.

"They have this feeling you can try or do anything," he says. "They have this willingness to try."

Online registration is now open.

Interested singers can check out www.chorleoni.org/myvoice or e-mail MYVoice@chorleoni.org.

The application deadline is Dec. 1, and sessions begin on Jan. 17 in Vancouver and Jan. 18 in New Westminster.

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