

# Song of Eastern High

How could these young singers from the inner city even dream of competing with world-class choirs?

BY KATIE McCABE



FIFTY-FOUR TEEN-AGERS came crashing through the double doors of the Eastern High School choir room one April afternoon in 1987, wild with the news they'd heard over the loudspeaker. They had been selected to compete at the International Youth and Music Festival in Vienna, Austria. To these kids from the inner city of Washington, D.C., it sounded like a dream.

"Is it true, Mrs. Garrett?" shrieked the usually dreamy Ayesha Brock. "Is it true?"

Joyce Garrett wasn't smiling. How could she tell her award-winning gospel singers that a golden voice wasn't enough to get you to Europe when your pockets were empty? Hadn't she spent 22 years convincing the city's poorest children that it wasn't where you lived but what you did that counted?

"Yes, it's true," she said slowly. "Only 36 North American choirs were selected. It's an honor just to have been invited."

"But Mrs. G," someone said, "are we going?"

Most of Garrett's students had to work to pay for their clothes, school supplies, sometimes even food. They had about as much chance of going to Vienna as to the moon. "We'll see," she said. "A year from July is a long way off."

Of course, they couldn't attend, Garrett told herself. Still, she showed the elegant, hand-lettered invitation to her neighbor Tom Howell, a local businessman who had collaborated with her on dozens of projects. Something in Garrett's voice told Howell this was special. He read the letter slowly.

"Joyce," he said, "you are going to *accept* this invitation! You get

those kids ready, and we'll find a way to get 'em to Vienna."

Figuring the trip would cost \$160,000, Howell and others formed a committee, the Friends of Eastern High School Choir. They began calling city officials, local businessmen, church groups and the press. By the fall, Joyce Garrett's school mailbox had begun to fill with contributions. One came with a note: "Congratulations to you and your students. I am now living on Social Security disability, so I don't have much money. I have paid my rent for this month and I am sending you my last dollar."

Garrett taped the note above the choir-room entrance, alongside her favorite maxim: "There's always room at the top."

TO TEEN-AGERS raised on the gospel sound, the classical pieces they would have to sing to participate in the festival were daunting: Mozart's Kyrie in D Minor, Schubert's Mass and Aleksandr Borodin's "Polovetsian Dances." And the Borodin was apparently to be sung in German! Even Garrett—an accomplished classical pianist with a Master's degree in music—was full of trepidation. She decided to enlist the help of a German tutor.

"Starting tomorrow," Garrett told the choir, "you can put gospel on hold. This is a whole different sound, and you're going to sing it on a world-class level."

Many of the students couldn't read music; they'd have to memo-

rize the long, complicated "Polovetsian Dances" one measure at a time. To begin, for each voice part, Garrett sang the first measure substituting the syllable "loo" for the German words the choir couldn't yet pronounce. Fifty-four voices echoed hers. Back and forth they went, working through the first section, until teacher and students were exhausted. Then German tutor Jeanne Lofton led the attack on the lyrics.

Each afternoon at 3:15, Garrett and sometimes Lofton tackled another page. And each day, more and more singers skipped practice. Garrett had always been so proud of the way her kids rose to challenges. This time, it seemed, she had overwhelmed them.

On the last Friday in March 1988, only half the choir was present. Garrett was close to tears, but she pressed forward until finally the choir became so entangled in the German that their voices trailed off into silence.

Garrett threw down her sheet music. "We have to stop being scared of this—*starting with me!*" she shouted.

The choir had never seen Joyce Garrett frightened before. But then she spoke in her softest voice. "These are just little black notes on a page. Are we going to let them get the best of us?" The realization that she was struggling along with them made the Mozart and the Borodin seem less terrifying. The tension began to dissolve.

Garrett walked into the next rehearsal with a box of cassette recordings of their Vienna music. "Now you can start living with this music from morning till night," she announced.

The students popped the tapes into the cassette players they carried with them. From that day on, Garrett's rehearsals spilled out onto the streets of Washington. Choir members, waiting at bus stops, staged impromptu Mozart or Schubert songfests. Soon the absent kids started coming back.

JOYCE GARRETT received a message to call Ayesha Brock's grandmother. Unhappy at home, Ayesha had begun riding the subway until late at night. Garrett promised to talk to the girl.

Intelligent and ambitious, Ayesha had hoped to become a writer. But lately, the pain of her mother's rejection had eclipsed all her dreams.

"She always promised to come see my sister and brothers and me," Ayesha told Garrett that evening. "We would sit on my grandmother's porch till dark, but she never came. She makes me feel like nothing."

"I used to feel just like you do," Garrett said gently. "But I am here to tell you to let it go."

Ayesha's large dark eyes welled with tears as Garrett recounted her own story of growing up without a mother in Kinston, N.C. After her parents divorced, Garrett was reared by two aunts, who gave her everything from piano lessons to

motherly love. But her mother's absence tore at her, and she rebelled against her aunts' strict upbringing. Not until they borrowed money to send her to college did Garrett decide to put the bitterness behind her. She made up her mind that she would do for her students what her aunts had done for her.

Garrett glanced down at the spiral notebook in Ayesha's hand. "God always gives us a way out of our pain. For me, it was music. You have your writing. Go to the most beautiful place you can find, and write away the hurt."

That night, in the garden behind the Washington Cathedral, Ayesha Brock sat and wrote about Joyce Garrett: "I'm beginning to understand what it takes to be a woman of excellence. Look what Mrs. Garrett's done with her life. I may not be the best at anything yet, but someday I will be."

It wasn't the first time Garrett had helped one of her kids. She didn't always have the answers, but she always understood the pain of youngsters like Tania Lumpkin and Albert Graves.

Tania's parents had put her out on the street when she was 15. Tania never asked for help, but, each evening after rehearsal, Garrett would pull her aside and make sure she had a safe place to stay for the night. "Don't worry, Tania, we'll figure out something. I'll talk to your mother. You just keep your head high."

Albert Graves had decided to

leave his mother's apartment to live in a short-term residence for adolescents. "We practice all this beautiful music," he told Garrett, "and then I walk past the dope dealers to get home. I hate it. Sometimes I wish I could just sing forever."

To Garrett, Albert's words brought to mind a simple truth. If the pain of their environment had kept her kids from dreaming, it was also what kept them singing—with a depth of emotion few choirs could match. She *had* to get them to Vienna.

"JOYCE, we've figured out a way to make \$30,000 in one night," Tom Howell said in early April. "You can book the Kennedy Center for a concert on May 22 and sell tickets for \$20."

Garrett was torn. The choir would be lucky to learn the music in three more months, much less six weeks. But she knew that donations had slowed to a trickle. "If that's an open date, I guess we'd better grab it," she replied nervously.

When Garrett broke the news to the choir, they cheered. The Kennedy Center! Now *that* was big-time. The prospect of performing in their own city energized them in a way Vienna hadn't.

As the Kennedy Center countdown began, rehearsals stretched to 8 p.m. Garrett decided to make the concert a dry run for Vienna. Ordinary choir robes wouldn't do, she told the fund-raising committee, so tailors were called. Everyone, it

seemed, was eager to put the choir onstage in style—some at no charge!

The week before the concert, choir members were walking on air. Not only had they learned the music, but ticket sales, which had gotten off to a slow start, had begun to pick up.

Backstage on concert night, Garrett called for silence. "So many people have believed in us for so long. Now it's time to say thank you to Washington."

The choir held the audience spellbound with the majestic Kyrie, and then brought them to their feet with the lively "Polovetsian Dances." Garrett couldn't see the audience, but her students' expressions told her all she needed to know: after a year of frustration and doubt, they finally believed in themselves.

In the sweltering June heat, the choir began a six-week journey from "good" to "world-class." Garrett was relentless. She knew the other contestants hailed from elite schools and had classical repertoires. To them, the vocal techniques her kids were struggling with were second nature. The heavy "chest sound" typical of some gospel singers would have to give way to the operatic sound Garrett called "head voice."

"Put your hands on your foreheads and bring the sound *up*," Garrett instructed. "Imagine yourselves in a vast cathedral, and let your voices float up to heaven."

In the final days of June, she

thought she could hear the crystal-clear sound coming. But what she heard standing in the back of the Eastern High auditorium on July 9 overwhelmed her. "I wish you could hear how you sound—like one voice!"

Soon they were on their way to Europe. They got their first glimpse of the rival choirs at a joint concert in Salzburg before the competition. "Listen to those kids; they sound beautiful," the Easterners whispered to one another. They knew instantly that in this competition no one could count on a prize.

An hour before the Vienna festival, Garrett gathered her students. "I want you to remember that everyone invited here is a winner," she told them. They listened quietly, trying to imagine how it would feel to return to Washington empty-handed. Then they practiced, right up until the master of ceremonies called them onto the stage.

"And now," his voice boomed, "the *amazing* Eastern High School choir, from Washington, D.C.!"

The choir froze. All heads turned to Joyce Garrett. The concert hall was so hushed that the audience could hear Garrett's satin sleeves rustle when she raised her arms to begin the Kyrie. Precisely on cue, 54 voices blended with the piano.

As they began to sing, Garrett read panic on her students' faces. In one horrible instant, she realized they couldn't hear themselves. The vast, heavily draped Sophiensaal

was an acoustical dream for audiences, but a nightmare for the unprepared performer. Up front, all the sound was absorbed.

Deaf to their own voices, the students kept their eyes on Garrett and made their way through the Mozart and the Borodin. But the music was so much a part of the choir that they didn't need to hear themselves.

Neither Garrett nor the choir could see the rapt expressions on the faces in the audience or know the judges' reaction to their performance. As they walked offstage, though the applause was thunderous, they were convinced they had failed. *Well*, Garrett thought, *at least it's over*.

In her hotel room that evening, Garrett heard the results by phone. "Mrs. Garrett?" said a heavily accented Austrian voice. "You are a winner!"

A barrage of instructions followed: the choir was to perform again in 48 hours, when the awards would be announced. Then, at a final concert on Thursday evening, Eastern was to sing the "Polovetsian Dances" with a Montana choir—in English.

Garrett didn't know whether to laugh or cry. *Learn the Polovetsian in English? By the day after tomorrow?* Learning it in German had been a bad joke; she had apparently misunderstood the requirements. On the other hand, she wondered, had their German rendition given them an edge with the judges?

When the students reported to the hotel lobby to hear the results, Garrett walked toward them and reached out with both arms. "You won!" she shouted. "You won!" And for 15 minutes, she disappeared in a sea of hugs.

Forty-eight hours later, the Eastern choir completed another hurdle. They performed the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and did it well. Holding hands, they watched the master of ceremonies step up to the microphone to award first, second and third prizes.

He startled everyone: "Because of the large gap between the top two contenders and the others, the judges have decided to award only first- and second-place trophies. These two winners are in a class by themselves."

The emcee held aloft a trophy. "The Silver Trophy goes to Eastern High School, Washington, D.C."

Garrett walked onstage. The audience roared.

"The winner of the Gold Trophy is the Latymer School from London." The choir director from the English school walked up to claim top honors.

Suddenly the Eastern choir began a spontaneous rendition of "We Are the World." Others joined in,

and soon hundreds of voices filled the Sophiensaal for the impromptu performance. That night Eastern completed another hurdle, performing a flawless "Polovetsian Dances" in English with the Montana choir, accompanied by a 100-piece symphony orchestra.

As the Eastern High students sang, they were celebrating much more than the cheering crowd could see. The audience saw nothing of the inner city in Ayesha Brock, rejoicing in her admission to Bennett College, Joyce Garrett's alma mater; or in Tania Lumpkin and Albert Graves, reunited with their families; or in the 51 other kids who'd wanted to quit so many times, yet hadn't. But the Eastern choir knew and, heads up, their voices floated higher and higher.

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*On returning to Washington, each choir member was granted a full-tuition scholarship by the University of the District of Columbia. In addition, proceeds from their performances since Vienna have funded an Eastern High School Choir Scholarship Fund, which has awarded \$1000 college grants to three seniors.*

*This fall Joyce Garrett is back in Room 337, with new faces in her choir and a new song in her heart.*



**Gaining Ground.** A former co-worker told her husband that she needed to do something about her shape. "You're fine," said her spouse. "You have a million-dollar figure already."

"Yeah," my friend replied, "but I've got it in all the wrong banks."

—Contributed by Mary L. Adams