

THE MUSICAL JOURNEY OF RYAN MURPHY

They say it takes a village to raise a child. It is also true that it takes a whole community to raise a musician. The small town of Newtown, Connecticut, though marked by tragedy in 2012, was an idyllic place to grow up and proved to be fertile soil for the mind of a musician. Ryan Murphy, associate music director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, attributes much of the success in his musical career to the mentorship of good music teachers.

“I feel like Newtown was where I was meant to grow up. I was put into contact with a lot of people who would help me along my musical journey,” says Ryan.

Before he was five years old, Ryan would come home from church and begin plunking on the piano, mimicking the songs that he learned to sing in Sunday school. Without the aid of formal training or sheet music, Ryan could re-create the pieces by ear. Seeing his gift, his mother promptly enrolled him in piano lessons.

Before the pint-sized pianist’s palms were large enough to stretch the breadth of an octave, he became the pianist for his Sunday School, a position usually reserved for adults. At the same time, Ryan joined a boys’ choir at a nearby Episcopal church.

The Episcopal Boys’ Choir was a rigorous program. “My first day in the choir we did *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* by Lassus, which is a serious, hefty piece,” Ryan remembers. “We were singing Handel’s *Messiah* by age 11. The boys’ choir introduced me to a lot of great music at a very young age.” This choir was instrumental in putting Ryan on the path to becoming a serious musician.

Ryan’s high school choral teacher also helped shape his talents, challenged him and gave him opportunities to stretch. Once, Ryan’s high school conductor wasn’t able to make a concert, and Ryan, as the choir’s student president, had to step in. “It wasn’t a huge gig, but when he gave me the baton and the responsibility to conduct, he showed a lot of trust in me. That trust was really key for me at that age,” says Ryan.

Ryan also played in the orchestra in high school drama productions. His senior year, he decided he wanted to know what it felt like to be on stage and limelight. He made plans to audition for a part in *Grease*. Ryan decided that for his first attempt at performing, he would just try to be one of the extras. Instead, the director cast Ryan as Danny Zuko, the hip-jiving, solo-singing, center-stage lead in the play.

“When I saw my role, my jaw hit the floor. I was shocked, and I was scared to death. I’d never acted or been on stage before,” Ryan says. “But I’ve learned since that things like that are really good to get you out of your comfort zone and to prove to yourself you can do things you never thought you could do. In that respect, it gave me confidence and paid off later.”



Somewhere in the Murphys' closet there is surviving video of Ryan as Danny Zuko, but after all these years he still hasn't brought himself to watch his performance.

After high school, he continued to be a musical chameleon, and with a group of like-minded musician friends, started a rock band called "The Current" that covered rock classics from groups like Led Zeppelin, REM, and The Doors.

Performing on stage for *Grease* and in The Current built his confidence. At 19, he left home to go to Paris as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for two years. There, he learned to love the French people and to speak the language. Ryan is still fluent in French.

Upon returning from France, he enrolled at Brigham Young University, where he majored in piano performance and minored in organ performance. He also sang in the concert choir under Mack Wilberg, then professor of choral music and now his colleague at the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. It was at BYU that Ryan met his wife, Jennifer.

"Mack Wilberg is responsible for my wife and me getting together. She was a soprano and I was a tenor in his choir. We give him credit for our relationship," Ryan chuckles.

As Ryan was completing his doctorate at Boston University, his wife who encouraged him to try for the position as associate music director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

"I almost didn't apply for the job. I thought I was too young and too fresh out of school to be qualified. But my wife assured me that it couldn't hurt to try. So I did," Ryan says. "My wife is always right."

The audition was in a series of phases. The last part of the audition was to do a rehearsal with the Choir. "It was one of the most terrifying experiences in my entire life," Ryan recalls. "It was the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, after all."

Deeply religious, he said a simple prayer: "Heavenly Father, if I'm not the one you want directing this choir, that's fine. But could you please help me not to embarrass myself in front of everyone? I just want to do my best."

He got the job and often Ryan is still incredulous. "Sometimes I still ask myself, 'How did I get here?'"

In the spring of each year, one of Ryan's main responsibilities is to conduct the Temple Square Chorale, the training ensemble for applicants to the Choir. That training culminates in a concert that usually includes a choral masterwork—Poulenc's *Gloria* and Fauré's *Requiem* have been recent selections—and other pieces as time on the program permits. Ryan also runs an in-service program for current Choir members usually held in the fall. The balance of the year Ryan's schedule as associate music director includes rehearsals,



conducting his share of *Music and the Spoken Word* broadcasts and concerts, and writing new arrangements for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square.

