



HIGH NOTES

Tucked away in a Benedictine monastery up in the Catalonian mountains, a boys' choir has sung its respects to the Lady of Montserrat for 800 years. **Veronique Mistiaen and Caroline Irby** pay a visit



In Catalan, 'Montserrat' means 'serrated mountain', describing its spectacular pink limestone spires shaped like saw teeth. The monastery has clung to this mountain for over 1,000 years, weathering fire, rebellions and Franco's dictatorship. Today it is still a strong symbol of Catalan identity and Catalans, religious or not, visit the monastery to celebrate graduations, weddings and other important events. The monastery, home to 80 Benedictine monks, is also Catalonia's holiest place. Its soul is the Moreneta (the little dark one), the black Lady of Montserrat who sits on a gilt throne high above the altar in the monastery's Gothic and Renaissance basilica.

It is for her that every day at 12:45pm, except on Saturday, the young choirboys

On a terrace carved high in the mountain, a group of young boys wrapped in puffa jackets are reading *Harry Potter*. Oblivious to the striking peaks around them, moulded by the wind and rain over many thousands of years, they are engrossed in the young wizard's story. Nearby, two boys sharing headphones are listening to Catalan rock on their iPod. It's break time at the Escolania de Montserrat, Europe's oldest boys' choir and

music school run by Benedictine monks at the Montserrat monastery. It may not be Harry's Hogwarts, but the boys who live at the Escolania are immersed in their own brand of magic. The choir has grown over the past 800 years in perfect symbiosis with its magnificent natural and spiritual surroundings, crafting its unique, rich golden sound along the way.

Situated in the middle of Catalonia, 25 miles northwest of Barcelona, the mountain of Montserrat is steeped in history.



LIFE ON TOP OF THE WORLD: (clockwise from far left) each year, two million visitors come to the basilica to hear the choir sing at 1pm; during a lunch break the choir swaps jeans for surplices; a pupil prepares for an afternoon practice; a quick scooter at break time; the vertiginous site of Montserrat – built in the pink ‘serrated mountains’ – gives the monastery its name

rush out of their classrooms and swap their jeans, T-shirts and trainers for black robes, white surplices and black polished shoes. Transformed into angels, they walk into the vast domed basilica and take their place behind the silver and enamel altar, as other boys have done before them for hundreds of years. There, at one o’clock, in front of some of the two million pilgrims and tourists who visit Montserrat every year, they sing the *Salve Regina* followed by the ‘*Virolai*’, the hymn of Montserrat, a song of praise and a prayer of hope, and one of the best-known and deeply loved songs of the Catalan people. At night, after Vespers, the choristers sing the *Salve* again, followed by a polyphonic motet. Their voices soar high in the golden basilica and linger over the mountain – strong, rich, and with their distinctive ‘Montserrat intonation’.

Father Ireneu Segarra, who directed the choir for 44 years until 1997, perfected the choir’s unique sound through a special breathing technique that allows more control of the voice – along with years of training, selection and daily performances. ‘No other choir sings like that,’ says musician and

composer Bernat Vivancos i Farràs, who became the Escolania’s choirmaster last year. ‘Some choirs sing only with the throat, but we sing from the belly and project the voice through the whole head. This gives our singing its special colour: stronger, rounder and fuller – a brilliant golden.’

‘Some choirs sing with the throat; we sing from the belly’

The Escolania tours the world for a few weeks each year and performs works by a wide range of composers, but unlike other choirs, its first role is to sing to the Virgin Mary every day in the basilica. Most of the choir’s repertoire has been created by a long tradition of Benedictine musicians to be performed by the choir, in the basilica, at Montserrat. ‘Every *Salve* is a miracle,’ says father Manel Gasch i Hurios, the Escolania’s director. ‘To have maintained an institution like this in this world, in this society, is a miracle.’

The Escolania is made up of 50 boys aged from nine to 14, who come from all over Catalonia, the north-eastern region of Spain. Each year, new recruits join the school after a selection process involving a voice test, music skill assessment and academic exams. Once selected, the choristers remain at Montserrat for four years. For centuries they were expected to remain there for 11 months at a time, but in recent years they have been allowed to go home for weekends and school holidays.

In the morning, the young boys follow the regular Catalan school curriculum in classrooms bearing names such as Benjamin Britten or Leonard Bernstein. In the afternoon they have individual or group instrument and music lessons. Apart from voice training, tonic sol-fa and singing theory, they each study the piano, plus one instrument – organ, violin, cello, flute or oboe. ‘I feel it is a privilege to be here. It is the best place to learn music,’ says Lluís Girbau Cabanas, a 13-year-old boy with short curly hair and red-rimmed glasses. ‘I love music. My favourite moment here is in the winter, when we sing the Vespers in the evening and there are only a few people at the



NOW AND THEN: a chorister receives a violin lesson; (below) choir boys sing to the Lady of Montserrat in the 17th century

THE ESCOLANIA'S HISTORY 800 YEARS OF SINGING...

11TH CENTURY Monastery of Montserrat is founded in 1025 by Benedictine monks.

13TH CENTURY creation of the Escolania de Montserrat to sing for the Lady of Montserrat.

14TH CENTURY the choirboys sing Matins, the *Salve to the Virgin* and the *Goigs to the Virgin*. The Escolania's fame begins to spread.

15TH CENTURY numbering around 20, the choirboys are known as 'good singers'. They are invited to sing at the welcoming of King Ferdinand II in Barcelona in 1479.



16TH CENTURY Abbot Garcia de Cisneros confirms the choirboys' mission of singing for the Virgin.

16TH-18TH CENTURIES the golden age of the Escolania, which reaches a kind of musical perfection. 'Practically all the Choirmasters, Organists, Precentors of Cataluña, Aragon, Valencia, Castilla, Navarra and Galicia had received their musical training in the Escolania of Montserrat,' said a chronicler.

19TH CENTURY Napoleon's troops burn down the monastery and Escolania in 1811. They are reconstructed in 1851.

20TH CENTURY Father Ireneu Segarra conducts the Escolania from 1953 to 1997 and develops its international reputation.

21ST CENTURY The Escolania collaborates with the likes of the Orquestra de Cambra Teatre Lliure de Barcelona and records CDs.

back of the church. It is so empty, so silent, and we sing. I love it,' he says, his eyes alight.

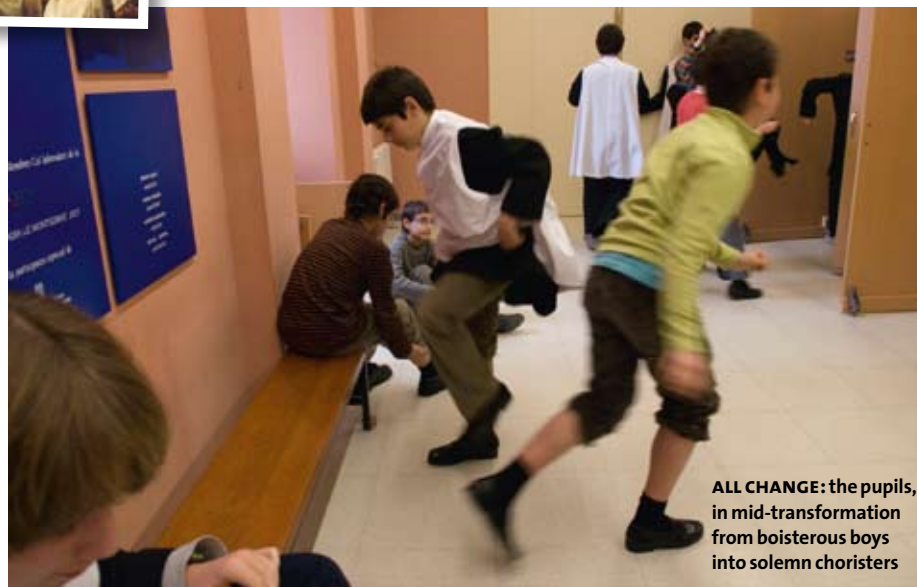
'At first, I was very nervous singing the *Salve* in the basilica,' says Maurici Soler, 11. 'People think that we are perfect. They say we are different – like angels. Some children even ask if we have arms,' he chuckles. 'But we are not angels, we are just normal boys who love music. And we work very hard.' The young choirboys might not be angels, but 'they have something special,' says Julia Seró, their English teacher. 'Maybe they are more sensitive because of the music and they are calmer because of the stability brought by the routine

here.' Seró and another female teacher are the children's surrogate mothers at the Escolania, waking them up early, making their breakfast, comforting them when they are feeling sad, nursing them when they are ill and travelling with them. Some 30 years ago, all teachers were monks, but now most are women.

Like most students here, Mauricio and Lluís plan to further their music studies when they graduate. Many are hoping eventually to become professional musicians, but not all of them. Mauricio, for example, wants to work in his family's butcher shop, but says music will always be part of his life. And none of them are considering becoming monks. The Escolania might be run by the Benedictines, but its mission is to provide students with the best musical education, not to steer them into the order, stresses Father Gasch. Many alumni, he adds, have become renowned musicians, opera singers, choirmasters, composers and teachers, including Josep Pons, director of the National Orchestra of Spain in Madrid.

One of the alumni is the actual choirmaster, Bernat Vivancos i Farràs. After graduating from the Escolania, he pursued his musical education in Barcelona, Paris and Oslo, and became a renowned composer and professor of Composition and Orchestration at the Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya. Yet, last year, he was drawn back to Montserrat. 'I was here from 1983 to 1987. My four years at the Escolania were probably the best period of my life,' he says. 'Father Segarra was my director. We all believed he has some kind of special powers. I've always thought there was something magical here – something in the mountain, in the air, in the basilica.' ■

For more information about the Escolania de Montserrat see www.abadiamontserrat.net



ALL CHANGE: the pupils, in mid-transformation from boisterous boys into solemn choristers