On a recent Tuesday morning, the British conductor Daniel Hyde led a group of choristers from the St. Thomas Choir School in Midtown Manhattan through a vocal warm-up of scales and liturgical parts sung in nonsense syllables.

The pillowy sound of boy treble voices floated through the small rehearsal space, with its three rows of wooden choir stalls facing one another, and spread through the resonant expanse of the school gym. But Mr. Hyde, his 6-foot-8-inch frame folded as economically as possible over a baby grand piano, was not fully content.

“That note was a bit moldy,” he said at one point. “We talked a lot about cheese the other day. Lift your cheekbones, and let’s try to have even more of those smelly-cheese ‘e’ vowels.”
The boys, who ranged in age from 7 to 13, are part of the St. Thomas Choir of Men and Boys: the only such ensemble in the United States that has its own boarding school — much like Westminster Abbey in London — to link high musical standards to the preservation of a centuries-old tradition of Anglican liturgy. In residence at St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, the choristers typically sing upward of 20 hours a week, participating in services, weekday evensong and concerts.

Immersed in choral singing and trained in all aspects of musicianship, the boys have the schedules of professionals and an understanding of vocal technique comparable to conservatory students, said Stephanie Tennill, the school’s singing teacher since 2009. And yet they are also children, who sometimes deal with homesickness when they first arrive, and with the emotional and physical ups and downs of puberty as they prepare to leave; many of them go on to private schools nationwide.

St. Thomas’s single-minded focus on music, combined with its ornate rituals and the ceremonial red robes worn for performances, make it unique. Ms. Tennill says she has found a simple way to explain where she works: “I say it’s like Hogwarts, but with choir instead of magic.”
St. Thomas was shaken last year when its longtime music director, John Scott, died after a heart attack at 59. In addition, flooding damaged the school building, creating financial strain. A dip in applications followed, so that this year the school, which is equipped to educate and house 35 students, has only 27 boys.

But since he took his position at St. Thomas three months ago, Mr. Hyde, a critically acclaimed organist and choral conductor with credentials from some of the most prestigious British institutions, has rallied school spirit. For many, his most high-profile test will be the choir’s performances of Handel’s “Messiah” on Dec. 6 and 8, an annual tradition at St. Thomas Church that holds a special place in New York’s musical life.

Already, Ms. Tennill said, she felt that Mr. Hyde has brought out “a truer sound in the choir than I’ve heard in a long time.” Within weeks of his arrival, she said, she listened to the choir thinking, “I can’t believe that’s my boys.”

In an interview in a wood-paneled drawing room at the choir school, Mr. Hyde spoke of his work with the boys and the kind of sound he is seeking. His own training started when he was 7 and joined the Chorister School at Durham Cathedral in Northern England — an institution founded when Henry V was on the throne and that this year celebrates its 600th anniversary. Subsequent positions included a stint as organ scholar at King’s College, Cambridge, and the job grandly titled Informator Choristarum at Magdalen College, Oxford.

Yet, Mr. Hyde said, there were aspects of the English choral style he sought to shed, starting with what he called “the traditional very polite English cathedral choir sound, where one is never louder than lovely, and it’s all very nicely packaged, and the ‘i’s are dotted and the ‘t’s are crossed.” Rather, he said, he was hoping to achieve at St. Thomas a sound that made use of a greater variety of tonal colors in the boy treble voice.

“When boys are 11, 12, 13 years old, they have this amazing instrument,” he said. “When they learn to use it in a free and open, relaxed way, there is a lot of power and color. That is the sound I’m interested in: It’s very resonant, it’s very exciting. It isn’t small and, dare I say it, slightly hooty.”

During his time at Cambridge, he said, he sometimes found the King’s College Choir stifled by the weight that rested on such a storied ensemble, its work familiar to millions through annual Christmas radio broadcasts. He found himself attracted to the choir of St. John’s, a neighboring college.
The secret to producing that sound lies in great part to careful attention to vowel shapes, which is where the “whole moldy cheese business” comes into play.

“Part of the challenge for me is to put something out there that the kids respond to,” Mr. Hyde said. “In Oxford, I had a particularly sparky group of boys, and I’d say, ‘All right, what’s the program of this piece?’ And I’d get them to tell you what they see in this music. Or I’d say, ‘Here’s this weird chord, what’s the color?’ And someone might be a bit more synesthetic than the others.”

Working with a group that includes boys whose first language is not English — the school recruits internationally, and from across the country — Mr. Hyde said he sought creative ways to work on vowel shapes. “We talked a lot about ‘cheese,’ where that ‘e’ is pitched, where you put the vowel,” he said. “If I say it’s a bit moldy, it’s a bit off color, then they’ll also find the tuning because they’ll think about the color rather than whether it’s just up or down.”

As he rehearsed the boys, there were stifled yawns here and there as they worked on psalm settings from the Anglican liturgy, passages from Schubert’s Mass in G and Mozart’s “Ave Verum Corpus.”
When they turned to movements of Haydn’s “Creation,” which they would perform later that week with the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, the energy in the room rose noticeably as the boys produced jubilant bursts of rapid scales that careened off the cinder-block walls. A sixth grader, Sammy Jin, explained the phenomenon later in an interview: “I guess I like fast music. It makes me concentrate more.”

For the boys, music does more than offer an exercise in concentration. Sammy, who’s from Maryland, added that when singing, “I can forget all my memories of sadness and all my worst fears. Music really helps me to forget about the bad world out here.”

John Scott, who died last year, was the previous music director of the St. Thomas Choir. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Dylan Cranston, a 13-year-old from Connecticut who will graduate at the end of this year, counts among the highlights of his time at St. Thomas a recent concert, a tribute to John Scott, in which he sang under the baton of Simon Rattle. “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience,” he said.

And however often they sing it, the “Messiah” remains a special experience. Sammy, his love of fast music notwithstanding, said his favorite part was the
opening tenor recitative because of its mystical calm and ability to “capture the audience.” Dylan said he gets goose bumps in the a cappella chorus “Since by man came death.”

“It’s unaccompanied, and at the end you hear just the silence,” he said. “I think Debussy said that music is the space between the notes. And I understand that now — the reflection is really important.”

Mr. Hyde said he enjoyed conducting it with the relatively small forces of St. Thomas because “it makes for a more nimble-footed pacing of the drama.”

He added: “In some of the big institutional ‘Messiahs’ I’ve sat through in the U.K., you get to the end of a chorus, and there is this communal mopping of the brow and turning of the page, by which time the music is dead.”

The brightness of the boy trebles, he said, also distinguishes the St. Thomas “Messiah” from the slew of other holiday-season performances in the city. This evergreen oratorio, which for many professional singers is merely an annual exercise, is a journey of discovery for Mr. Hyde’s young charges.

“Because it’s the first time for some of these boys,” he said, “the adrenaline rush is there.”