

Willowbrook chorus

A 'possible dream' for 50

By BERT KURTIN

Mental retardation limits its afflicted children with a vastly reduced learning capacity. An arithmetic problem involving the addition of two single-digit numbers may be insurmountable, the conjugation of a verb impossible.

Physical talent, however, apparently is inborn. One either has it or does not. Among those who do have it are about 20 residents of Willowbrook State School, whose natural ability is being nurtured and developed in a school chorus under the direction of Al Lambert, a music instructor at the institution for three years.

The thought of starting a school chorus came to Lambert toward the start of the recent school year when he "noticed that a lot of the kids had perfect pitch."

Lambert, who is 24 and lives at 259 8th St., New Dorp, took his idea to Mrs. Hannah Glasser, the school's education director. She gave him the go-ahead so, with the help of a teacher, Miss Beth Anderson of

Manhattan, and as assistant, Miss Louise Cognata of Dongan Hills, Lambert began to organize the chorus.

Fifty students were finally chosen. But Lambert points out that intelligence levels had nothing to do with the selection. "Low intelligence doesn't impair a child's inborn music abilities," says Lambert. A wide range of IQs is represented in the group.

There are of course, difficulties Lambert and the youngsters have had to overcome. The greatest, perhaps, is the short attention span of the mentally handicapped. Another is their inability to read music. They must do everything by memory. Some chorus members are blind.

But when Lambert begins his "One, two, three" and the song begins, all the singers' disabilities vanish, says Lambert, a Wagner College graduate. The repertoire consists primarily of popular tunes. A favorite are the songs of Burl Ives and Bacharach.

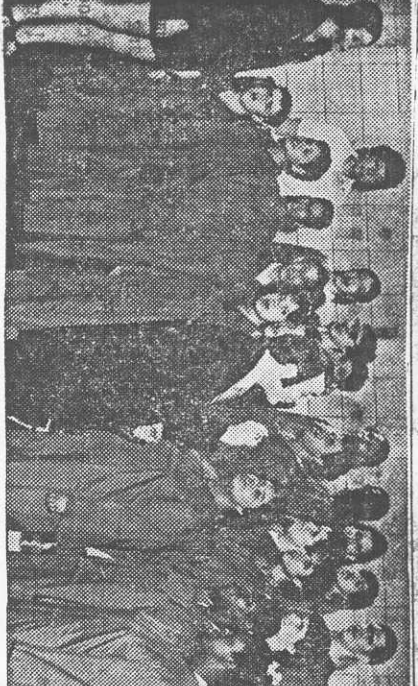
What they do with the songs

astounds Lambert. Three-part, four-part harmony has been mastered, expressing his gratification. Four-part harmony is on the way.

Last month, the youngsters gave their first concert at a fund-raising event in the Americana Hotel in Manhattan. It was the culmination of Lambert's initial goal and the first of many concerts on Staten Island and throughout the city. For all his work and tireless

difficulties, Lambert has

when he repeats what he was told at the Manhattan event by a professional entertainer, a member of a comedy team. "We've performed with some of the biggest names in show business. But the thrill has never been greater than being on the stage with these kids."



Al Lambert leads the Willowbrook State School Chorus through a song, in the school's auditorium. Miss Beth Anderson, left, a music instructor, and Miss Louise Cognata, an assistant, join in the melody.

Photo by Frank J. Lohr