

## The Chorus

It's 1949 France, and mild-mannered Clement Mathieu (Gérard Jugnot) is a new supervisor at a boarding school for troubled boys called Fond De L'Étang (i.e. "rock bottom") in the Auvergne region. Somewhat dreamy, a music lover and closet composer, Mathieu is cowed both by his irascible, domineering school director Rachin (François Berléand) and the recalcitrant rabble of boys in his class. To give his charges something to achieve, he hits upon music as something to build discipline and teamwork, and he begins to compose music for his own chorus--an activity frowned upon by Rachin. Did I mention that one particularly intractable kid, Pierre (Jean-Baptiste Maunier) has the voice of an angel but doesn't warm up to the prof?

Sounds like hints of *To Sir, With Love* or *Music of the Heart* or *Mr. Holland's Opus* or even *School of Rock*, no? It is, though this time with a French accent and a period setting. The trajectory of *The Chorus* ("Les Choristes") is similar, as music redeems both the teacher and his students, and the story moves towards a denouement with a triumphal performance by the singers.

Gérard Jugnot, a respected and prolific character actor in France, is sympathetic and genial as the ruffled, thoughtful Mathieu. New discovery Jean-Baptiste Maunier proves a sweet-faced, sweet-voiced teenager (and has become a heartthrob in France because of this film). Most of the kids--offering the usual gamut from mild to mean--are adequate, though the villain Rachin overplays his hand as school overlord.

Director Christophe Barratier makes his debut with this film, for which he also co-wrote the script and even composed some of the film's music. That music, by the way, is affable and gentle, decent enough, but not exactly memorable--much like the movie itself. A pleasant, even sweet night out, this *Chorus* doesn't so much ring out as soothe.

*(The film is rated "PG" and contains nothing objectionable.)*

(February 2005)