Beauty Beyond the Differences

The 12th International Chamber Choir Competition Marktoberdorf

by Tim Koeritz, journalist and teacher

Competition…but rivalry with friendly encounters too. For the twelfth time in a row, this remained the avowed aim of the International Chamber Choir Competition Marktoberdorf, which took place from 10-15 June and offered this time the categories mixed choirs and women's choirs. This remarkable centre of choral music has established itself in rural Allgäu over the years, rising to becoming an international Mecca for an international choral scene that comes together and discusses developments in the art. For choral connoisseurs from all over the world, Marktoberdorf is a name with a ring. Listening to and comparing differing ideals of sound and interpretation is a thrilling experience. Again and again, one asks oneself whether a jury – whose members originate from various countries – will be able despite or because of this fact to discover the inherent qualities of the choirs, even if these are concealed by unfamiliar local colourings of vowels, the voices themselves, and different singing traditions. This year, the jury members, with Gudrun Schröfel from Germany as the chair, came from Sweden, Venezuela, Taiwan, Slovenia, Canada and Armenia. The Slovenian jury member Martina Batič came to what may be an unexpected conclusion: "We were amazed by the various timbres of the choirs which, after all, come from different countries. Even the jury came from different continents. But the interesting thing is that we all agreed as to what is beautiful or what moves us or what touches our hearts."

Naturally, there is much to discuss concerning differences of interpretation and the question of stylistic faithfulness. Thus it is somewhat problematic when, for example, the outstanding Cuban choir Entrevoces from Havana were called on to sing a compulsory piece from the German Romantic period, Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger's *Rhapsodie*. Despite excellent vocal technique and considerable skills, even such a choir will surely come to grief with the precise shading of the vowels of the German language. Frieder Bernius, among the most high-profile choral conductors in Germany and very familiar with the scene, was in Marktoberdorf merely as a guest. He was however not prepared to show mercy in this regard: "I find it difficult to put, but why should I now go all liberal and accept a totally different view of such a Rheinberger interpretation? I don't think things should be done this way…just as much as one, as a European, would find it hard to cope with a Cuban piece, or with the first item in the women's choir competition, a work by Rachmaninof. One can only sing that kind of thing if one knows a little about the Russian tradition, or of the Cuban one for that matter, and if one knows the sound of the language really well. That is my opinion anyway."

With the compulsory Rheinberger piece, surprise, surprise, the German choirs led the field, represented by Cantabile Regensburg under Matthias Beckert and the Kammerchor der Hochschule für Musik Detmold, directed by Anne Kohler.

In the end, the Detmold group did not offer a perfect performance of the Rheinberger, but theirs was the most appropriate one. Nevertheless they "only" made it to fourth place. It was unusual that this time many of the choirs in both categories in Marktoberdorf were only placed on the lowest level III, "internationally good". In this context one needs to know that there are further definitions: "internationally very good" level II, and "internationally outstanding" level I. A minimum of points has to be reached

for the highest level to be awarded.

Overall it was a mediocre year, as Gudrun Schröfel had to admit: “The quality was good, but in previous years there really used to be more choirs at level I, “internationally outstanding”. One would really hope that in the course of the next few years, we will find a way back to this kind of singing.” This level was eventually reached – among the mixed choirs – by the Cuban choir Entrevoces from Havana, whose sound was of substance and simply was best. This choir is also the one that enjoys the best possible conditions. They rehearse for four hours every day. Is this still an amateur choir, as the rules prescribe? As so often with such competitions, one encounters a picture which is at times considerably distorted. Other choirs have fewer singers for whom music is also their job and, because these members need to work, such groups rehearse only once a week, in the evenings, when concentration really has already begun to flag. For this reason, many choirs have already changed to rehearsing on a project basis only.

Such circumstances have always been the precondition for excellent performances in Marktoberdorf. And once again, for the above reasons, choirs from the USA and from Sweden were among the leaders. At level II “internationally very good”, the Cubans were followed by the University of Louisville Cardinal Singers from Kentucky with a Second Prize and the S:t Jacobs Ungdomskör from Stockholm with a Third Prize, a choir whose singers are all aged between 10 and 25, optimal conditions for vocal homogeneity which the director of Cantabile Regensburg described thus: “You can tell from the sound of this choir that particularly the women have been singing together for a number of years. They blend together in a way that one thinks: now are they all sisters, and have the same parents? There really is a feeling of singing together which in this form impressed me immensely.” The only thing this Swedish choir still lacks is a certain maturity and

vocal schooling. In Sweden a complete training system supports such eminent achievements. As conductor Mikael Wedar explains: “In Sweden, or rather in Stockholm, we have this special type of musical training called ‘Adolf-Frederik-Musikklasse’ after its founder. This system of music classes has existed for about 70 years. The children start aged ten, in their fourth year at school. Then they have six years in which they sing together. And they sing a lot, something like six or seven hours a week. Of course they also study the ‘regular’ subjects. And after that we hope that they will join the Music Sixth Form, where I work.” In every choir of course one hears immediately the standard of vocal training of the individual voices. And one hears how attention is given to the overall sound of a choir. The secret of the best possible choral sound is really not a secret at all, and for Kent Hatteberg, the conductor of the American choir, there is a simple explanation: “Basically there are three things to watch: intonation, forming the vowels, and dynamics. If dynamics and timbres produced by the singers match well, and if fifths and thirds are really in tune, then a wonderful balance and homogeneity can be achieved. Nevertheless the voices should not all sound the same. What I am concerned about is particularly the variety of colours, but ones with well-matched vowels, dynamics and intonation. The outcome is a really homogeneous sound.”

So it was that pure quality of sound, but also skilled articulation and vocal technique, eventually helped the Ukrainian ensemble, the Female Choir of Kiev Glier Institute of Music, to gain the highest number of points, and this by a large margin. They took First Prize in the competition and were ranked “internationally outstanding”. The verdict of Gudrun Schröfel was similarly unambiguous: “This simply is a choir with a stunning and substantial sound, totally balanced in all registers, with a superb blend, and with a choral technique to enable a proper legato, something we have rarely heard during this competition. The group has, of course,

already performed very challenging pieces”.