

Coming Together for the Asia Choral Grand Prix

Interview by Irvinne Redor, IFCM Communication Manager, Philippines

Returning after a 3-year hiatus due to the global COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the second **Asia Choral Grand Prix** was held in Bali, Indonesia. This choral event, which started in 2019 in Manila, Philippines, is an annual competition between the grand champions of four Asian choral events held in Singapore, Bali, Manila, and Kuala Lumpur. Planning is underway for more Asian choral events to join the ACGP, something we are all looking forward to. I was very fortunate to get a chance to connect with the directors of these first four ACGP events and chat with them about the choral competition scene in Asia.

Could you tell us more about your event?



Mark Anthony Carpio (M): As the Philippine Madrigal Singers was celebrating our 50th year in 2013, the Cultural Center of the Philippines approached us to organize an international choral competition. More and more Filipino choirs had been wanting to go abroad to experience competing with outstanding choirs but were deterred by the high cost of travel. To make it easier for Filipino choirs to experience the international scene without leaving the country, we formed the **Andrea O. Veneracion International Choral Festival**. This event is held every two years.



Ai Hooi Lim (A): We started the **Singapore International Choral Festival** 10 years ago and just finished our 7th edition in July, after a break due to COVID. We had organized events before in Hong Kong and Portugal and thought, maybe we can organize something in Singapore. We were a bit reluctant at first because we are aware that Singapore is a very expensive country, but we received a very good response to the first edition and just continued from there.



Susanna Saw (S): The **Malaysian Choral Eisteddfod (MCE)** was conceived from the Young Singers Choral Festival. We started a national choir competition because competition is still the main motivation for people in Malaysia to sing in a choir, especially in a school choir. Because we didn't want to focus only on the competition aspect, we also organized workshops. Our Ministry of Education praised the MCE's organization and suggested making it an international event. There are many choirs in Malaysia with high musical standards that have not had the opportunity to travel overseas. Making MCE an international event gave us the chance to bring in international choirs and introduce them to the Malaysian choral scene. We started doing children and youth's symposium. From 2016, we started doing a national level choir competition.



Tommyanto Kandisaputra (T): Choirs in Indonesia are developing very well and have excelled in various international events. The success of so many Indonesian choirs encouraged more groups to perform on the world stage. The **Bali International Choir Festival (BICF)** provides a stage for choirs who want to participate internationally but cannot perform abroad for several reasons, mainly financial. I am very proud of BICF: Not only did the festival contribute to the development of choirs in Indonesia, it also promoted the richness of Indonesian culture on the world stage and helped bring thousands of tourists to Bali.

What do you make of the high interest of Asian choirs in participating in competitions?

(M): All conductors are very interested in improving the musicianship and musicality of their singers. Aside from the thrill and excitement, competitions speed up the development and improvement of singers. I always remind choirs: “You are not really competing with other choirs when you join a competition; the idea is for you to become better versions of yourselves.”

(A): Excitement! It’s always very nice to compete, but how you look at competitions depends on the individual. When you have an aim and want to win something, you work very hard for

that. However, I always caution my choir: “When you compete, there will be winners and there will be losers.”

(S): In Malaysia, if students participate in competitions at the state, national, or international level, they receive marks for co-curricular activities, which also benefits their school. Because of this, everyone is driven to work for good results in a competition. Also, overall learning culture in Malaysia is motivated by getting a certification or passing an exam, which can be likened to a competition. This serves as the motivation to attend rehearsals, practice better, work harder, and perform well. We must be very clear about our reasons for competing: to try to learn something and to improve.

(T): Many choirs from Asia take part in competitions because singing traditions are firmly embedded in our cultural life. This encourages choirs to continue developing and to share that culture with everyone. The enthusiasm for creating, the urge to interact with other artists, and the pleasure of traveling to various places are all very strong.



What challenges do you encounter in organizing your events?

(M): The most challenging part is that because a lot of people are involved, we need to get volunteers to help with the logistics. Getting participants to meet deadlines is another challenge: We must keep reminding them, and sometimes have to

push back deadlines.

(A): The biggest challenges we face are scheduling issues, because we hold many choir events. Aside from the competition, we have workshops and friendship concerts, and need to fit them all in during a few days' stay in Singapore. We see to it that choir members can benefit from attending these programs without long waits between events.

(S): We need to think of ways to make things work while complying with local government regulations. We are in the private sector and when we organize events that involve school students, we must apply for an endorsement from the government, which requires us to fulfill many requirements. This endorsement serves as our "passport" to the school, so it can utilize school resources to take part in the event.

(T): The biggest challenge is to raise funds to make the event more interesting and to satisfy participants. Other challenges are finding a venue for competition and managing activities related to licensing, convenience, and security.

How did the formation of the Asia Choral Grand Prix come about?

(M): Before the 4th edition of the AOV International Choral Festival, Ai Hooi, Tommyanto, and I discussed the possibility of holding an Asia Choral Grand Prix with the Artistic Director of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. It was in 2019 when we held the first edition of the ACGP, in Manila.

(A): I had previously attended a few European Grand Prix for Choral Music events. One day I wondered if maybe we could have something similar in Asia. We wanted to find festivals that shared the same ideals and vision. I met Tommyanto at an event and spoke with him about the idea. After that, we went to Manila to speak with Mark Carpio, Menchi Mantaring, and Chris Millado. That's when we came to an agreement as to how it should be run.

(S): In the early days when Mark, Ai Hooi, and Tommyanto were creating the Asia Choral Grand Prix, they were able to observe the Malaysian Choral Eisteddfod. They felt comfortable working with me and invited me to Manila to be present at the first ACGP. That was when I was able to get to know more about the ACGP and accepted the invitation for MCE to be part of it.

This is the first year we've sent a representative to the ACGP. This is good for MCE because it will attract choirs of a very high calibre. Our year to host the ACGP in Kuala Lumpur will be 2024.

(T): The **Asia Choral Grand Prix** emerged from an agreement between the Artistic Directors of the AOV International Choral Festival, the Singapore International Choral Festival, and the Bali International Choir Festival to collaborate and to encourage the development of choirs in the Asian region and the world at large.

Can you give us three quick tips for choirs who are looking forward to joining competitions?

(M): (1) Singers must love what they do, and they can show this by always looking for ways to be better and improve. (2) Conductors must know their singers and what they need. (3) Every rehearsal is an opportunity to be better.

(A): (1) Look for a competition that suits your choir and select one at least a year in advance, so that everyone can prepare. (2) Choose pieces that your choir can perform well and choose the number of categories which can be prepared on time. (3) When you go to a competition, just enjoy it!

(S): (1) Read through the competition rules and regulations. (2) Find a competition best suited to your choir's skill level by looking at choirs that have joined in the past. (3) Find and choose a repertoire that the choir members can handle.

(T): (1) Choose a competition that is suitable for the situation and condition of your choir; especially consider its

artistic achievements and financial capabilities. (2) Plan every aspect carefully and leave sufficient time to meet all needs. (3) Take part in the competition as a chance to improve singers, improve the quality of music, and to build the singers' character and attitude.



The Asia Choral Grand Prix Artistic Council, from left to right: Indra Kurniawan Salama (Indonesia), Tommyanto Kandisaputra (Indonesia), Ai Hooi Lim (Singapore), Susanna Saw (Malaysia), Yong Chee Foon (Singapore), Mark Anthony Carpio (Philippines), and Joey Gianan Vargas (Philippines)



Mark Anthony Carpio is the Artistic Director of the Andrea O. Veneracion International Choral Festival: <https://aovchoralfestph.com>

Tommyanto Kandisaputra is the Artistic Director of the Bali International Choir Festival: <https://bandungchoral.com>

Ai Hooi Lim is the Festival Director of the Singapore International Choral Festival: <https://sicf.sg>

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Irvinne Redor is a performing arts management advocate and a choral music industry worker with years of experience in organizing national and international choral music conventions, conferences, competitions, and events. He was involved in a couple of pioneering training programs for young choral arts managers in Europe: the Young Event Management Program of the Europa Cantat Festival 2009 in Utrecht, Netherlands, and the Choral Arts Management Program of Polyfolia 2012 in Saint Lo, France. In April 2023, he served as mentor to 10 participants under the 'YOUNG' Program, a Youth International Cultural Management Programme, of the International Federation for Choral Music during the World Symposium on Choral Music in Istanbul, Türkiye. Currently, he is the Communications Manager of the International Federation for Choral Music. He is also the Secretary General of the Philippine Choral Directors Association where he has played part in organizing Provincial Assemblies, Regional Conferences, and National Conventions. He owns The Choir Loft, an online choral music store, and SANGHIMIG Performing Arts Events & Travel Consultancy Services. communication@ifcm.net

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