

2012 Taipei International Choral Festival

By Yu-Chung John Ku, choral conductor and teacher

Taipei International Choral Festival (TICF), one of the most prestigious and extensive choral festivals in Asia, was founded by Taipei Philharmonic Foundation and Professor Dirk DuHei in 1996. It started as a biannual event, and is now held annually from the end of July through to the beginning of August. Every year, several outstanding choirs from around the world, as well as excellent local artists, gather in Taipei to perform not only for tens of thousands of local audience members, but also for a great number of choral fans from Southeast Asia. In addition to the concerts, there are several workshops and master classes, presented by clinicians from all around the world, during the festival. In 2012, the 12th TICF not only brought excellent concerts to audiences and intensive workshops to participants, but also introduced several special events celebrating choral music.



A conducting master class participant rehearsing with the Taipei Philharmonic Youth Choir

Highlights of 2012's festival included the opening concerts on 28th and 29th of July. Taipei Philharmonic Chorus and the National Chinese Orchestra, Taiwan, presented the world premiere of Nan-Chang Chien's *The 12 Animal Signs of the Chinese Zodiac*. This piece was one of the works commissioned by the Taipei Philharmonic Chorus to celebrate its 40th anniversary. Drawing inspiration from ancient Chinese fairytales and novels, poet Mei-Chen Lai (Taiwan) wrote one poem about each of the 12 Chinese zodiac signs to form this 12-piece cycle. "In [the poem] *Snake*, I based the text on *The Tale of Lady White Serpent*", expounded the lyricist, "which is a love story about a woman who sacrifices everything to protect her lover and her family. Looking at things from a woman's perspective, I wish to pay tribute to all traditional Chinese women, who usually make sacrifices for their families, by portraying this strong and humble woman, Lady White Serpent." It is not only the 'snake'; Lai applies specific stories, some romantic, some serious, some humorous, to each of the zodiac signs. These stories, which are mostly very familiar to all Chinese speaking people, gave the composer many imaginative ideas whilst composing the music.



*National Concert Hall in
Taipei, Taiwan*

"It is important to learn about Western techniques, but we must also find inspiration in our own culture", says the composer. "Images and sounds came to my mind as soon as I saw

some of her lyrics, but I also put in some onomatopoeias and sound effects that were not originally in the text. I hope she, the lyricist, did not mind the changes I made.” The end result was very successful. The 12 Animal Signs of the Chinese Zodiac is not just a big, hour-long composition for chorus and Chinese orchestra. It is a combination of music, poetry, theatrical play, sound effects, children’s games, masks, costumes and props, with improvisation. The combination of the unique sonority of Chinese instruments and the oriental atmosphere the chorus brought to the stage meant the premiere was a huge success. Four thousand audience members from the two performances cheered this innovative work. Conductor Theodora Pavlovitch (Bulgaria) stated after watching the first concert: “It is so unique, so interesting, so colorful. What a wonderful way to open the festival.”



PUST in concert

In addition to the opening concert, the 2012 TICF also introduced six outstanding choirs – Eva Quartet (Bulgaria), the Children and Young Women’s Chorus of the China National Symphony (China), Kammerchor Stuttgart (Germany), PUST (Norway), the Mandaue Children & Youth Chorus (The Philippines), and VOCES8 (UK) – in the festival concert program. Every evening from 28th July to 5th August, concerts featuring these groups welcomed thousands of audience members to enjoy their fascinating repertoires, excellent singing skills and fabulous multicultural atmosphere in the National

Concert Hall in Taipei, as well as in performance venues in many cities of Taiwan.



Mandaue Children & Youth Chorus (The Philippines) performing in the National Concert Hall

Together with the free matinee concerts held in several public spaces in Taipei, the 2012 TICC presented 25 concerts in total, to tens of thousands of audience members in Taiwan.



Mandaue Children & Youth Chorus (The Philippines) performing in the Taiwan University Hospital

The TICC has in fact hosted over 200 concerts for more than 50 outstanding choirs from all continents of the globe since its founding in 1996. Kammerchor Stuttgart (Frieder Bernius, conductor) is one of the choirs returning to the 2012 TICC,

marking their fourth trip to Taipei. Other formerly invited choirs include the Tallis Scholars (Peter Phillips, conductor) from the UK, Real Group from Sweden, the Cantemus Children's Choir (Szabó Dénes, conductor) from Hungary, Australian Voices (Stephen Leek, conductor) from Australia, the Vancouver Chamber Choir (Jon Washburn, conductor) from Canada, Cantoría Alberto Grau (Maria Guinand, conductor) from Venezuela, Incheon City Chorale (Hak-won Yoon, conductor) from Korea, and the World Youth Choir (André Thomas, conductor), amongst others. These concerts have for years been showcases of choral excellence for audiences and learning opportunities for workshop participants at the festival.



PUST (Norway) giving a workshop to the festival participants and singers

Workshops and master classes play very important parts in the TICF. Every year, hundreds of participants from Taiwan and all corners of Asia (China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and other countries) gather in Taipei to attend these workshops. In 2012, Theodora Pavlovitch (Bulgaria) and Fred Sjoberg (Sweden) each led a ten -session conducting workshop, containing different levels and varieties of choral pieces from several genres. With this wide repertoire, participants in both workshops can brush up their conducting skills, enhance their rehearsal techniques, widen their choral repertoires, and become familiar with different music styles. "The conducting workshop [at TICF] offers a rare opportunity

to those who would like to advance their studies in conducting. It is really beneficial", said Leon Chu, a conducting workshop participant from Hong Kong.



*Professor Theodora
Pavlovitch (Bulgaria)
teaching in the Conducting
Workshop*

In contrast to the conducting workshops, the ten-session conducting master class, which was instructed by Gábor Hollerung (Hungary), focused on one multi-movement, choral-orchestral work solely. In the past, TICF had featured pieces like Handel's *Dixit Dominus*, selections from *Messiah*, Mozart's *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore* and *Krönungsmesse*, and Fauré's *Requiem* among others. In 2012, it was Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*. Under Gábor's guidance, the participants gained in-depth knowledge of this work through structural analysis, and examined their conducting and rehearsal techniques while working with the singers and instrumentalists during class sessions. At the end of the festival, participants had the opportunity to conduct the Taipei Philharmonic Youth Choir and Youth Orchestra and to perform this work at a gala concert.



*Maestro Gábor Hollerung
working with a Master Class
participant*

The Children's Choir Camp, a seven-day choral camp designed for children, was a new event launched at the 2012 TICF. Here, 100 children from China and Taiwan had the privilege of working with Kari Ala-Pöllänen (Finland), of experiencing the beauty and playfulness of making music in the choir. The final presentation was inspirational, meaningful, and full of children's laughter. Ala-Pöllänen also gave a series of lectures to the workshop participants on topics such as children's choir repertoires, vocal training technique, development issues, and so on.



*Professor Kari Ala-Pöllänen
working with the Children
Choir camp*

The highpoint of the 2012 TICF was the final concert on the 5th August, in which the Festival Choir and Taipei Philharmonic Youth Orchestra presented Beethoven's Mass in C Major, led by

Gábor Hollerung. The festival choir consisted of 150 young singers, who participated in the workshop for choral singers. They rehearsed Beethoven throughout the week of the festival, and received voice lessons, took part in workshops given by invited international choirs, sat in international clinicians' lectures, and watched all the festival concerts when they were not rehearsing. It was an intense learning experience for these young singers, and the outcome was phenomenal. These choral musicians of the younger generation not only mastered Beethoven's Mass, but also presented a fresh, brilliant, new voice to the audience.



This year, TICF will be held from 27th July to 4th August. There will be six international choirs invited to perform, ten local groups invited to join the shows, four workshop and master class series for participants to attend, twenty-five concerts in the National Concert Hall and across all Taiwan. Taipei International Choral Festival is an event that on should definitely not miss.



*VOCES8 on Freedom Square,
Taipei, Taiwan*

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