

# Choral Singing in the Czech Republic

*Prof. Jiří Kolář, Honorary President of the UČPS*

The art of choral singing, be it in the realm of composition or of interpretation, has always ranked among the national treasures of Czech culture, amongst the strongest musical traditions in our country. In this context we might mention the world famous works of B. Smetana, A. Dvořák, V. Novák, L. Janáček, J. B. Foerster or B. Martinů, as well as the riches of our contemporary choral literature, represented by the compositions of P. Eben, I. Hurník, Z. Lukáš, K. Slavický, O. Mácha, J. Hanuš and many others. Their creation has exerted very considerable influence on the artistic achievements of Czech choirs, among them, in the past, the internationally renowned vocal associations of male and female teachers from Prague and from Moravia (PSPU, PSMU), or a number of choirs founded in the postwar years, which regularly won – and still win – the highest marks at international choral competitions and festivals. Standing for all children's choirs we might name Kühn's Children's Choir Prague, the Bambini di Praga or Severáček Liberec, who are well known even abroad, and among the women's choirs Foerster's Chamber Choir Association Prague, Iuventus Paedagogica Prague, the Choral Association of Female Teachers of Ostrava, as well as the excellent academic choirs, mixed choirs as well as women's choirs.

From 1969 the choirs of the entire region of the Czech Republic have been united and represented by the Association of Czech Choirs (UČPS). At the time of writing, the UČPS is looking after nearly 1100 choral groupings, among them a number of 'choir schools' with several preparatory departments, concert choirs, and, attached to them, youth

choirs and sometimes also mixed choirs consisting of parents, offering them professional assistance and support in the organisation and realisation of choral festivals and competitions (in the course of the year, these amount to around fifty nation-wide and fifteen international events) and with the development of cultural life in the regions. The UČPS dedicates particular care to the choral singing of children and young people (the annual festival of mixed grammar school choirs *Gymnasia Cantant*, which by now has taken place sixteen times, has already raised the standards achieved in this category to the excellent European level). By organising composers' competitions and disseminating information about new works by contemporary composers, the UČPS strives to support new Czech choral creativity. It also co-operates with foreign institutions, setting up contacts between Czech and foreign choirs, keeping detailed records about the entire Czech choral movement (choirs, choral conductors, choral festivals, choral competitions, choral concerts, etc), and maintaining the comprehensive informative website *České sbory* and the professional magazine *Cantus* with its regular sheet music inserts.

The UČPS supplies the suggestions for the awards of nation-wide prizes for choral conductors (the B. Smetana, F. Lýsek, and F. Vach prizes, as well as the UČPS "Junior Choral Conductor" prize) and for the similar regional awards which serve to acknowledge outstanding, meritorious and successful activity as a choral conductor.

If we look at the development of mutual recognition and co-operation within the framework of the EU, choral singing (and particularly that of children and young people) is the most widespread form of amateur artistic activity and thus of immeasurable and still undervalued importance. We believe that the Czech choral movement will perform an important role in the process of achieving increased mutual, musical understanding.