

# Putting the Prizes Into Practice

## Acclaimed Ensembles to Cooperate With IFCM Choral Composition Competition

*Andrea Angelini ICB Managing Editor and choral conductor & Graham Lack composer, ICB Consultant Editor*

At the Second IFCM International Composition for Choral Competition two internationally renowned vocal groups have demonstrated great generosity by agreeing to participate. This close cooperation demonstrates the pragmatic side to prize-giving: the chance for the outright winner to work with the Philippine Madrigal Singers, who will premiere the work that receives the competition's main prize, and an opportunity for a composer whose piece is deemed to have inherent 'harmonic originality' to hear the music in a workshop run by VOCES8 especially to this end. The following interviews explain exactly why and how this will be put into practice.

### Interview with Mark Anthony A. Carpio

**Andrea Angelini** Perhaps I can just tell you how happy we are that you agreed to collaborate with the IFCM. The Philippine Madrigal Singers are certainly one of the best choirs in your part of the world. It seems you are working really hard to increase your profile abroad, especially in Europe and in the continent of America. Could you tell our readers about your work with the choir? How did the story start?

**Mark Anthony A. Carpio** The Philippine Madrigal Singers

celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013. The MADZ, as the choir is affectionately known, was founded in 1963 by Andrea Veneracion, a moving force in building the choral music tradition in the Philippines. I joined the ensemble in 1992, as a tenor. Although I am a pianist by training, I always loved to sing, and saw her and the MADZ as role models. Almost immediately, I became inspired to teach others to make music in a choral setting. In 1994 I founded the Kilyawan Boys Choir, which has now grown into a society of choirs that also includes Kilyawan Male Choir and the Voces Aurora Girls Choir. In 2001, after several years of deliberation, Prof. Veneracion decided to retire from her position as choirmaster, and asked me to carry on as the new leader of the MADZ. I was both honoured and humbled by this enormous responsibility. We have a long tradition of choral excellence. It is through her guidance and encouragement that I carry on with our mission and responsibility.

**AA** It has been said that choral music belongs to the world but that tradition plays an important role correct performing style. Do you feel comfortable with any kind of music, starting with European Renaissance polyphony, through to Baroque and Romantic repertoire, and up to contemporary works? Or do you prefer to perform works by composers closer to home?

**MAA.C** The MADZ performs a wide range of music and has always held a special affinity for Renaissance music, particularly for the madrigal. And when our former singers or alumni get together, they always end up singing the madrigals they used to sing. Nevertheless, the MADZ has always been interested in exploring all kinds of music. Early on, our founder Prof. Veneracion actively encouraged Filipino composers – especially those who were singing with us at that time – to write contemporary Filipino choral works. Today, we bear the fruit of this continuing passion. We also have a keen wish to

engage with cultures and traditions other than our own. In our travels, we make new friends and connect with other cultures by learning and performing their music, often in their own language. We have also become friends with many composers from around the world, and performing their works has strengthened our bonds with them.

**AA** The next question is obvious, and I know many people have asked you this before... but I am always surprised when I see your singers singing sitting down in a semi-circle. And I want to ask you if there is a particular reason for doing this.

**MAA.C** We jokingly reply that we are not lazy singers even though we sit right through our performance. In the beginning, the very first members of the MADZ wanted to relive the experience of a banquet, where guests would gather around the table to sing madrigals. The table disappeared long ago, but we continue to sit in a semi-circle. In this set-up, with no conductor or risers, the singers see each other, feel each other's sound, and can listen to each other. The singers have to know what is happening inside and around the music. This has become the tradition of the MADZ – for almost 50 years now.

**AA** Recently, many Filipino choirs have taken part at important choral competitions, especially in Europe, where they continue to win many prizes. How was it possible to get such good results in such a short time? Do these conductors have a secret that they do not want to share with their colleagues here in 'Old Europe'?

**MAA.C** There are no secrets. Just a strong passion for singing together, a lot of hard work, and a liberal dose of fun too... and that is that. I can definitely add that the spirituality of the Filipino choirs, or of most Filipinos, for that matter,

is present in their singing as well.

**AA** It will be a great honour for the winner of the IFCM International Competition for Choral Composition to have a premiere by the Madrigal Singers. You do not know exactly what you will be getting of course. And up to now you have always worked closely with composers. So do you see a need to cooperate with the composer of the winning work?

**MAA.C** Well, we are very excited about this project. As performers, we should perform the music the way the composer imagined it. And this means close collaboration. This is how I prepare any piece, and I look forward to doing exactly this with the winner of the competition.

**AA** Thanks to you once again Mark, for your generosity.

### **University of the Philippines Madrigal Singers**

The University of the Philippines Madrigal Singers was founded in 1963 by National Artist Professor Andrea O. Veneracion. The choir comprises students, faculty and alumni from the various colleges of the University of the Philippines (UP) and has consistently won prizes at many prestigious competitions around the world: Arezzo and Gorizia in Italy, Marktoberdorf in Germany, Spittal in Austria, Neuchatel in Switzerland, Tours in France, Varna in Bulgaria, Debrecen in Hungary, Cantonigros, Tolosa and Torrevieja in Spain. The ensemble holds the distinction of being the first choir in the world to win the *European Grand Prix for Choral Singing* twice (1997 and 2007).



*The MADZ in the Teatro  
Colon, Buenos Aires 2011*

The choir's repertoire is extensive, including Renaissance music, classical works, Filipino and international folksongs, contemporary and avant-garde music, opera, and even popular music. Its specialization and focus on the madrigal idiom inspired their disposition, singing while seated in a semi-circle, without a conductor.

The influence of the UP Madrigal Singers on the Philippine and Asian choral scene has been far-reaching. Since 1963 over 200 singers have passed through its ranks, many of whom are now actively involved in organizing and conducting choirs. This eventually led to the organization of the 'Madz Et Al', a national network of choirs that gather regularly for festivals and workshops and whose membership includes around 60 choirs.

Under the direction of Mark Anthony Carpio, many composers and arrangers continue to produce for the UP Madrigal Singers new compositions and settings of Philippine, Asian and international songs, thus contributing to the growth of world choral literature.

The group was recently honoured by UNESCO nomination as Artists for Peace (July 2009), acknowledging the choir's influence and efforts to promote cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and a culture of peace. Similarly, the group has been honoured with the Guidoneum Award (September

2010) by the 'Concorso Polifonico Guido d' Arezzo Foundation' for its 'artistic activities and promotion of choral activity', having won the European Grand Prix for Choral Singing in 2007.

The UP Madrigal Singers also maintains an active outreach and concert tour schedule, performing in far-flung areas of the Philippines seldom reached by choral artists. With an average of two overseas concert tours a year, the UP Madrigal Singers is the country's most active ambassadors of goodwill. In August 2011, the group was one of the featured choirs in the '9th World Symposium on Choral Music', held in Puerto Madryn, Argentina. They subsequently gave several goodwill concerts in other parts of the country as well as in Paraguay and Uruguay.

### **Mark Anthony A. Carpio**

Mark Anthony Carpio graduated cum laude from the University of the Philippines College of Music with a Bachelor's Degree in Piano and immediately returned to the college as a faculty member of the Piano Department. In 2001 he was chosen by Prof. Andrea Veneracion to succeed her as the choirmaster of the Philippine Madrigal Singers. He has since led the ensemble on numerous international tours. In 2004 his choir won First Prizes in both the 'Habanera' and 'Polyphony' categories at the competition 'Certámen Internacional de Habaneras y Polifonia' held in Torrevieja, Spain and were victors too at the 35th 'Florilege Vocal de Tours', France (2006) as well as the 2007 'European Grand Prix for Choral Singing', Arezzo, Italy. A sought-after choral clinician, he frequently holds intensive courses and workshops throughout the Philippines, as well as in various Asian and European countries. He also directs the Consortium of Voices, a choral society consisting of the Kilyawan Boys Choir, Kilyawan Men's Choir and the Voces Aurorae Girls Choir. He is presently a faculty member of the Conducting Department of the UP College of Music and active too as countertenor and accompanist.

*Revised and edited by Graham Lack, UK*

## **Interview with Barney Smith, Artistic Director of VOCES8**

**Graham Lack** When did VOCES8 turn professional?

**Barney Smith** What a nice easy question to start with. That was in 2007.

**GL** And what prompted you to make that decision?

**BS** That's pretty easy to answer too. We'd won some important competitions a couple of years earlier, a First Prize in Gorizia in 2005 and both First Prizes – for our sacred and profane programmes – in 2006 in Tolosa. So it seemed a kind of logical step.

**GL** But a big one...

**BS** Yes, of course, a huge one really, renouncing amateur status and taking the plunge into the world of professional music-making.

**GL** But you don't regret it now?

**BS** Not at all, not for one minute.

**GL** What did that mean for the group exactly?

**BS** What sticks in my mind is the word 'commitment'. Up to that point we had been working pretty much on an *ad hoc* basis, calling rehearsals as and when we saw fit, learning new pieces if we felt a need, and trying to plan ahead, well to some extent at least.

**GL** You were all students at the time...

**BS** That's right. At Westminster Cathedral. And we had so many ideas, real desires, and our own personal dreams. The hard reality of the music business seemed a long way off thank goodness. When we won those competitions we just knew we had something interesting to offer. And we felt it had given us a leg up the ladder. It was the old question of whether or not to give up the day job. But we were all young, and quite ambitious I suppose, looking back now, so we simply sat down and discussed the whole idea.

**GL** And the rest is history.

**BS** Kind of, we had few lucky breaks too, and loads of people who supported us from the start.

**GL** Where was the start exactly?

**BS** There were many starts, but one event stands out in my mind, a concert in Oklahoma in 2009, following an invitation by ACDA to perform at their convention. That's when we realised that we were being listened to and we were capable of exporting our music to other audiences.

**GL** So what is different about VOCES8? How does the ensemble



stand out from others performing around the world?

**BS** We have eight singers, and that means we can be incredibly flexible. We're just as happy with Bach motets for double choir, done one to a part of course, as with Renaissance music or contemporary repertoire, or even film music.

**GL** It seems as if you 'cast' your singers in particular roles for certain works.

**BS** Exactly! That's the trick. We don't use female altos, but have countertenors, so, with two sopranos on top, and tenors and baritones in the middle, and a strong bass at the bottom, we can swap places in the line-up to suit the demands of the music.

**GL** Which all has to do with tessitura...

**BS** Quite. Each of us offers a huge vocal range, we're so lucky in that respect. The overlap of one singer with the next in line is enormous, and it gives us the chance to create interesting colours and blends. In 'Warum ist das Licht gegeben' – the Brahms motet, which is SSATBarB – we put Chris and Andrea on melody, the others take the chorale chords, and I end up on a top *g" sharp*!

**GL** What! Above the stave in the treble clef?

**BS** That's the one.

**GL** So what happens when Dingle has a solo? He's then a kind of bass lead.

**BS** You'll never guess, unless you've heard us in concert of course, I sing bass!

**GL** But you're a countertenor...

**BS** Yes I know, but I can use my 'normal' voice, my other instrument as it were, and take over the bass line. It's fun, and I hope I make a nice enough sound.



*The British Ensemble VOCES8*

**GL** A journalist once wrote that there was a ninth member of the group. Is that an in-joke or is there something to it?

**BS** The extra is not a singer, but an arranger. It's Jim Clements.

**GL** Who was on board at the beginning...

**BS** That's right. We'd teamed up at the start and, I'm happy to say, he's still with us today.

**GL** So what does he add to the heady mix?

**BS** Without Jim, we might not be where we are today. His are

bespoke arrangements, made just for VOCES8. He really understands how the group works, knows just what is going on in the outer voices, and how the inner ones mix and blend.

**GL** I've heard quite a few of his arrangements now, they really are extraordinary...

**BS** They're kind of luxury goods. They fit us perfectly.

**GL** So what is the musical secret?

**BS** In a way it's quite simple. A single voice is a solo. Three voices in unison are a section. And two equal voices are usually just so hard to blend in this kind of singing that he keeps some other options open, like a soprano and a high tenor on one line for example.

**GL** He obviously has an incredible ear...

**BS** I think he is quite intuitive, and knows what kind of sound fits each number best. His harmonies are amazing, they really keep us on our toes. The other thing is where he puts the tune. It's not in the soprano as much as you might think, and he lets it roam.

**GL** So you all get a shot at it...

**BS** We just take it in turns, and pass it from one singer to the next. Not as easy as you might think. It means really listening to what everyone else is doing. The other parts are just so different to what my line is up to that there's a real danger in drifting off and doing more listening than singing.

**GL** Jim's a dab hand at a descant, something 'very British' of course.

**BS** That's true, and probably why we also chose to record Michael Tippett's 'Go Down Moses' on our most recent CD, 'Choral Tapestry'. There are some soaring lines there. So we feel it's part of a tradition. In 'I Wonder as I Wander', which is one of Jim's, it's easy to hear how he is part of this.

**GL** There's an amazing moment too in the soprano line in 'Once in Royal David's City', an arrangement by another composer who has started to work with VOCES8, Thomas Hewitt Jones.

**BS** Another stroke of good fortune. It's early days in his career, and we value his input already. He has turned such a well-known carol into something very special. It's on our next release, a Christmas album, out later this year.

**GL** The James Bond arrangements are probably Jim Clements' signature works. They're pretty subtle too.

**BS** We like to think so. Sometimes he just hints at the Bond tune, a melody everyone knows, so there's sometimes no need to state it in its entirety or be too brazen about it. We err on the side of understatement, like the character should be played. And there's lots to listen to in the backing voices too, if you close your eyes, it's all going on in the film at the same time.

**GL** Finally, tell us about the London Olympics? How did that project come about?

**BS** That was another break for us. It was Thomas who had been working with the development team, and writing the music for a series of short animation films. One day he had the bright idea – well we thought it was a good one at least – of adding vocals to the score. And we found ourselves in the studio working with the British Film Orchestra. Another new experience for us...

**GL** ...and quite a contrast to Palestrina...

**BS** We're in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we're doing a 21<sup>st</sup>-century job. It's just to do with the tools of the trade, and trying to do different things as well as possible. We're on tour in Japan next year, singing the 'Messiah', with a small orchestra and just eight voices for chorus and solos alike.

**GL** But you're not all things to all men?

**BS** No, we just believe in two kinds of music, good and...

**GL** ...not as good?

**BS** You got it in one.