

Second Vietnam International Choir Festival and Competition (Hue, December 12-16)

New Impetus and Vitality for Choral Music in Asia and Southeast Asia

Henri Pompidor, choir director and teacher

Enthusiasm, sharing, joy, colors – these were the key themes of the second Vietnam International Choir Festival and Competition that took place in Hue, December 12-16, 2012. The happiness was shared between participants and members of the jury alike at this beautiful celebration of choral voices, a dazzling demonstration of the vitality and expressive diversity of Asian and Southeast Asian choirs. Many countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, are promoting and supporting their choirs these days. The Vietnamese Ministry of Tourism and the Interkultur Foundation also deserve recognition for initiating the project and seeing to preparations down to the smallest detail. Their flawless organization enabled choral music to be expressed throughout the week and under the best possible conditions. A superb opening ceremony in the main Hue stadium launched five days of vocal music festivities structured around a high-level competition supplemented with numerous concerts in various tourist spots throughout the city.

More than twenty choirs came from the principal countries of Asia and Southeast Asia to participate in the competition. Indonesia and the Philippines were especially well represented, with several excellent ensembles each. Vietnam also displayed quite a bit of *savoir-faire*, with its very high quality groups. Other participating countries included Malaysia and South Korea. We are able to report favorably on the high musical and vocal quality of participants in this competition. Vietnam's National University of Art Education Choir (Vinh Hung, choir director) garnered several gold medals for excellence, notably in the Mixed Voices Chamber Choir and Equal Voices Male Choir categories. The competition featured numerous ensembles from the Philippines and Indonesia in particular. The Iriga City Singing Ambassadors (Cris Cary B. Yu) won the Grand Jury Prize, while others – The Indonesia Choir (Ignatius Widjajanto), the Smukiez Choir (Paulus Chandra), the Paduan Suara Mahasiswa University (Nestianta Kriswardhani) and the Mapua Cardinal Singers (Angelito A. Ayran, Jr.) – left the competition with one or more gold medals. In the Children's Choirs category, the Santa Laurentia Choir (Cornelius Selo Atmanto) did well for itself, garnering a gold medal as well as a prize for musical direction. The Girls Choir of the Malaysian Institute of Arts (Susanna Saw) also turned in an artistically fine performance, which was rewarded in the Equal Voices Chamber Choir category.



Iriga City Singing

Ambassadors (Philippines)

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By the end of the competition, a positive report could be made of the state of choral music in Asia and Southeast Asia, its vitality confirmed by the presence of a significant number of high-level choirs. Most countries today seem to have available a choral training system distinguished by solid technical mastery and a diverse repertoire. Ensembles are clearly better prepared to handle the difficulties encountered in competition. The choirs displayed characteristic vocal coloration, the fruit of hard work by choir directors who had learned to pay particular attention to vocal quality and aesthetics. We should add that the visual presentation of the choirs, with their brightly colored costumes and use of synchronized movements, contributed to both national pride and audience interest in the different kinds of choral music. These are additional assets when it comes to attracting people to obtain musical training and education.

The jury particularly valued choir directors' efforts in the area of tuning and intonation. The basic principles of musical interpretation have been sufficiently mastered; today, execution is a question of nuance and, most importantly, of phrasing. The choirs we heard displayed solid musical sense and a true desire to display their own identity by means of a specific aesthetic. Likewise, they understood that their repertoire needed to be both diverse and adapted to the musical and vocal competences of the singers. Indeed, choir competition is not merely a straightforward technical comparison, but is rather an exchange of aesthetic contributions by each choir. Moreover, scores that exceed the performers' technical abilities do not always appeal the most to juries. Forcing voices puts them at risk of injury, and

the jury's ears as well. Thus it is preferable for a choir director to choose unpretentious musical pieces that singers can perform well and use to win over the jury. The level of difficulty must always be adapted to the choir's experience and capabilities. A multitude of choral pieces exists, representing diverse styles and languages and capable of displaying a group's artistic sensibility; everything is a matter of choice. Song and dance combinations should be evaluated in the same way, as a function of the contribution they make to musical expression and interpretation, and therefore should be mainly in the folklore category; elsewhere the combination is questionable.



*St. Paul College Pasig High
School Chorale
(Philippines) ©Interkultur*

Choir directors' conducting gestures during competition also require greater attention than is currently the case. Directing with elaborate gestures requires the acquisition of artistic, musical and vocal competence on the part of the one who makes them. The director must be precise in order to maintain three-way communication between the choir, the director and the jury. It is gesture that produces the sound, not the other way around. The gesture must be anticipated;

singers will then follow it. Conducting is thus a discipline requiring methodical preparation for it to be called an interpretation in the true sense of the word. It is through their gestures and leads that directors give their musical vision of the piece and communicate their own dynamics, tempos and emotions to those who will carry it out.

These recommendations were mentioned during the final evaluation with members of the jury and participating choir directors. Thus, the second Vietnam International Choral Festival and Competition contributed significantly to the development of choral music by providing advice to participants on technical and artistic matters, building blocks on the road to improvement.

Additional Asian competitions are planned for 2013 and 2014: One is coming soon, in June, in Hoi An (Vietnam); two others are planned for October in Sulawesi (Indonesia) and for December in Manila (Philippines). Without any doubt, the Hue festival is a milestone in the expression of the new musical dynamism of this region of the world. It confirms that choral practice demands work, time and perseverance; that it is a discipline which is part of our patrimony reliant upon experience and exchange; an artistic field that, according to Pierre Kaelin, "creates community". Above all, these competitions consolidate the framework of musical education and contribute to the general formation of singers and choir directors. They develop bonds of friendship between ASEAN countries and contribute to the musical competitiveness and vitality of an entire region.

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