

“Finding the balance between technical proficiency and passion” Juror Michael Barrett on adjudicating, competing and his love for choral music

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Michael Barrett from South Africa is a conductor for several choirs, including the award-winning University of Pretoria Camerata, and is a sought-after adjudicator at international choir competitions. In July he will compete with his choirs at the Grand Prix of Nations in Riga, and in October he will act as a juror at the Interkultur event “Canta al mar – Festival Coral Internacional”. In the following interview he speaks about adjudicating, competing and choral music in general.

Acting as adjudicator at choral competitions: What is your main focus when evaluating, to what do you pay most attention?

I think it is important to keep a balance between all technical aspects (intonation, balance, blend, diction, etc.) and making the music live! Singing with integrity, heart and soul is so important for the music as it is this aspect that makes people feel something. As an adjudicator, but more importantly as a human being, I want to be moved by the message. So finding the balance between technical proficiency and passion is my main focus.

You regularly bring your choir “University of Pretoria

Camerata" to national and international choir competitions. Why do you think it is important for singers and choirs to compete with others?

I believe it is important that we push ourselves to always be our best. By competing, we force ourselves to work harder and be better, and regardless of the end result, my choirs are always better singers and musicians after the journey. It is also so much fun to be able to enjoy the music of singers and choirs from other countries.

One of the first and most essential things for conductors prior to a competition is selecting an adequate repertoire. What is your advice, what makes a "good" competition program?

I think variety is the key. It is so important to showcase your choir's strengths and abilities through the music you choose. I also enjoy music that is fresh and not overdone, and more often than not I have music commissioned for competitions. This is also a great way to expand on the choral repertoire.

As a conductor and sought-after juror at international choir competitions, you have been listening to a lot of choral music from all over the world. The choral music from which country or region has you impressed most?

I must admit that I love music from all over the world; I have a soft spot for music from the Baltic region. But the country that has surprised and impressed me the most is the Philippines. The music from this country is so original, challenging and exciting. Filled with complex rhythms, body percussion and unique tonal and harmonic color. Wonderful people and wonderful music. It is a great combination ☐

From your point of view, what is the greatest piece of choral literature that has ever been written?

Without a doubt *Mass in B Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach. This

is my all-time favorite.

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