

Krakow Advent and Christmas Choir Festival

By Andrea Angelini, ICB Managing Editor

The candor of the snow introduces you to the Christmas spirit or, better, to the Advent atmosphere which, like every expectation, has something magic about it. The lights are suffused, subtle, the people are walking in a hurried bustle of colorful scarves and hats.

It is here, in the charming city of Krakow, that the *Advent and Christmas Choir Festival* (www.christmasfestival.pl) was held from 10th to 12th December 2010 with the participation of 25 choirs, coming from various cities of Poland and also from Hungary, Russia, the Czech Republic and Ireland. The music ranged from traditional harmonies to songs by contemporary composers, from a cappella music to pieces accompanied by the piano, the violin, and the drums; all of this in the beautiful setting of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, Krakow's first Baroque building, built by the Jesuits who arrived in the city in 1583 to fight the Reformation. The audience was attentive and quiet as if inwardly enjoying the emotions aroused by listening. The program was rich in events: the choirs performed evening concerts in the most beautiful and interesting churches in the center and took part in the liturgy on the Sunday morning.

In the swarming market square, a true medieval jewel, the stalls offer craftwork in wood, ceramic, glass, wool and Baltic amber. The smell of cinnamon pervades the air: it is used to flavor the hot wine sold in the typical "barrel houses", together with the "*pierogi*" (dumplings), "*barszcz*" (soup with red beets), potatoes and roasted vegetables,

sausages... Polish cuisine is rich and hearty, with plates of meat and game, thick soups, sauces; there are many preserves due to the need to store the products harvested in summer, for the long winters. The welcoming nature of the local people is also reflected by the Christmas Eve custom of setting an extra place at the table, in case an unexpected guest should knock at the door.

The judges and staff work for the festival in a climate of great cooperation. The artistic director of the Festival is Maciej Przerwa who is supported by many volunteers, almost all of them young people. Each choir is supervised by a member of the staff: nothing is left to chance. The acoustics of the church are very good, especially for small groups which are amplified by the natural reverberation.

Throughout the entire city one can feel the culture that has always been a characteristic of the place: one of the first universities in Europe was established here in 1364, in the reign of *Casimir III*, a very enlightened king who introduced important reforms in legal, economic and commercial matters.

Among the many Renaissance buildings you can find *Wawel Castle*, the residence of the Polish Kings for over 500 years, and *Sigismund's Chapel* inside the cathedral, considered a unique artistic heritage for its amazing number of works of art but also an important spiritual sanctuary in Poland.

At the end of the competition the jury, composed of *James Haydn* (UK), *Thea Paluoja* (Estonia), *Veronica Lozoviukova* (Czech Republic), *Andrea Angelini* (Italy), and *Marcin Cmiel* (Poland) nominated the following winners: for A category (Mixed Adults Choirs): *Chor Akademii Techniczno-Humanistycznej*, from Bielsko Biała (Poland); for B category (Equal Voices Choirs) and C category (Youth Choirs): *Aurin*, from Kecskemet (Hungary); for E category (Chamber Choirs): *Cantica laetitia*, from Zlin (Czech Republic). *Kadans Choir* from Moscow (Russia) received a Golden Angel.



*The final concert at the
Mariacki Church*

A final word: visit *Matejko House*, the place where Jan Matejko lived and worked in the most creative period of his life. A curiosity: he painted portraits of all the Polish kings from 960 to 1790, as well as the major events and battles in the nation's history.

Edited by Gillian Forlivesi Heywood, Italy