

Macau, a Wager on Choral Music

By Aurelio Porfiri, Choral Conductor and Organist

When people think about Macau, usually the first thing they think of is the gambling industry. There is a reason for this: Macau is really the Las Vegas of the East. Gambling here is the center of economic growth and the main business for this ex-Portuguese colony. Casinos and hotels are flourishing everywhere, with their lavish buildings and luxurious restaurants. This is part of life. So when I came here more than two years ago, engaged by the University of Saint Joseph (USJ) as Associate Professor, I was very curious about the work I could develop in my own field, choral music. I soon discovered that despite the many problems, there was also room for growth in this area. This is true because in Macau we have a quite consistent musical tradition, thanks to our connections with the western world.

We can affirm with some degree of certainty that western music was present in Macau at least from the sixteenth century, for it was in this century that the first institute of higher education in Macau was created: *“In 1594, thanks to the successful experience of the Italian missionary, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in China, the Jesuits decided to upgrade the church school to an institute of higher learning and established St. Paul’s College, aimed at training missionaries in China, Japan, Vietnam, etc.”*¹ We cannot be certain only from this description that there was musical activity in this first center of higher education, but some other scholars seems to suggest this more precisely.

Even before the foundation of the College of Saint Paul by the

Jesuits who had arrived in Macau on November 20, 1555, we know that there existed a school for Chinese Catechumens, established by Father Ruggeri in 1580. In 1584 there were about 200 students studying Latin, mathematics and music. We know also of the existence of a school of music and painting led by an Italian missionary, Father Niccolò. Obviously, in Saint Paul's College music was an important part of the curriculum. The instruction given was the same as that which Jesuits received in Europe. We know that Matteo Ricci, the great missionary himself, was instructed in music during his years of study in the Collegio Romano in Rome, and there is no reason to think that a similar curriculum was not implemented in Macau from the very beginning.

Subsequently two seminaries were founded for the training of future priests: St. Ignatius (founded by the Japanese in 1623) and St. Joseph (created for Chinese Seminarians in 1732). We can confidently surmise that in these places too music was an important feature. The St. Joseph Seminary is still in existence and we can document flourishing musical activity in the twentieth century, with a number of music directors and composers from Europe (Portugal, Italy, Germany etc.) and China. An interesting book informs us that in the Seminary of Saint Joseph they had instructors in *"Theology, Philosophy, Rhetoric, Natural History, Physics, Latin, Geography and History, French, English, Portuguese, Chinese, and Music"*². This Seminary was a really important place for music instruction, so there is a historic connection creating a basis for music studies in Macau.

In these two years I have collaborated with several institutions: apart from my full-time involvement in USJ, I also enjoy collaboration with Santa Rosa de Lima College (English Section), Our Lady of Fatima Girls School, and the Ricci School. I was also delighted to be invited to teach choral conducting for the Music Education program at Macau Polytechnic Institute. All these experiences have given me a

broad idea as to the possibilities of development for choral activities.

The University of Saint Joseph was founded in 1996 by the Catholic University of Portugal and the Macau Diocese with the name Macau Inter University Institute. In 2009 the name was changed to University of Saint Joseph. All the degrees granted by the University are also recognized in Europe through the Catholic University of Portugal. USJ is really an international University, with faculty and staff coming from many different geographical areas.

Nowadays, the various Macau Universities are trying to develop choral activities. At the University of Saint Joseph, the University of Macau, Macau Polytechnic Institute and Macau University for Science and Technology there are choral activities, most of the time extracurricular. Macau also has some choirs which enliven the city scene with concerts at various times of the year; for example, the Perosi Choir, and there is a competition for the schools, usually in spring. In recent years the University of Saint Joseph has organized a Festival of Lessons and Carols in December, with the participation of school choirs, and *Via Lucis*, an Easter celebration which takes place in May.



*University of St. Joseph
Choir*

One of the ideas I had from the very beginning was to create an opportunity for those who want to develop their skills in choral conducting, giving them not only the necessary training but also an academic qualification. So I suggested to the Rector of the University that we create a Master in Choral Conducting. Happily the Rector is a great lover of music and he promptly accepted this proposal. I at once started to work on the curriculum to be submitted to the relevant authorities in the Macau education office for their approval. After receiving approval, we began to develop this new program, unique in Macau and to my knowledge also in this geographic area. From the beginning I planned to offer this Master in three intensive installments, rather than over a whole year. Why? To give people coming from outside Macau the opportunity to come and join the Master using their holidays, without leaving their regular jobs. The modules are offered in three weeks in June, so the people enrolling for the Master now will come to Macau in June 2011, June 2012 and June 2013.

The concept of the Master, I believe, is in line with the way the world is today and with the vision of my University: We cannot separate knowledge into compartments; knowledge is holistic. So, besides the music modules dealing with the history of choral music, voice, analysis, conducting techniques, we have also included modules dealing with leadership and with the neuro-scientific view of music, so relevant for musical studies today. We think that opening the mind to different areas will help students to have a broader understanding of choral music. This is the way the world is evolving. The fragmentation of knowledge is something that today makes little sense. Anyone interested can consult (also online) studies by Brian Martin, an Australian professor dealing with the issue of academic segmentation and power struggle.

What I think is also remarkable is that students will have the

opportunity to study under well-known and experienced professors. In this first installment we will be honored to have as a Visiting Professor Colin Mawby, the well-known English composer and former Master of Music at Westminster Cathedral. But we are already in contact with other well-known conductors and professors who have gladly accepted to come next year. I see this Master as a great opportunity to develop still more the art of choral music in this part of the world. I am not only thinking about Macau, but of the whole area. We really hope to attract students from the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam and so on. We sincerely hope that this program will contribute notably to the development of this art form for the benefit of every kind of audience and for the enjoyment of all lovers of choral music.

¹ (Lau Sin Peng (2009). A History of Education in Macau. Translated by Sylvia S.L. Ieong and Victoria L.C. Lei. Macau SAR, China: Faculty of Education University of Macau. Pag. 4).

² (Dyer Ball, J. (1905). Macao: the Holy City. The Gem of the Orient Earth. Canton, China: The China Baptist Publication Society. Pag. 38.).