

In Memoriam Willi Gohl 1925-2010

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In Willi Gohl the world has lost a musician and pedagogue who shaped several generations of musicians in Switzerland, his homeland, and in Europe and the rest of the world.

His entire life was devoted to music and music education. His greatest love was choral music. But he was also an excellent pianist, and he accompanied the Zürcher Kammermusiker around the world playing the harpsichord. Among the different choirs which he conducted during his lifetime, the Zürcher Singkreis is inseparably linked to his name, as he was their conductor for more than forty years; together they gave concerts in many countries. Willi Gohl was the director of the Winterthur academy of music ("Konservatorium") for 27 years. Throughout his career he organised and directed conducting classes as well as school music and choral workshops at home and abroad.

Willi Gohl was involved in Europa Cantat from its very beginning. This organisation was set up in Geneva in 1960 and legally incorporated in 1963 under the name of European Federation of Young Choirs – EFYC. For their festivals and singing weeks he was frequently a workshop leader for large choral works. However, he will be best remembered for his unique way of conducting the Open Singing sessions for which he compiled many of the songbooks.

In a similar way he worked for the Israeli Zimriya festival for more than 20 years; he also participated many times in France's Choralies festival. He was an intermittent Board member of Europa Cantat from 1965 to 1994, and of ISME

(International Society for Music Education) from 1978 to 1982.

He loved large choral works and oratorios. But he loved simple folksongs just as much and wrote many choral arrangements of these. His own compositions and texts are written like folksongs, and some of them have become part of the Swiss folksong tradition. Several generations of Swiss pupils have used songbooks containing songs or arrangements by Willi Gohl. His open-singing broadcasts by the Swiss Radio were legendary. The German-speaking world knows him as the author of the beautiful "Grosse Liederbuch" ("Big Songbook"), published in 1975 by Diogenes with illustrations by Tomi Ungerer.

Bringing people together was most important to him, and choral singing was for him a fantastic tool in this respect. As early as 1972 he participated with his choir in the International Choral Festival at New York's Lincoln Center (organised by Jim Bjorge, with Robert Shaw as musical director), the aim of which was to promote peace and international understanding. (This festival took place five times, and concerts were also given at Yale and Washington's Kennedy Center.)

This festival may have contributed to his strong commitment for the creation of an international choral organisation, which was finally founded in Namur (Belgium) in 1982 under the name of International Federation for Choral Music – IFCM. It was only right then that he was immediately elected to its Board, where he remained until 1996.

Willi Gohl was a member of the working group for the preparation of the First World Symposium on Choral Music held in Vienna (Austria) in 1987, to which he contributed many of his educational ideas: the "format", including workshops, master classes (in many places of the world there were, and still are, no formal choral conducting classes), the presence of some of the world's best amateur choirs as "show cases", etc., is still in use.

In 1996 Willi Gohl was the president of the jury of the UNESCO Prize for the Promotion of the Arts, which was unanimously awarded to Finland's Tapiola Choir conducted by Kari Ala Pöllänen during the 4th World Choral Symposium in Sydney (Australia).

Willi Gohl was popular and revered by many. He had a very special gift for communicating his love of music and musicmaking. His humane, lively and humorous nature will be remembered by all who have known him.



*Willi Gohl conducting at
the United Nations*

Willi Gohl is survived by his wife, Verena, and his five children, all of them musicians.

A concert in his memory will be held on 6 June 2010 in Winterthur.