

# **The ACDA International Conductors Exchange Program: Building International Bridges in Choral Music to Make the World a Better Place**

*By Dr. T. J. Harper*

*“To inspire excellence in choral music by expanding our reach to create positive social change, foster community, and create opportunities for the next generation of choral leaders.”*

Beyond the borders of the United States, choral music continues to grow and redefine itself as it continues to be informed by the cultural traditions inherent to a region, and by the passion of individuals actively engaged in its creation, its performance and its scholarship. Across the globe, centers of choral music are emerging and continuously reinventing and challenging traditional notions of what choral music can look like and sound like. The ACDA International Conductors Exchange Program (ICEP) is committed to leading the world in the creation of opportunities for intercultural and artistic dialogue with these choral communities from around the world. This dialogue is the key to creating connections and forging stronger relationships between ACDA and the rest of the world. It is an ongoing exchange program for emerging leaders from the U.S. and their international counterparts to interact with choruses and choral musicians from one another's respective countries.

Founded in 1959, the American Choral Directors Association has always advocated for excellence in choral music performance.

The core of this idea is excellence through education, sharing, and the promotion of best practices. The very first ACDA Choral Journal announced the formal introduction of a choral music exchange program where ideas and teaching methods could be shared and discussed. In 1975, ACDA added to its list of official Purposes, the following: *To foster and promote international exchange programs involving performing groups, conductors, and composers.* The addition of this language into the canon of official objectives for the association marked a watershed moment in the US choral profession as it acknowledged the global community as a critical partner to foster cross-cultural dialogue and broaden artistic horizons.



Maestra Carmen Collado,  
ICEP 2012, Cuba

Almost thirty years ago, ACDA embarked upon its first official international conductor exchange project with partner countries Germany, Sweden, Venezuela, and Argentina. This early project engaged some of the most well-known choral conductors from each country. Following these highly successful international exchanges, this program was not pursued for many years, although international relationships and collaborations continued in the US and abroad. However, these partnerships were localized to those conductors with the desire and means of creating a successful international experience. It would be many years before ACDA would prioritize this type of exchange program at the national level for its membership.

In 2010, upon the advice of ACDA Executive Director Dr. Tim Sharp, past national president Dr. Jerry McCoy led a renewed effort that established a new steering committee for an International Conductors Exchange Program to fulfill the official mandate of the 1975 ACDA Purpose. This ICEP Steering Committee was charged with the creation of a vision, a set of objectives, and a timeline for the implementation of this international initiative. The committee was composed of leadership representing all seven ACDA divisions and led by Dr. James Feiszli, Dr. Bruce Browne and Dr. Jerry McCoy. In 2012, Dr. T. J. Harper was appointed the national director for the ACDA International Conductors Exchange Program. Since the launch of this initiative in 2010, ACDA has planned and successfully executed international exchanges with Cuba in 2012, China in 2014, Sweden in 2015, and South Korea in 2016. 2017 will witness the most ambitious ICEP exchange to date with collaborations ranging from North America (Canada and the United States) to Central America (Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, and Mexico), and South America (Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina).



Dr. Nicole Lammartine &  
Professor Wu Lingfen, ICEP  
2014

The ACDA International Conductors Exchange Program is a one-to-one exchange of conductors from partner countries. This means that for every conductor selected to participate from one country, the identical number of conductors will be

selected from the partner country. The selected ICEP Conducting Fellows will then participate in a professional residency lasting anywhere from seven to fourteen days. Each residency is designed to expose the Conducting Fellows to a broad view of the choral culture of the host country. In the US, Visiting International Conductors (VICs) coordinate their professional residencies with either an ACDA Division Conference (even years), or the ACDA National Conference (odd years, i.e. 2017 in Minneapolis, MN). Each ICEP Conducting Fellow is required to purchase their own round-trip airfare but the host country is responsible for all expenses related to housing, meals and transportation.

One of the most significant outcomes of this initiative is the impact felt by choral communities around the world long after the ICEP residency is completed. There are nearly 90 alumni from the ACDA International Conductors Exchange Program. Each ICEP Conducting Fellow represents hundreds of singers from their own local community and choral organizations. Additionally, each ICEP residency represents interaction, learning and cross-cultural exchange with thousands of singers from around the world. The relationships that are fostered through this program continue to build upon themselves and form fertile ground for the creation of new partnerships and collaborations beyond the original scope of this initiative.

ICEP Conducting Fellows are in essence goodwill ambassadors for the choral profession whose primary focus is simultaneously artistic and humanistic. On behalf of all of us in ACDA, these USA conductors are connecting every member of their own singing communities with their international partners. The influence of this program becomes exponential. As a result of these ACDA initial international residencies, ICEP alumni are creating new opportunities for collaboration and meaningful dialogue beyond the borders of the original exchange. Additionally, the ICEP alumni are beginning to work together to explore the ways in which people are using choral

music to create positive social change, promote mental well-being, and foster community. Through the International Conductors Exchange Program and its related activities, our membership is provided numerous opportunities to directly engage with conductors, choirs, repertoire and choral traditions from around the world.

*Edited by Karen Bradberry, Australia*