

Africa Cantat Festival 2023: Singing in the Heart of Africa

*Henrike Schauerte, manager of the Africa Cantat Festival 2020
and member of the Africa Cantat international committee*

From 1 to 6 August 2023, more than 500 individual singers, conductors, guests, and choirs from 15 countries came together to celebrate the diversity of African choral music in Yaoundé, Cameroon. The second edition of the festival was the first Africa Cantat Festival, where singers got the opportunity to meet, learn, exchange, and sing together in person.

Five ateliers, led by Sabelo Mthembu from South Africa, Jean Benoit Bakhom from Senegal, Jean Alexis Bakond from Cameroon, Jean-Marie Puissant from France and Jan Schumacher from Germany, the junior space, a study tour, daily open singings as well as daily afternoon and evening concerts gave the opportunity to discover songs from all over Africa and the world. In this article, we have brought four perspectives of the festival together to present Africa Cantat Festival 2023 and its visions for the future: Yveline Damas, president of the African Confederation for Choral Music and board member of the International Federation for Choral Music; Ann-Valérie Foning, member of the national hosting committee; Henri Mandeng, organising director of the festival representing the hosting association “Les Amis du Choeur Madrigal du Cameroun”; and Lucien Mendy, secretary general of the African Confederation for Choral Music.



Yveline Damas, the Africa Cantat Festival 2023 in Yaoundé was the first in-person edition of the event. What does this event mean to the African Confederation for Choral Music?

The first in-person edition of the Africa Cantat Festival is the flagship project of the African Confederation for Choral Music. With the support of the International Federation for Choral Music-IFCM, A Coeur Joie International and the European Choral Association, Africa Cantat Festival was hosted and organized locally by the association “Les Amis du Choeur Madrigal du Cameroun”. The Africa Cantat Festival has a special meaning for the African Confederation for Choral Music because it embodies our desire to see African Choral singing flourish by promoting exchange and sharing between choristers and conductors from Africa and other continents. The 2023 edition was an opportunity to commune in music, to exchange, to appreciate the hospitality and the joy of African life for all people involved, and more particularly, for the Cameroonian. There was a challenge ahead. That of overcoming

all obstacles and finding a partner capable of organizing a festival of such magnitude. After the festival in Yaoundé, we are happy to see that, despite all the challenges, we were able to make the Africa Cantat Festival a great success. We are more than ever determined to make this beautiful festival sustainable, and we are now focussing on the organisation of the next edition.

Ann-Valérie Foning, the Africa Cantat Festival was the first international event organised by “Les amis du Choeur Madrigal du Cameroun”. What did you, as the head of the festival office, experience during the festival?

The Africa Cantat Festival was a new experience for the local team, from the national committee to our volunteers who supported the festival. It was therefore a great opportunity for us to organise the festival with the support of the international committee. We received scores from festival participants, inspired by the ateliers they attended, showing us their appreciation for the festival. All the festival events could not have taken place without the support of our local committee and volunteers. Several of the volunteers were university students, so the new skills they gained will be very useful in their future careers. Throughout the festival, they were able to experience an international working environment. We also attracted interest from other students who were intrigued by the innovative nature of this festival and its openness to people with disabilities. The concerts, with their variety of styles, showed that choral singing is not just a religious activity (a widespread belief in Cameroon). In short, this festival was not only beneficial to those directly involved, but also to the people we reached through our choral singing demonstrations during the open singing and concerts.



Henri Mandeng, as the organising director of the festival and representative of “Les Amis du Choeur Madrigal du Cameroun”, what is your musical observation of the festival?

The festival was musically a great success. We were able to bring together choirs of excellent quality and various repertoires: Ensemble Ephémère from Lyon in France, Le Chant sur la Lowé from Gabon, Ban’Afrika, Bel Canto and Luc Gillon from the DRC, to mention some. Cameroonian choirs were represented by the Mboa Youth Choir and Makuli Ma Nlima. Additionally, the international committee had chosen the African Youth Choir as our guest choir, who were able to meet for the first time after the pandemic to sing together under the direction of Ken Wakia. Above all, the public was amazed by the originality of the artistic offer: simultaneous concerts in four locations in the city, and as a highlight of each festival day, the outdoor concerts in the evening at the Catholic University of Central Africa. Through the Africa Cantat Festival we were able to introduce the public, but also

the festival participants, to the diversity of choral singing, which is a great satisfaction and pride for us. The music offered really contributed to unite hearts in a surge of cohesion, shared joy, friendship, and togetherness. And the public has finally understood that choral singing is a wonderful tool for social cohesion and intercultural integration and understanding.



Lucien Mendy, what is the vision of the African Confederation for Choral Music for the future of Africa Cantat Festival?

The festival has solidified the Africa Cantat network. Thanks to the partnerships with other continental choral organizations, it offers promising prospects within the African continent for the next editions. The connection between African and European festival participants and organisers will generate synergic effects and lasting cooperation in the field of choral singing, and will establish the tradition of an Africa Cantat Festival, organised in a

different African country every three years. The Africa Cantat Festival in Yaoundé was an excellent platform for disseminating and preserving intangible cultural heritage, facilitating encounters, and contributing to intercultural understanding. It served as a catalyst for capacity-building for choral music professionals in Africa, and as a training framework for choristers, conductors, choirs, and festival managers to improve artistic and organizational standards in Cameroon, with an expected multiplier effect in participants' home countries. Another major advance to be mentioned is the networking of choral organisations, choirs, conductors, and managers within Africa and between African countries and other continents. Lastly, choirs' mobility and fundraising have proved to be real challenges in terms of empowering the actors to make Africa Cantat a sustainable and recurring event.

The statements were collected by Henrike Schauerte, manager of the Africa Cantat Festival 2020 and member of the Africa Cantat international committee. A special thanks goes to the members of the international committee. Yveline Damas, Ken Wakia and Lucien Mendy (representing the African Confederation for Choral music), Iva Radulovic (representing the International Federation for Choral Music-IFCM), Sonja Greiner (representing the European Choral Association), Thierry Thiébaud (representing A Coeur Joie International), Henri Mandeng (representing the association "Amis du Coeur Madrigal du Cameroun"), and everyone who brought the vision of the Africa Cantat Festival alive. The event took place in the "Creating in Central Africa" project, co-financed by the ACP-EU.

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info@africacantat.org

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