

# Celebrating 20 years!

World Youth Choir Anniversary Celebration

(21 – 25 October 2009, Örebro, Sweden)

*Vladimir Opačić*

*World Youth Choir Project Manager*

*“There is no greater task than to support somebody’s development; help the human being in its striving!”*

Ivo Andrić, Nobel Prize winner

*From Signs beside the road*

The World Youth Choir is a genuine educational and social experience that draws on many vocal traditions and aims to work at the highest artistic level. For 20 years now, the World Youth Choir has built bridges between young singers from diverse cultures. Many articles and reports have been written about this project, many stories told, and many videos recordings made over the last two decades. These tell of the philosophy of the ensemble, and document its value in the choral world from an artistic, social and human point of view.



*When singers from various past sessions meet – Photo: Andrea Angelini*

The question is always raised regarding how to present the various projects and events undertaken by this choir. Also, how to present its current role. So how should this “child”, born in 1989, be described? It came into being through the efforts of a group of choral music enthusiasts, who were led by the ideas of equality and an historical quest for multicultural diversity. This diversity is a peace found deep within our soul. It is an inner legacy, given to all of us by birth, and to be experienced during our short lives as a kind of personal balance held between our external self and our internal one. Diversity in this sense is a “country” inhabited by the World Youth Choir for some 20 years now. It is where we have “lived” during this time, and has helped over 1000 young people all over the globe to subsist. Over 1000 singers, conductors, organizers and choral music enthusiasts have worked within its “borders”.



*When singers,  
conductors and  
founders meet –  
Photo: Andrea  
Angelini*

This is the World Youth Choir at the end of these two decades, our dreams, hard work, constant belief, artistic professionalism and enormous enthusiasm for remarkable idea. It is our lives before the dream, and remains our lives whilst we are still dreaming!

The World Youth Choir has been the meeting point for young singers from around the world, and many individuals have taken part and left an indelible mark on the ensemble, imbuing it with their unique talent, personality, creativity, warmth and humour. From October 18-25, 2009, for the first time in the history of the ensemble, over 200 former singers, conductors and organizers throughout the globe were reunited in order to celebrate the choir's birthday. This was a true anniversary celebration, simple in its greatness, and the best possible present to the World Youth Choir.

**“Happy birthday, World Youth Choir”**, this was said so many times!

**“Happy birthday to you all”,** people said to each other!

One simple sentence, so innocent, yet one that recalled thousands of memories for us all. Singing, laughing, we gazed at many a fading photograph from the 1980s. We looked at singers and their families, little children running around, people hugging each other, and remembered this and that. Plus the conductors and their stories, and the emotional moments when the quality of the performance was broached. As for concert uniforms...do you remember him...or remember her? And so on in this vein for ten whole days and nights. A veritable beehive of activity. This is how the celebration started, thanks to the collaboration of the International Center of Choral Music and Swedish International Choral Center, Örebro, for these were the organizers of the Anniversary celebration together with the International Federation for Choral Music (IFCM), Jeunesses Musicales International (JMI) and Europa Cantat (EC), the World Youth Choir patron organizations, who were all proud to present a week of celebrations in Sweden, the first host country of the World Youth Choir.

Concerts were given by:

- **The World Chamber Choir** anniversary ensemble, gathering singers from 22 countries, with Nikolaj Znaider and the Swedish Chamber Orchestra performing two works by Johannes Brahms.
- **“The World Sings for you”** show, an international showcase presenting past and present World Youth Choir members, soloists, instrumentalists, vocal groups: Kaori Tsushima, Japan; “Jazz trio” presenting David Izard, piano, Ryan Andrews percussions and Zachary Lane, double bass, all from USA; Hildegunn Coucheron, soprano, Norway; “Cherry Blossoms” vocal group Japan; “VOXTET”, Czech jazz vocal group, founder Martin Mikes former WYC member; Fabienne Carlier, France, solo voice, piano and accordion accompanied by violinist Radoslaw Pawel Stawarz and “Witloof Bay”, jazz vocal ensemble, Belgium.

- **“GALA”** Anniversary ensembles and tutti ensemble gathering more than 200 singers from 45 countries, conducted by María Guinand, Venezuela; Nobuaki Tanaka, Japan; Fred Sjöberg, Sweden; Sidumo Jacobs, South Africa and Steve Zegree, USA, presenting choral music and traditions of five continents: The world on stage.

Whoever was with us in Örebro would have felt the joy of this gathering. Generations of singers from 1989 to 2009 made it happen. They made a huge effort and built up a unique international group of people with special musical and communication skills, people so different in their sound, lives, and minds but so similar when their expression, human and musical emotions are the main actors on the stage.

If you were not there with us, there is no better way to feel and hear how great was the impact of this project and its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It impinged on all our lives and still does. This is documented in the lines written by founders, organizers and singers of that first summer session of 1989. (More than 20 singers from the first summer session were present). This then was the face of the World Youth Choir. For humans exhibited a certain simplicity felt at every corner of the globe.

The 2009 anniversary will be one more “stone” in the foundation that underpin the World Youth Choir for future generations, and is an investment for all of us, for the next 20 years.



*When children and World  
Youth Choirs meet – Photo:  
Melody Rönnlund  
([www.melodypics.com](http://www.melodypics.com))*

## **“Global Unity and Future Hope”**

### **Facebook: Comments from some of the early World Youth Choir Singers**

“Dear friends! The World Youth Choir was once a dream and a vision shared by many in a time where it was extremely difficult for many countries all over the world. In this year of 2009, we have celebrated two strong and symbolic events that took place in 1989 – the realization of the dream World Youth Choir and the breaking down of the wall symbolizing the Iron curtain. For Stefan Sköld and myself who poured our hearts in the process with the ground work, it was a dream come true to help out in the birth process of this wonderful vision – to unite young souls and voices from all over the world. We are today grateful for the wonderful work that IFCM, Europa Cantat and Jeunesses Musicales *together* have done bringing this child up to what it represents today – the very sound and strong sounding symbol for the ideology that *music is all about humanity!* It means the world to us! We hope that all the children of the vision with World Youth Choir will adopt that vision and relentlessly work for humanity with

music as the instrument – thus we can make a difference! Meeting all wonderful singers from WYC – and particularly from *the very first WYC* in Örebro – made a great impact on me. You all reminded me of the beauty of *humanity and music* in perfect harmony. Let's hope for another reunion very soon! Thank you! I would like to finish with two verses from a poem sent to us in 1989 after the first assembly of the World Youth Choir by Alec Jackson – our wonderful English tenor.”

*United, we rise*

*A melody*

*A lyric of greatest depth*

*The most beautiful song*

*We are the hope*

*We are the unity*

*We have the love*

*We are the new seeds in the heart of our countries*

*We will last forever*

***Stefan Sköld, Thomas Caplin,***

Founders of the World Youth Choir

“What an emotion in Örebro... so many faces I hadn't seen for 20 years... and how strong the friendship and network has remained! I was far from imagining how the project would develop when I decided in 1990 to take over the management of World Youth Choir, a project that Jeunesses Musicales Sweden had started

in 1989. I am very proud of the work accomplished and I am also very moved by the real worldwide network the World Youth Choir has created among young very talented singers. I wish that the project will continue for the next 20 years to be a place for high-level music education, intercultural exchange, global unity and factor of arts development. May the alumni of the 20 past years, together with the patrons help to contribute to those goals and aims. Long life to the World Youth Choir!"

***Jean-Claude Wilkens, Belgium***

Founder and the manager of the World Youth Choir, 1990-1999



*Jean-Claude Wilkens  
and Eli Belgrano –  
Photo: Andrea  
Angelini*

"I'm a system administrator with an engineering company in Germany. In Örebro I had the chance to escape my nutshell and share my voice with friends from all over the world, which I had last seen 20 years ago. Singing in this choir on that high level is amazing. Feelings – overwhelming. These are the real



big moments of my live, I'll never forget. It feels like another world. A world of unity and freedom, nations joined. These projects and celebrations must continue for the next generations. Give all singers the chance to unite the world."

***Christoph Jandek, Germany***

World Youth Choir 1989

"For me this meeting was one of the greatest events in my life. I never have been crying so many tears of joy in my entire life. It maybe was not just the choir. I sometimes did have some emotionally very hard times in the last 15 years with lots of changes and crises, especially in the last year. So, probably it was a mixture of emotions that came over me and it often overwhelmed me. Nevertheless now something came up again that had completely occupied my heart 20 years ago. And on the one side there was this paradise-like atmosphere. I felt this optimistic and idealistic power of youth again. On the other side I met so many new singers and realized that I'm not that young anymore. But nevertheless: the fantastic thing was, that we sang together. It wasn't just a meeting with stories of old times. It was a meeting to continue in what we have done before: sing on an extraordinary good level and meet lovely people from all over the world. That is fantastic and it has to go on! It can help to build up a network of former singers who may support the organization and performance of the WYC sessions all over the world and keep the idea of the World Youth Choir running!"

***Heiner Geerlings, Germany, World Youth Choir 1989***

*Music teacher, secondary school Otto- Hahn- Schule for children of 50 different nationalities, Frankfurt, Germany*

“The World Youth Choir is still The World Youth Choir, 20 years later! – With its professional sound made in peace and harmony, from young people around the world. A joy to see, for a former participant, that the choir is in its good shape, as it was when it started in 1989. This also means, the management behind is doing its job to make this choir alive. The world needs this choir! Not only for the music aspect, but to show the world and the young singers themselves, that its possible to come together in this way, though there are conflicts and maybe even war between the countries the young singers come from. Creating music makes peace between humans and in us. So it’s even a greater joy to see that the WYC has become UNESCO Ambassadors for Peace. Many of us former singers had been waiting for this reunion, simply because, the very beginning of the World Youth Choir was such a great experience in our lives, when we were young singers. Coming together in this way, with people you don’t know anything about, to make wonderful music, travel the world and share social time, is THE BEST thing you can ever do in your life. You feel FREE! I joined for the World Youth Choir for 5 summers, from 1989 till 1993. For me, coming from a small island in the North of Norway, it made a huge impact on my life. I’m now a professional singer, do I need to say more? Of course the WYC fulfilled its purpose in my choice of career. I’m also helping young singers to develop as a singer, and that gives me great pleasure. It was so good to see my old friends again. We decided, 20 years later, that it would not be 20 years till next time. It will actually probably happen already next year. Maybe the world needs another choir? – With old World Youth Choir singers? – Who knows, only the future will tell? But for sure, “we’ll meet again, don’t know where, and don’t know when...!”

***Hildegunn Coucheron, Norway***

World Youth Choir 1989

“To reunite with those I first met 20 years ago was like coming home to the place where you have the happiest early memories. I couldn’t help but feel like we were just picking up from where we left off 19 or so years ago. It was also wonderful to sing with the group which continues to provide high quality training and development for singers from around the world. Still I felt a little melancholy that so many of our old friends still didn’t manage to make it. One of the most wonderful aspects was finding and chatting with our friends before the event started. I think that had emails existed when the choir began in 1989 we would all have been in contact much earlier. Since the event I have managed to contact about 50 former members who hadn’t managed to attend and we are trying to set up another reunion next year. The anniversary project really re-kick-started my love for these people and the WYC as a melting pot for international talent and choral coaching. Now the event is over I feel the same I did 19 years ago when I couldn’t attend any more WYC meetings and that is great loss and a feeling that this must never end; and it must not end. 20 years ago we didn’t know where the project would go, or where it would end up. Possible the best thing that happened was the cough and splutter of the first year, thankfully someone took up the project and breathed new life into the project and kept it alive. Regardless though, everyone who has had a hand in this project over the last 20 years has helped to create an institution of world cooperation and creativity. Not many international projects can claim that when they get together they speak with one voice. The WYC and the people I have met through the project will remain close friends for the rest of my life and hopefully we will all help to enrich our world through these wonderful experiences.”

***Alec Jackson, United Kingdom***

World Youth Choir 1989

“Music and singing is my whole life, but my profession is businessman, entrepreneur and manager, so my point of view will be a little bit different than opinions of active and professional musicians. As at the beginning in 1989, the quality of a choir, conductors and chosen musical substance, is at an excellent level. The main vision of World Youth Choir /global unity and future hope/ and its social aspect is equally important, beautiful and courageous, as it was 20 years ago. World Youth Choir '89 was an amazing experience of freedom, which is written in my memory for the rest of my life. For me, the WYC 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was a proof that in case of friendship time is not important. And in case of good music time has no role. The opportunity given to all musicians from 45 countries all around the world, which can communicate and be together for one week, is a wonderful experience for their further professional life. The fact, than in this way all musicians from 45 countries can communicate, including the fact that there is a generation gap between them, is an experience which value we can't evaluate. The idea of organizing the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary is absolutely great. If it could be up to me, I would organize this type of anniversary every 5 years as during past 20 years of my life I have outlasted a lot. I have got a wonderful wife and three beautiful children. I had 2 serious diseases. Each day is a gift for me! The WYC 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the meeting with people and the musical experience is a great gift for me too. Every time I think about memories from this meeting, I have got a big smile on my face. And I would like to say thank you all”

***Oliver Salon, Slovakia***

World Youth Choir 1989

“I am one of the “very first” singers of the World Youth Choir. I sang in 1989, 1990, 1991 and 1992. In 1991 I was also

the project manager for the Prague portion of the tour. I am having a hard time finding words to express what the World Youth Choir experience means to me. I never imagined I would be a part of such talented group of people. I was sad once I became "too old" to be a member anymore. I would miss my friends; I would miss the incredibly high level of music we were making together. I often thought about us "old" members singing and spending time together again, so I was ecstatic to find out that there will be an anniversary reunion. I knew I would do everything I could to be there. I wasn't the only one, apparently. Even in the time of the economic downturn, World Youth Choir former members from all over the world turned up at the Stockholm Central Station looking for the train to Orebro! The reunion was marvelous and way too short. Seeing my friends and catching up was priceless. So was singing together again. And yes, we were crying at the end, just like we did every year. Thank you, Thomas Caplin and Stefan Sköld for the World Youth Choir and it's first year, thank you, Jean-Claude Wilkens for keeping it alive till today, thank you Vladimir Opacic (and everyone else) who made this anniversary possible. And some of us 89'ers are already planning World Youth Choir Alumni sessions for 2010 and 2011."

***Jamila Hla Shwe, Czech Republic/USA***

World Youth Choir 1989

For the past 20 years many volunteers have worked to keep the World Youth Choir running. All of them, all over the world, will recognize themselves in this article. The World Youth Choir simply says thanks to all of them, to those people around the world who recognized the importance of choir's existence, and who believed in its future. We hope you and others will continue to believe for the next 20 years!

On behalf of the International Center for Choral Music, which

oversees the project, gratitude must be expressed to:

*Stefan Sköld, Thomas Caplin* the founders; *Jean-Claude Wilkens* founder and previous World Youth Choir manager; *Benoit Giaux* and *Jean-Marc Poncelet*, executive directors and previous managers; *Alessandro Cortese*, former singer and previous manager of the choir; former and present employees/trainees of the ICCM and IFCM *Véronique Bour*; *Nadine Robin*; *Maria Catalina Prieto*; *Victoria Liedbergius*; the management and editorial team of the ICB, *Jutta Tagger*, managing editor; *International Federation for Choral Music*, *Jeunesses Musicales International* and *Europa Cantat*, patron organizations of the World Youth Choir; the *members of the World Youth Choir Committee*, and of course to the *Province of Namur*, *Martine Jacques*, and *Ville de Namur* with their appointed representatives, for their support through all these years.

Special gratitude must also be expressed to more than 40 renowned world conductors of the choir in past 20 years, and hosts/organizational teams of Sweden, Belgium, Hungary, Spain, Norway, Uruguay, Canada, Estonia, Japan, Taiwan R.O.C., Slovenia, Venezuela, United States of America, Switzerland, South Korea, Israel, South Africa, P.R.O. China, countries which welcomed the World Youth Choir on its tours at more than 25 summer and winter sessions since 1989.

Finally a big thank you to *Christina Kühlewein*, IFCM programme coordinator for her immeasurable, invaluable work on the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration, as well as to *Fred Sjöberg*, president of the Swedish International Choral Center, and his wife, *Gunnel Sjöberg*, the producer, for their tremendous work and devotion in hosting the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration within the frame of the "Raise Your Voices" choral festival, Örebro, Sweden.



*Gunnel and Fred Sjöberg,  
producer and manager of the  
20th Anniversary event –  
Photo: Melody  
Rönnlund (www.melodypics.co  
m)*

***Vladimir Opačić***, Serbia

WYC singer 1999-2004, WCC singer 2004, 2009

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