

Festival de Música de Cantonigròs a Vic 2015

How a visit to Wales and one young man's glance into the future evolved into one of the world's most outstanding Music Festivals.

By Christopher Horner, musician and teacher

Nestling high in the mountains above the Plana de Vic lies the small Catalan village of Cantonigròs. With a population of some 200 people, this might seem a most unlikely genesis for a Music Festival which every year since its inception in 1983 has been attracting choirs and dance groups from all corners of the globe to participate, providing a feast of competitions and performances which bring in audiences not only from the immediate community but from far beyond.

Central to this Festival's beginnings and continuing evolution has been the extraordinary purpose and vision of one man, Josep Maria Busquets. As a teenager in the early 1950s he made the first of several visits to the International Eisteddfod in Llangollen, North Wales, on this occasion with his father as members of the Cor Laudate, a choir directed by Àngel Colomer, a principal figure in the Catalan choral world from the 1940s until his death in 2001. Busquets was greatly impressed by his experience at Llangollen, not only by the choirs he heard but also by the hospitality of the house where they stayed, which opened his eyes to the way in which the Llangollen community supported the Festival. Somewhere amongst this sea of experiences, an idea was taking root in Busquets' mind. As he recalls "This experience made me feel that of necessity we in Catalonia would have to do something like this in order to aid the sharing of cultures and traditions between nations by

means of the language of music thereby opening up a dialogue of understanding and peace.”

As Busquets relates “In order to achieve this objective, it was necessary that a good number of people from Cantonigròs should get to know the language and the world of music, and so it was that in 1975 a choir was founded in the village with the name of Orfeo de Cantonigròs. Once they were prepared and ready to go to Llangollen, the choir then took part in the Llangollen Festival in both 1981 and 1982. Thus well imbued with the spirit and the aims of this Festival, we started to get ready and organise the First Festival Internacional de Música de Cantonigròs which has continued every year since then, confounding all the odds that we might not survive beyond the second year.”



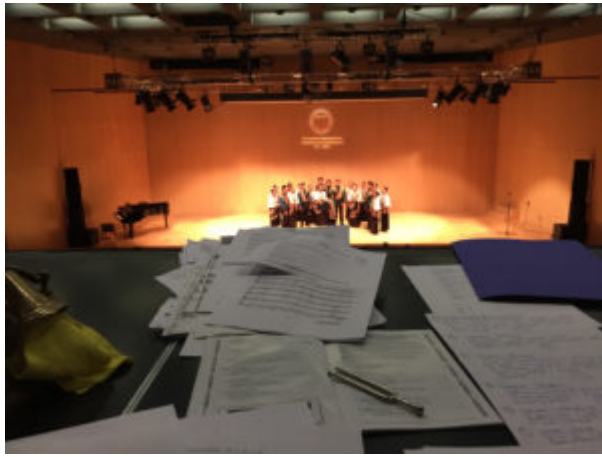
**The Children’s Jazz State Choir
(Yekaterinburg, Russia) Cond. Marina
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Many of the ideas derived from the Welsh model of the Eisteddfod were incorporated from the start. For example, as in Wales, the auditorium was a large marquee seating several thousand people and the tradition of community support through hospitality which had so impressed the young Busquets resulted in his asking many homes in Cantonigròs and the surrounding villages and towns to do the same. The result was that many people subsequently opened their doors to the visiting choirs and dance groups from all over the world. A large army of volunteers had to be recruited for other jobs and the response was huge; many of that original cohort remain with the

Festival to this day. Without them the Festival simply would not operate and it is a telling fact that many give up work or holiday time both before and following those intensive four days of competition and performance activity in order to volunteer their services.

The tradition of inviting groups from far afield began in the Festival's first year with the arrival of a group from the Philippines, a country which has continued to send groups every year. However, despite the parallels with Llangollen, other characteristics of Cantonigròs are very much its own. There is no question that at the core of the Festival's success and survival is the Busquets family itself. During the Festival, the eight children of Josep María Busquets and his wife Rosa María all hold key positions within the organisation and running of the four intensive days in mid-July each year when the Festival takes place. They are also often on hand to help during the rest of the year when the next Festival is being prepared.

This tradition of family participation has in turn been extended to the children and grandchildren of the original families and of visiting families such as ourselves. My wife has been a volunteer from the Festival's early days and together we have seen our two young daughters and their friends profit greatly from the work they do in organising and co-ordinating the proceedings backstage. Other young people working as guides and interpreters find that they may need to communicate in another language or in a mixture of languages at times. Through this, they gain an understanding of different customs, and, as happens so easily with the young, soon discover much of what they have in common and, not unusually, form long-standing friendships.



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One of the most humbling aspects of the Festival is to see groups arrive, who having spent three or four days travelling across Europe in a cramped coach without air conditioning, then go on to give outstanding performances, sometimes more than once on the same day. Some may battle with various maladies at times but nevertheless remain determined to take part if at all possible and do honour to their group, family and country.

In order to have facilities that would match the level of the groups that the Festival was attracting, a move to the Atlàntida theatre complex in nearby Vic was announced for the Festival's 30th Year in 2012 and its name was formally changed to Festival Internacional de Música de Cantonigròs a Vic. This naturally led to questions as to whether a Festival founded amongst the rural surroundings of Cantonigròs could maintain its legacy within these new surroundings. Equipped with two excellent auditoriums, with a concert series featuring some of the world's top performers as well as popular local artists and home to a Music School, this prestigious venue was indeed a major change of profile for the Festival. The warm welcome given to the Festival from the Ajuntament (City Council) of Vic, the Atlàntida and the people of Vic itself was quite overwhelming and the Festival has now become an important

event in the town's year. Meanwhile, the personality of the Festival with its established working structures of families and volunteers well in place, has continued to go from strength to strength.

This year's Festival, which ran from 16th-19th, July saw a wonderful range of choirs and dance groups visiting Vic. The prizes for the five competitions were generously donated by the Generalitat (Government) de Catalunya, Ajuntament de Vic, Institutió Puig Porret and the Ajuntament de Manlleu and the Festival itself. There was a high level of performance in all the competitions and the evening concerts. The Inaugural Concert featured the Catalan Youth Orchestra and soprano Ulrike Haller as the Festival's opening event.



All the singers congratulate each other on a stage covered with flowers

The First Prize for the Mixed Choirs was won by the Palawan State University Singers from Puerto Princesa, Philippines. Three First Prizes were won by The Children's Jazz State Choir from Ekaterinburg, Russia, who as winners of the competitions for Folksong for Mixed Choirs, Female Choirs and Children's Choirs, became one of the Festival's highlights. This choir sang with such a unanimity of style and character and at such a high technical level that any one of their performances could have been issued as a live recording. The Dance competition was won by the remarkable Catalan dance group, Esbart San Martí who, with music of the Cobla, (a largely double reed folkloric Catalan ensemble plus a single double

bass) performing a contemporary score of intermittently disturbing power, gave a dynamic and moving performance which arguably made history in giving new life to a long-established Catalan art form.

It is perhaps this performance which for me sums up the spirit of this remarkable Festival. Never content to remain comfortable with its format and ideals, it refuses to stand still and has a heart which is truly palpable for those present. Visiting Wales for the first time and having that glance into the future, could the young Busquets have had even the remotest idea of what might someday transpire? What can be said is that all those fortunate enough to be part of the Cantonigròs Festival find themselves drawn into an experience which lives on long after the final rousing Festival Hymn, sung by all.

The future of this highly individual Festival seems assured: it has indeed opened that "dialogue" of peace, knowledge and understanding between people, as its founders hoped it might.

Edited by Louise Wiseman, UK/Canada