

Gaudete et Exsultate – International Congress of Pueri Cantores in Florence

Matthias Balzer, choir conductor and organist, Germany

From July 13th-17th 2022, about 2500 children and young people met in Florence for an international choral festival of Pueri Cantores. At temperatures of continuously well over 30°C, 74 choirs with over 2500 singers met in this metropolitan city in Tuscany.

In the impressive setting of the famous Piazza della Signoria, the 43rd International Congress of Pueri Cantores started on the evening of July 13th with an opening ceremony. In an exuberant atmosphere under the open sky, people sang passionately, first contacts were made among the choirs and a feeling of community was quickly established.



Peace Prayer at Piazza della Signoria © Niels Singer/Rottweiler Münstersängerknaben

Thursday the 14th began for all 2500 participants with a large prayer for peace; in these times a very special sign in an extraordinary setting in front of the Palazzo Vecchio. As Marius Linnenborn, the Ecclesiastical Assistant of Pueri Cantores Germany, was unfortunately unable to come, Rainer Hohmann stood in for him at short notice and celebrated the "Prayer for Peace" with the choirs. Two youth choirs from Germany also performed on stage to lead the singing. On Thursday afternoon, the first open-air concerts were held; choirs from Italy, Poland, Spain and Germany sang at various places all over the city center.



Open-air city concerts: Coral Sol Ixent, Catalonia, Spain © Christian Klenk/Dommusik Eichstätt

In the evening French, Mexican, German, and Austrian choirs gave concerts together in four churches in the city center. In many places, the singers did not want to part after the concerts and spontaneously continued to sing and dance in the squares, thus attracting many onlookers. With great passion and joy, Matthias Balzer (Vice-President of Pueri Cantores Germany as well as the International Federation of Pueri Cantores) carried away hundreds of participants at the Open Singing event in the square in front of the Church of San Lorenzo: together with the Diocesan Youth Choir of Trier he animated those present to sing along with a varied selection of songs. Hundreds of Pueri Cantores were joined by tourists and residents of the city. In the evening further Encounter Concerts followed, given for example by the Youth Choir St. Columban from Friedrichshafen, Germany, together with the Pueri Cantantes Cathedralis from Stockholm, Sweden. Also impressive was the performance of the Diocesan Youth Choir of

Munich, an association of 14 choirs, which had chosen a demanding program with about 150 singers and mastered it with bravura. Friday morning was dedicated to the Masses of the Nations in eight churches around the city.



Concerts: Youth Choir St. Remigius, Düsseldorf, Germany © Christian Klenk/Dommusik Eichstätt

Afterwards, the choir directors, accompanying persons and Ecclesiastical Assistants were invited first to a concert in the Salone dei Cinquecento (Palazzo Vecchio) and then to a reception in Palazzo Borghese. The historical premises alone gave much cause for enthusiasm; the musical program and the exchange among the choir directors added to a very successful midday session. In the afternoon as well as in the evening the choirs again had the opportunity to present themselves at numerous concerts and to meet children and young people from other countries.



Open Singing led by Matthias Balzer with the Diocesan Youth Choir of Trier and Lukas Stollhof (piano) © Pueri Cantores Germany

Saturday offered the choirs time for excursions in the region; popular destinations were cities such as Pisa and Lucca. However, many choirs were also drawn to the seaside due to the hot temperatures. In the evening there were gala concerts: in the Basilica di Santa Trinita, the Junge Domkantorei, München (Germany), the Petits Chanteurs de Saint-Thomas d'Aquin (France) and the Coro Giovanile della Toscana (Italy) all came together. In the Basilica di San Lorenzo, the Youth Choir of the City Parish Church of Graz (Austria), the Youth Choir of St. Remigius Düsseldorf (Germany) and Canticum Novum (Poland) performed an acclaimed concert. Late into the evening, the Pueri Cantantes Cathedralis from Sweden shone especially brightly at the Basilica di Sant. Earlier, the Girls' Choir of Paderborn Cathedral (Germany) and Les Petits Chanteurs de

Belgique (Belgium) had also sung there.



National Service of Germany (here: Youth Choir Soleil from Lauchringen) © Christian Klenk/Dommusik Eichstätt

The 43rd International Congress of Pueri Cantores ended traditionally with a Closing Service on Sunday. Cardinal Giuseppe Betori, Archbishop of Florence, celebrated the mass in the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. The service was marked by the fact that this time the choir book had only been sent out shortly before the beginning of the festival and therefore many singers were not yet completely familiar with the literature. Nevertheless, there were numerous goosebump moments, such as during Handel's "Hallelujah". The great cathedral of Florence was filled with the sound of 2500 young voices.



Youth Choir Soleil on the way to Florence Cathedral wearing their festival bags © Doris Schäuble/Jugendchor Soleil

Despite numerous organizational challenges for the choirs, the participants went home highly motivated and happy. After more than two years of the pandemic, this international reunion was especially fulfilling. Also, everyone agreed that the standard of the choirs was consistently high, which was not a given due to the restrictions of the rehearsal schedule. For the singers, the five days in Florence were full of intense musical moments, enriching encounters with children and young people from other countries and a great sense of community.



Handel's Hallelujah at the Closing Service © Christian Klenk/Dommusik Eichstätt

More pictures and videos of the festival can be found on www.pueri-cantores.de/impressionen as well as on YouTube.

Pueri Cantores ("Singing Children") is an international federation of Catholic children's and youth choirs. Founded in 1950, the association has grown to become a worldwide movement of more than 25 countries. Every year girls and boys meet regionally, nationally, and internationally to sing for peace, praise the Lord, experience community and to have fun making music together.



Matthias Balzer was born in Fulda in 1955. After graduating from high school, he studied church music at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Frankfurt am Main from 1975 to 1979, including organ with Prof. Edgar Krapp, and choral and orchestra conducting with Prof. Helmut Rilling. During his organ solo studies, which he completed in 1982, he undertook chamber music and piano accompaniment lessons with Prof. Rainer Hoffmann and Prof. Hartmut Höll, as well as harpsichord lessons with Johann Sonnleitner, among others. From 1980 to 1995 Balzer worked as a church musician at St. Nikolaus in Friedrichshafen, Lake Constance. There he was, among other things, founder and artistic director of the annual “International Organ Academy, Lake Constance”. In the period between 1995 and 2021, Matthias Balzer was responsible for church music in the diocese of Trier and directed the Episcopal Church Music School there. From 2007 to 2019, Matthias Balzer was president at the helm of the German Children’s and Youth Choir Association Pueri Cantores. He is currently vice-president of the national as well as the international choral association Pueri Cantores, where he is responsible in particular for the planning and implementation of the choral festivals. In addition, Balzer also represents the German choral associations as vice-president in the “Bundesmusikverband Chor und Orchester”, the association of all amateur music associations in Germany. Email: matthias.balzer@pueri-cantores.de

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