

He who has youth has the future, Europa Cantat Junior 2023 Ghent (Belgium)

Mariette Effing (NL), choir conductor and editor of ZINGmagazine, Member of European Cantat Junior Artistic Committee

There was great interest in the 10th edition of Europa Cantat Junior from 5 to 12 July in Ghent. This became apparent when the registrations started pouring in a few days after enrollment opened. It soon became clear that the interest would be greater than the expected 800 participants, and the organization started to investigate how to expand the festival. When this proved technically and organizationally possible, two new ateliers were added by the Artistic Committee. This made it possible to welcome all 1300 participants. The Europa Cantat Junior 2023 in Ghent was a great success in every respect.



International festival

Europa Cantat Junior is an international festival that takes place every three years in a different European city. Singers up to the age of 18 from children's and youth choirs come together to discover new repertoires, to get to know each other, to learn a lot and above all to create a lot of beautiful things together. Every morning, the children and youth work on a repertoire specially selected for the festival during ateliers led by international conductors. In addition, there is ample opportunity to discover the city and to give concerts. In 2020, the 9th edition in Vilnius could not take place due to the corona virus and it was decided to move the festival. Fortunately, the festival continued in a slimmed-down form in 2022 and everyone was delighted to be able to sing and give concerts together again! But this also means that Lyon was the last major Europe Cantat Junior festival in 2017, more than 5 years ago. That is why this Ghent edition was the first international festival for many young singers. The German children's choir 'Chormonie' from Dresden participated in 2022 in Vilnius. The children had such a good time that they decided to participate again this year in Ghent. Hans Hoch, conductor *'It is impressive to see how everyone works together. Singing connects, those are not just words, you can experience it here.'*



Open Singing with Tom Johnson (Belgium) © European Choral Association

Ateliers

In the end, an impressive 53 choirs participated in Ghent with 1300 participants from 14 countries, from Canada to Israel and everything in between: Denmark, Norway, The Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and Belgium. In Ghent, the participants could choose from 11 ateliers with a varied selection of international conductors: Tracy Wong (CA/MY), Basilio Astulez (ES), Kadri Hunt (EE), Rohan Poldervaart (NL), Paul Smith (UK), Michael Barrett (SA), Erica Mandillo (PT), Dieter Staelens (BE), Birgitte Næslund Madsen (DK), Ken Wakia (KE/UK) and Jan Schumacher (DE). Each atelier leader prepared a program for the festival with programs varying in difficulty, genre and age group. The atelier leader worked with the participating choirs and singers on that program, presenting it on the last day during the closing concert. It was the first time for Dutch conductor Rohan Poldervaart to lead this kind of atelier. In the Groove Stories atelier, he invited the singers to sing pop music with movement and energy on the basis of storytelling. For Rohan

himself it was a fantastic experience: *'At Europa Cantat Junior young people show the rest of the world how you can meet each other based on mutual respect with a strong will to make their voices heard. For me as a conductor it was a rewarding place to be able to work with these young people.'*



lots of energy, focus and groove in the atelier of Rohan Poldervaart Music (the Netherlands) © Wim Gelders

Concerts

In addition to the ateliers in the morning, there was also free time in the afternoon. All choir members and their supervisors took a boat trip through the beautiful center of Ghent and there were various other activities. But there were also rehearsals for the 9 Choir-to-Choir concerts that took place in different locations. The 3 final concerts took place in the beautiful Ghent Opera House. Of course, Open Singing was also part of this festival, with the leading role for

the Flemish conductor Tom Johnson. A true professional who led the 5 Open Singing sessions very well prepared, with humor and above all a lot of positive energy. Johnson used the results of these sessions in the closing concerts that were directed in a truly excellent way. Tom brilliantly invited the audience to sing along during the changes, which created a great singing party.



Rehearsals are fun too © European Choral Association

Study Tour

This year there was also great interest in the Study Tour for choral conductors/teachers. No fewer than 40 participants from all over the world visited the morning ateliers in two groups. In the afternoon, discussions took place or atelier leaders were invited to participate in discussions. The Study Tour was led by conductors Inge Sykora (BE) and Linas Balandis (LT). Linas Balandis: *'We discussed many interesting topics. Think of the different methods that the conductors applied in their ateliers, how they deal with the children, the*

warming ups and their choice of repertoire. The participants learned a lot to take home.'



Tuimbe Pamoja, the Power of Song and Dance with Ken Wakia (Kenya) © Wim Gelders

High level

Marleen Annemans (Artistic Committee): *'The ateliers had a high level this year. I found it very special that everyone in the C atelier was really well prepared. Already at the first rehearsal the singers sung in several voices and the conductor was immediately able to get into the music. But there was also great singing in the A and B ateliers from the first day.'* After an intensive week of rehearsing, the result could be heard during 3 closing concerts in the beautiful hall of Opera Ballet Flanders. A fantastic setting for the children who took selfies during breaks in front of the richly decorated mirrors of the foyer with its beautiful chandeliers. What a richness of wonderful memories these children will take home! The home audience was able to

enjoy the live stream that can still be seen via www.koorenstem.be/en/ecj/livestream. The registrations have now been viewed more than 20,000 times. In 2026 the Europa Cantat Junior Festival will take place in Girona (Catalunya).



Final concert at the Opera House in Ghent © Wim Gelders

Organization

The organizing team of Koor & Stem, together with the Flemish Federation of Young Choirs and the European Choral Association, created a fantastic festival. Marleen Moorgat, festival coordinator: *'It was a large team, consisting of Koor & Stem employees, supported by a passionate team of volunteers, from teenagers to adults, artistic volunteers to logistics. At least 50 people were at work every day. Over the years we have built up the volunteer team consisting of young people who themselves participated in the camps and choir weeks of Koor & Stem and adults who are closely involved in the singing weeks of Koor & Stem. For example, we had several generations of volunteers, parents and teenagers who themselves knew the pleasure of choir weeks and festivals and therefore now made the festival possible for others as a volunteer. In any case, I was over the moon about the atmosphere. This was what I*

had in mind, and it was completely worth the hard work: to make young people enthusiastic about singing together and to pass on this joy and life experience to future generations.'



Mariette Effing (NL) studied school music and choral conducting. She is conductor of the City Boys' Choir Oldenzaal and in that position she gained valuable experience in working with boys and young men. In 2015, she organised *Boys, keep on singing!*, a project seeking to encourage more boys to engage with – and continue – singing. She presented this project at Europa Cantat in Pécs, in 2017, at the World Symposium On Choral Music in Barcelona and during various other activities related to boys' singing in Belgium and the Netherlands. In 2020, intent on furthering outreach and engagement, she created the foundation *Boys, keep on singing!*. This year she was a member of the Artistic Committee of the Europa Cantat Junior festival Ghent. Apart from her work as a conductor, she is on the editorial board of a ZINGmagazine and works as a music journalist. mariette@boyskeeponsinging.com – www.koorenzo.nl

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