

Your Life ... Your Song – The New Choral Landscape of Germany

An Interview on chor.com with Dr. Henning Scherf, President of Deutscher Chorverband

By Graham Lack, ICB Consultant Editor

A new choral trade fair, “chor.com”, will take place for the first time this year, from 22 to 25 September 2011. It is devoted to “Choral Singing in Germany” and is a workshop and symposium at the same time, offering an officially recognized opportunity for the furtherance of education and a discussion forum on relevant subjects concerning music practice and musicology, as well as cultural and social policy. It is intended both for choral conductors, singers, experts and for aficionados of music and culture. The interview with Dr. Scherf was conducted by Graham Lack.

When did the idea of “chor.com” come up? “It was Moritz Puschke, our wonderful and imaginative manager (of the Deutscher Chorverband – the German Choral Association, Ed.), who, after much cogitation, raised the following question: ‘How do we bring those people in Germany who conduct choirs and their choirs together with journalists and publishers?’ This rhetorical question found a practical solution almost straightaway: there should be an event, a ‘fair’ devoted to choral music. Immediately we started looking for an adequate venue, and we were surprised by the candidature of the city of

Dortmund. They were most interested in being defined as a choral city. A period of ambitious planning followed. I have been good friends with the Lord Mayor of Dortmund for many years, and there is a choir in almost every primary school now. By the way, the name 'chor.com', definitely an expression of today's media society, was coined by Moritz Puschke."

What are the objectives of "chor.com"? "To begin with, we wanted to try and determine the situation of the choral landscape as it is now and as it should be in the future. This 'chor.com' is the first of a series of 'fairs' that will take place every other year, alternating with the national choral festival which takes place in a different city each time. With 'chor.com', we want to plant a fundamental idea into everyone's mind: you all have the chance to try something new here... this is a place where a great number of enthusiastic singers can meet. During the 'Day of Song' in June 2010, an incredible number of choirs performed all over the Ruhr area. They even sang in places like the Schalke 04 football stadium. It was a huge movement with a massive public impact. The journalists, too, were extremely enthusiastic. We all were encouraged and on emotional high, so I hope that the upcoming 'chor.com' will have a similar impact."

What is the theoretical basis for this new initiative? "We hope that there will soon be a choir in each primary school in Germany and that every child will have the possibility to sing in a choir. These are very ambitious aims. But in addition, we wish to embrace a certain professionalism...we need a crowd puller, but also want to reach a broad public. Did you know that 5000 kindergartens will participate? The former 'FELIX' (a quality seal for music in German kindergartens, Ed.) will from now on be known as the 'Carusos' – a registered brand name by the way – and we believe that by having children

participate, they will not be left on their own when they start school. It is easy to raise enthusiasm in small children. Our experience with them has been fantastic, and I believe that there is a huge potential which will increase the value of choral singing in society.”

Did you have other countries in mind as examples? “Well, if the Nordic countries are able to do this, I mean, casually speaking, ‘sing well’, why not we? I think that in the 1960s, APO (the extra-parliamentary opposition, Ed.) destroyed a lot of things, because it took place outside Parliament and did not find, or want to find, a voice in the parties represented there. In my opinion, cultural policies really went downhill at that time. The situation was hopeless as far as music teacher education was concerned. Luckily today there is renewed interest on the part of parents.

In American English one refers to a “top down” or a “bottom up approach”. What will be the repercussions of this new movement – expressed at this year’s ‘chor.com’ – for the existing choral association structures? “There is much competition in the cultural arena. In the field of cultural and educational policy it is necessary to promote our activities and aims actively. The arguments clearly speak in our favour. In Germany, millions of people want to sing. It is a kind of preventative cure as in health policy. ‘Empowerment’ is the key word in English, is it not? Let’s sing together. And let’s drive away melancholy feelings without resorting to pharmaceuticals! We want to create an exciting field of learning within which personal development can take place.”

How do you deal with the unpleasant phenomenon rife in Germany of “complaining about the price of champagne?” How will you

solve the well-known problem of the choral conductor who is really "just" an organist and does not necessarily sing well (i.e. has poor intonation)? What about the notorious "note bashing" that ruins many a rehearsal? And how can we convince choral conductors to work away from the piano? I see that Herald Jens will give a talk about intonation during 'chor.com'. A very welcome initiative. "People who have given up hope are the last thing we need. It is necessary to invest heavily in choral conductors' training. State music academies must continue to be supported. There must be new in-service courses for music teachers. We can only define ourselves through the quality of our choral conductors. We must motivate everybody: all those who conduct choirs, sing in choirs, teach in schools, write articles about German choral life, and also those who are on the periphery but actively involved with a choir. A good example is the 'We cannot sing choir'. With the help of Markus Lupke we have just finished outlining a new and innovative curriculum for the the 'Carusos' (June 2011, Ed.). There will be new benchmarks. The essential question is: How can we teach children good intonation? It is a lot of work. In addition, we not only want to present concerts but also further music education and create new competitions. The Bremer Ratschor which developed out of the famous Bremer Domchor remains an excellent example. We also work very closely with the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie. Some tickets cost up to 30-40 Euros! But the concerts are always sold out. We pay for professional soloists, and hence create future chances."

It might be said – and here I should don kid gloves – that a conscious acknowledgement of the overtone series seems to be lacking in German choral life. Intonation is surely the magic word par excellence? To torture the public with bad art makes no sense, don't you agree? "Choral conductors must conduct choirs. And they must do that well. We are familiar with the

problems concerning overtone production. It is absolutely necessary to combine voice lessons and aural training. The feeling for one's own body is extremely important. Where are the sounds situated? Where exactly in the body? And what do they feel like? This third, a fourth, that fifth or an octave? I love to sing, and the bigger the score the better. To concentrate on sound production rallies me, especially after a long day. At least this is my experience."

What do you understand by "best practice", and "excellence"? How about cooperation with or a willingness to take a leaf out of IFCM or ACDA's books? "There is the Deutsche Chorjugend (German Choral Youth, transl.) directed by Robert Göstl – a former member of the Regensburger Domspatzen. And we have the new Jugendkammerchor (Youth Chamber Choir, transl.) We have just decided to organize a trip to Venezuela. We know that it is extremely important for young people to gain experience performing in such a country. We are talking about our future choral conductors! We are talking about future opportunities for support and promotion. The principle is that we can transcend the national musical language by opening up young singers to new music cultures. I think that a new interface is being created here, one which ought to be relevant to international associations like IFCM or ACDA. I have worked in Nicaragua for many years...since the beginning of the 1980s. We founded two music schools as part of the 'Pan y Arte' project (Bread and Art, transl.). I hope to have set a good example."

What is your opinion about the image of choral music on German television? Can we finally get away from the "Gotthilf Fischer monoculture" and the "Hit Parade of Folk Music"? Are new representatives of such commercial mass movements already in their starting blocks? What is the influence of the many casting shows? And are the famous remarks by Adorno on choral

singing as an “ingratiating to the people and its purportedly intact or natural forces” and the “priority of the collective over the individual, the defamation of the intellect” now water under the bridge? “I am not interested in that kind of media phenomena. It is important that we look to the future and try to channel into Germany’s mainstream choral life the new energy that obviously exists in our primary schools. We have worked incredibly hard in this field during the last few years. And at some point we will reap what we have sown.”

Stubborn as I am, I would like to stick with the same author, Adorno, who once said: “Nowhere is it written that ‘singing is necessary’.” But perhaps we should turn to his description of choral singing as a “sanctified, protected area of irrationality”. A nice quotation, quite in fitting with our subject. There is something beautiful about art, but also something not quite comprehensible..It has, by the way, been a great pleasure for me to talk with you about the new choral landscape of Germany. See you soon...in Dortmund perhaps.”

More information: www.chor.com

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