

Singing with the Whales

A report on IFCM's 9th World Choral Symposium in Puerto Madryn, Patagonia, Argentina

By Jutta Tagger, Former ICB Managing Editor

"Let's go to the beach and sing to the whales!" A wonderful suggestion by Maya Shavit, with so many of those enormous southern right whales swimming in the bay. They were so much fun to watch: I could see them from my hotel window. Maybe some individual choirs or singers did so, but of course it was impossible to organize a massed choir singing on the beach.

This 9th World Choral Symposium was like no previous one: It took place in a far-away region – at least far-away for most participants – and one that was difficult to reach because ash from the Chilean volcano was still blowing all over the region, making air travel impossible. By bus, it took 19 hours to reach Puerto Madryn from Buenos Aires. The Symposium had to be shortened by two days to allow for this extra travel time. It took a huge effort by the local organizers to reschedule the Symposium program accordingly. Unfortunately, some people who had planned to participate in only part of the Symposium were unable to come, and a few events had to be cancelled for that reason. Still, there were more than enough activities and concerts from morning to night to please everyone.

This Symposium was also different in that Puerto Madryn is a small town without all the trappings of the big cities where such large events are usually held. For instance, because there was no dedicated concert hall, gala concerts took place in a converted sports hall. But we knew this beforehand, and it did not have any influence on the spirit or intrinsic

quality of the concerts, master classes, conferences, reading sessions and round-tables. Most venues were in the town center, within easy walking distance of each other.

One very successful event was the Open or Community Singing under the leadership of Michael Gohl from Switzerland and Josep (*Pep*) Prats from Spain. These singings were very lively and had hundreds of participants every day. The pilot choir was excellent (Cantoría de la Merced, from Argentina), and many guest conductors shared in teaching the songs contained in the official Songbook, often together with their own choirs.

The spectrum of participating choirs included all continents and genres – mixed, men's, women's and youth' – from small vocal ensembles like Witloof Bay from Belgium and Da Nó Coro from Brazil to very big choirs like the very colorful Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University Choir from South Africa, as well as excellent chamber choirs like the Argentinian Grupo Vocal de Difusión, to name just a few. A wonderful variety. All of them had of course been selected for their excellence and for representing a certain kind of choral music and style. The full list of participating choirs and the daily program of the Symposium can be seen on www.wscm9.com/.

A full range of works specially commissioned for the Symposium from Latin-American composers were premiered, as was a work by the American composer Matt Van Brink: *White, Those That Stayed Still*, based on a text by Eduardo Galeano on the theme of peace (cf. also ICB Vol.XXX, n° 2, 2nd quarter 2011), was selected as the winner of the First IFCM International Composition Competition.

A very interesting concert was an orchestral one by the Orquesta de Instrumentos Autóctonos y Nuevas Tecnologías under the direction of Alejandro Iglesias Rossi, an internationally renowned Argentinian composer who is also President of the Argentinian Council of Music. The aim of this

orchestra is to combine traditional instruments of this part of the world with modern Western technologies by giving them the same cultural value. All members of the orchestra are simultaneously composers and performers.

There was also a small but representative choral expo where business seemed to be quite good. And of course after the gala concerts there were social gatherings and tango dancing (and Penguin Dancing!), which continued into the wee hours.

A report on the IFCM General Assembly and election results are published elsewhere in this issue.

Dolf Rabus from Germany did a great job recording many of the concerts (as a service of the Choral Festival Network to the international choral community); quite a few of these are posted on YouTube. Listening to them makes you remember why you came – and want to come again – to the World Choral Symposium; it makes you forget all the fatigue and inconveniences encountered. By the way, the next Symposium will take place in three years, in Seoul, South Korea.

A big thank you to the organizers and their teams who made the Symposium happen despite many complications.

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