

# A Summer Of Singing In Abidjan on the Ivory Coast

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Choral music has again proven its powerful ability to unite people. The achievement is even more impressive for having taken place on the African continent – and in Abidjan, no less, a city in the process of rebuilding after a decade of conflict. What an impressive symbol. The first summer camp for the African Youth Choir / Chœur Africain des Jeunes (AYC / CAJ) was held near Abidjan (Republic of Ivory Coast) over a two-week period last July. The choir, comprised of approximately thirty young people from all over Africa, has been led for the past two years by Ambroise Kua Nzambi Toko, Choir Director of the La Grâce Choir of Kinshasa.



*Ambroise Kua Nzambi Toko  
conducting the AYC ©Thierry  
Thiébaud*

Thus, thirty young people aged 16 to 26 years, coming from a

total of six West and Central African countries (Senegal, Gabon, Togo, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast) found themselves together from July 28 to August 8, 2012, for this first-time camp experience. The first African Youth Choir was launched.

This was a magnificent meeting of young people. Selected from their respective countries, they gathered together to sing about peace, love and friendship. Yveline Damas, President of the A Cœur Joie Federation-Gabon, in collaboration with the continent's national choral federations, established the choir, which is affiliated with IFCM. Five African choir directors worked together to make real this dream of unity and sharing: Sophie Damas (Gabon), Lucien Mendy (Senegal), Olivier Pascal Koua Angoua (Ivory Coast), Ambroise Kua-Nzambi Toko (RD Congo), Sylvain Gameti (Togo).

Each year, a two-week summer camp, including public concerts, will be planned in one of the participating African countries. One of the goals of this format is to train a high-performing choir, to create a 'greenhouse' for nurturing singers capable of representing Africa at the international choral world's major festivals. The initiative seeks to develop and integrate participants' artistic talents within a collective framework, but equally important, strives to raise their awareness of the riches that arise from their cultural differences and to encourage them to use their talents in the service of promoting and protecting the African cultural and linguistic patrimony.

The AYC ended its camp session by recording a first CD and by contributing part of the proceeds from the opening concert of the first International Abidjan Festival of Choral Music, known as FESTICCA. This event brought together from August 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>, 2012, a thousand choristers belonging to groups from 13 countries in Africa and Europe. It was organized by the Ivory Coast ACJ Federation, directed by its dynamic president,

Pascal Koua.



*Pascal Koua, president of  
the Ivory Coast ACJ  
Federation ©Thierry  
Thiébaud*

Under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture and Francophony, with support from A Cœur Joie International and IFCM (both organizations represented by Thierry Thiébaud), a series of lectures and formation workshops were offered on various topics, including group vocal technique, choral direction, jazz and improvisation, harmonization technique, skills management, and event organizing. All training activities as well as the concerts took place at the Cultural Center of Cocody-Abidjan.

A choral singing competition was also held during the event. Eight choirs competed in the classical category, five in the folklore category. First prizes were awarded to the Mgr. Luc Gillon Choir of Kinshasa (DRC) and the Zion Choir of Cotonou (Benin), respectively.

Sub-Saharan Africa is a region where choral music is part and parcel of the culture of its many peoples. Organizing such an event in Ivory Coast, a country that has experienced a period of political and economic troubles these past ten years,

represented a true challenge. The will-power of the organizers, their determination in the absence of seemingly necessary financial resources, the participants' confidence in the credibility and content of the project, dispelled fears that could have put a brake on their enthusiasm. "Where there's a will, there's a way", as Winston Churchill used to say.

The second FESTICCA is scheduled for summer 2014, but the idea of an Africa Cantat that would extend to the entire continent is already being considered.

### **Some testimonials**

Godwin (Togo): "I am happy and proud to have participated in this camp. I met several people who after all weren't very much different from me, although they came from different countries. It was wonderful."

Alias "The Powerful One" (Ivory Coast): "This camp helped me to live the experience of singing and I'm really proud to have taken part in it."

Joshua (Ivory Coast): "This camp taught me so much about human nature, as well as about singing ... I appreciated the way that everyone welcomed me, the maestro's artistic approach, the coffee breaks of Tonton Gervais... Thank you so much."

Igor (Gabon): "I now have self-confidence... thank you to everyone."

Matthew (Cameroon): "I experienced a feeling of solidarity from the very first day, and truly, coming here, I discovered many cultures, many traditional types of music. ... This camp is special, unique."

Alpha (Ivory Coast): "Coming here, I thought I'd just relax, so the rigor of the work really surprised me. At present, I feel like I have several nationalities, truly I feel more African. Long live the AYC."

Alice (Gabon): "I discovered the power of singing: thanks to that, I gained brothers and sisters who really speak the same language. Singing is a unifying factor, and we really need that in Africa... May the Most High allow this initiative to continue on for a long time."

*Translated by Anita Shaperd, USA*

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