

Towards Polyphony – Wrocław 2016, a Competition for Young Choral Conductors in Poland

Agnieszka Franków-Żelazny, conductor of the Polish National Youth Choir and teacher

2016 was a special year for Wrocław's culture. For 12 months this historically colourful city held the title of the European Capital of Culture. A rich cultural and artistic programme was prepared to celebrate the occasion, including almost 1000 musical events in the form of nearly 80 projects. Not only were world-famous foreign artists invited to Wrocław but also special editions of the events that are regularly held in the city – those which Wrocław's people are proud of and which define their cultural identity – were organized.

The important musical events of the European Capital of Culture included the TOWARDS POLYPHONY International Choir Conducting Competition, organised by the Karol Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław. It could not have been otherwise as Wrocław's culture is largely based on choirs! We should mention here the Singakademie established in 1825 and numerous singing societies, thanks to which today the University of Wrocław Library holds numerous manuscripts of works by vocal composers related to the old Wrocław. Many of those have yet to be premiered. In 1966 the 'Wratislavia Cantans' International Festival was established in Wrocław. It draws on the city's vocal traditions and since its beginning has determined the direction of Polish voice-related music. It was also in Wrocław that the 'Singing Wrocław' project for promoting school choirs was initiated in 2001. It became a pilot project for the 'Singing Poland' National Programme. Today it is a part of a broader project of the Minister of

Culture and National Heritage, called 'Choral Academy', which aims to provide financial and educational support for school choirs, conductors and young singers who want to develop their skills with professional group singing in mind. This project is also based in Wrocław and is run by the Witold Lutosławski National Forum of Music.

Finally, there is the Karol Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław, which for over 70 years has been successfully preparing conductors, choirmasters and teachers for working with vocal groups. It is thanks to choir conductors who have been educated there that Wrocław has over 80 choirs including 7 professional, 12 academic, 18 parish and more than 40 school choirs. Among many activities and events organized by the Academy for the purpose of training and developing conductors and choirs – such as master courses, workshops and conferences – an important place is taken by the TOWARDS POLYPHONY International Choir Conducting Competition. The first edition of the festival was held in 1991 and according to the original idea of its initiator – Prof. Zofia Ubranyi-Krasnodebska – it was to be 'Students' Musical Bridge Connecting the East with the West'. The seventh edition of the Competition showed how much it had developed within the period of 25 years, following the changes in Poland, Europe and in the world. Most of the participants of the early editions had come from across the eastern border of Poland. The 2016 edition welcomed participants from 10 countries: Lithuania, Russia, Romania, Spain, South Korea, Belarus, Ukraine, Japan, Latvia and Poland.



The group of finalists © Mariusz Mikołajczyk

The participants of the recent edition were judged by a jury consisting of expert conductors-choirmasters and composers: Prof. Marta Kierska-Witczak – chair/head of the competition, Prof. Lack, Prof. Vytautas Miškinis, Prof. Raul Talmar and Prof. Marcin Tomczak.

The competition organised in Wrocław is the only international event of this kind in Poland so it attracts attention of the whole Polish choral world. It is attended by students and professors as well as conductors no longer related to music academies and universities, who come to Wrocław from different parts of Poland.

The main principle of the competition is implemented thanks to the possibilities offered by its formula: the attendees can observe participants who represent different conducting schools and young conductors can bring into effect various artistic ideas while working with very good, flexible and friendly competition choirs. In 2016, three academic choirs

consisting of students (future conductors) and one professional choir performed the role of competition choirs. Two of them came from the Karol Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław: the 'Feichtinum' Choir under artistic direction of Dr Artur Wróbel and the 'Senza Rigore' Chamber Choir established and directed by Prof. Jolanta Szybalska-Matczak, the Choir of the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice under artistic direction of Prof. Aleksandra Paszek-Trefon, and the Choir of the Witold Lutosławski National Forum of Music in Wrocław directed by Dr Hab. Agnieszka Franków-Żelazny.



Behind the laboratory choir... © Wiktor Rzeżuchowski

An unquestionable merit of the 'Towards Polyphony Competition' is the rich diversity of repertoire performed during its three rounds. In the first round of the recent edition the participants could demonstrate their awareness of stylistic differences between romantic music exemplified by Johannes Brahms' songs and early music exemplified by works of the main 17-century Polish composers: Mikołaj Zieleński and Bartłomiej Pękiel. The second round focused on Renaissance-inspired

madrigals by Morten Lauridsen and Karol Szymanowski's Kurpie Songs – artistic arrangements of folk tunes from the Kurpie region, which is one of Poland's many culturally colourful and distinctive ethnic regions. The third round of the competition is always a considerable challenge for the participants as it focuses on works by contemporary composers in which both conventional and unconventional composers' techniques have been used. In 2016 the third-round competition pieces included compositions by Andrzej Koszewski, Miłosz Bembinow, Przemysław Szczotka, Perttu Haapanen, Frederik Neyrinck and Gundega Šmite.

A big attraction for the participants is always the large pool of both statutory and non-statutory prizes, including cash awards. In the seventh edition of the Towards Polyphony International Choir Conducting Competition, the jury awarded the following prizes:

- 1st Prize – Linas Balandis (Lithuania)
- 2nd Prize – Javier Fajardo (Spain)
- 3rd Prize – Izabela Polakowska-Rybska (Poland)
- Honourable mentions – Kaoru Tani (Japan), Paweł Szypulski (Poland)
- Prize for the best interpretation of a piece inspired by Italian poetry – Magdalena Lipska (Poland)
- Prize for the best work on Karol Szymanowski's composition – Linas Balandis (Lithuania)
- Prize for the best performance of Polish early music – Kaoru Tani (Japan)
- The Chair of Choral Art and Choir Conducting prize for the best interpretation of contemporary music – Izabela Polakowska-Rybska (Poland)
- The Choir of the National Forum of Music prize – a concert project with the Choir – Kaoru Tani (Japan)
- The Choir of the Academy of Music in Wrocław prize – Linas Balandis
- The Choir of the Academy of Music in Katowice prize –

Izabela Polakowska-Rybska.

If we follow the careers of the winners of the previous editions, we will find out that most of them have become professionally active conductors who achieve successes with their choirs and the participation in the competition was an important element in their development. The majority of the recent edition participants, though very young, also turned out to be mature artists and conscious conductors, each of them having something important to say in music. I am sure that great conducting careers lie ahead of them.

The most important benefit, however, that the competition brought was the fact that during four winter days, the Academy of Music was full of emotions connected with choral art. The singing in different languages – English, German, Italian, Polish and Latin – could be heard everywhere. The sound of conversations in various languages between participants and listeners was coming from all directions. An invaluable exchange of experiences and opinions was taking place – learning from one another, which is such an important element of every musician's development.

It is a great happiness to take part in such an important event and to meet people who also want to participate in it. It is a great happiness to meet people who want to organise such an event and create development possibilities for others, for the young. Such possibilities are created by Wrocław, the Karol Lipiński Academy of Music and the TOWARDS POLYPHONY International Choir Conducting Competition.

We invite all choral art enthusiasts from around the world to the next edition of our competition in December 2019.



Agnieszka Franków-Żelazny graduated from Wrocław University (diploma in biology 2000) and the Academy of Music in Wrocław (diploma in musical education 2004, diploma in voice 2005). She completed postgraduate studies in choral conducting at the Academy of Music in Wrocław. Since June 2006 she has been artistic director of the National Forum of Music Choir (before 2013 – Wrocław Philharmonic Choir). From January to July 2013 she was artistic supervisor of the Polish Radio Choir, helping to re-establish the ensemble and reintroduce it to Poland's professional scene. Her idea to create the Polish National Youth Choir came to fruition in 2013, and she has been its artistic director ever since. The PNYCh is supported by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage and managed by the Wrocław Philharmonic. In January 2015 she became the Programme Director of the Choral Academy project. At present she is a senior lecturer (PhD in Arts) at the Department of Music Education, Choral Music and Church Music at the K. Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław. In 2013 she was designated by the Mayor of Wrocław to join the Curators' Council at the European Capital of Culture 2016 as the curator in the domain of Music. She has over 70 prizes and awards to her credit, including 1st prize at the National Choral Conductors Competition (2004), 1st place at the Lower Silesian stage of the National Student of the Year Competition *Primus Inter Pares* (2004), Wrocław Music Prize (2010), Personality of the Year 2011, *Juvenes Wratislaviae* awarded by the Polish Academy of Sciences (2012), the Meritorious Service to Polish Culture badge (2008), and the Bronze Medal for Merit to Culture – *Gloria Artis* (2014). Her track record includes over 700 concerts in 19 European countries and the USA., 12 CDs and preparing around 600 vocal and 170 vocal-instrumental pieces for performance. Email: a.frankow-zelazny@wp.pl

Edited by Lottie Valks, UK