

Second Children's and Youth Choral World Championships, St. Petersburg, February 2015

By Romans Vanags, Associate Professor of J.Vitols Latvian Academy of Music and Artistic Director of Interkultur

There is at least one choir competition or festival taking place in the world every month, often making it difficult for choirs and their conductors to choose where to go. Some choirs choose so-called "cultural tourism" and go to places they have not been to before, some choirs look for opportunities to compete with high-quality choirs where the competition is fierce, while others choose more down-to earth competitions in terms of choir composition, requirements and regulations. To ensure the quality of the competition and the number of participants, the competition organisers often have to look for new form and content in order to organise a choral competition that is special and stands out among the rest. The 'Children's and Youth Choral World Championship', organised by the St. Petersburg Cultural Agency *InterAspect* in cooperation with the *Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia*, is a 'creation' in search of new directions. By definition, this competition is intended for certain categories of choirs with an age limit that largely determines the composition of participants and the competition rules; an interesting format. As happens in sporting contests, the choirs compete in qualifying heats, quarter-finals, semi-finals and the finals. This undoubtedly creates suspense and a true spirit of competition. As with the 'World Choir Games' organised by *Interkultur*, the fight for the champion's title is very fierce, as only the most powerful and technically and musically strong choirs are selected for the finals.



All participants singing together

This year, the Second Children's and Youth Choral World Championships in St. Petersburg took place from 15th February to 22nd February and was attended by thirty choirs, mainly from Russia and Eastern Europe. This is understandable given the current geopolitical situation, not very favourable for a number of international arts and culture festival organisers in the region. However, I would like to highly commend the competition organisers, especially Elena Brizina and Igor Matjukov, for an extremely professional yet sincere attitude. All of the competition rounds were planned meticulously, and the choir performances evoked great public interest. Quality and objectivity were also provided by the international jury under the leadership of Sergei Jekimov, an assistant professor from the N. Rimsky-Korsakov St. Petersburg Conservatory, and a composer and conductor. I had the great pleasure of working with my colleagues Andrea Angelini (Italy), Milan Kolena (Slovakia), Vytautas Miskinis (Lithuania) and Valeri Uspenski (Russia). All of these experts are widely known among choir singers and conductors around the world. I do hope that both expert assessment and discussions after the competition were significant for the choirs and their conductors. Each contest has its own leaders and choirs whose performances are an enjoyable surprise. The leader of this championship from the competition's first day was the N. Rimsky-Korsakov St. Petersburg Conservatory Student Choir conducted by Anton Maksimov. The choir's performance was especially vivid in the

final. The vocal and technical capabilities of the choir and the professional training of the singers determined the results and largely confirmed the high educational standards of the Conservatory. After the contest, the jury reflected on whether such music school and university choirs should have a category of their own as competing in the same group with the choirs that do not possess such musical experience severely limits the competitive opportunities for the choirs with less professional training. Similar artistic qualities were also shown by Daugavpils Stanislav Brok Music School Choir from Latvia (conductor Yevgeny Ustinskiy) and Simferopol Children's Music School Choir (conductor Viktor Zaslavskiy). The 'Avrora' children's choir from Moscow, led by Anastasia Belajeva, delighted the spectators with its clear sound, but the 'Petersburgs Stars' choir from St. Petersburg, led by Svetlana Galimova, earned a special response from the audience. This choir, in which children with visual impairments sing, gave an amazingly charming and harmonious performance.

The format of this championship imposed a difficult task upon the conductors, namely to plan the programme tactically and correctly so as to improve performance both technically and artistically with each of the following rounds. The choirs that had chosen an appropriate programme were able to maintain the interest of the audience and jury up until the competition finals. It was good that the organisers gave the choirs an opportunity to perform in the most famous and acoustically suitable concert halls of St. Petersburg, the Great Hall of N. Rimsky-Korsakov St. Petersburg Conservatory and the State Academic M. Glinka Chapel. These concert halls, in which the world's most prominent performing artists have performed, will remain in both the conductors' and singers' memories. Each choir was also offered the opportunity to give independent concerts during the festival, and all participants were invited to attend a concert in one of Russia's most famous churches, *Spas na Krovy* (Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood).



Children's Choir Allegri
(Novouralsk, Russia)

The organisers had planned everything very carefully so that each choir would be assessed and awarded with commemorative diplomas and prizes. Until now, I had never seen so many supporters who wanted to award their favourites with special sympathy prizes. At the closing ceremony, each choir felt like a winner and the children's eyes and hearts were filled with joy!

I would like to affirm that these types of choir competitions are an important starting point for the growth of each choir and for the self-affirmation of young singers. I hope the St. Petersburg Choral Contest organisers will continue on this path and will always remain creative and generate new ideas. The most important objective for the competition's future is to attract choirs from further afield, therefore creating a true sense of a World Choir Competition. I hope that world peace will prevail and that this musical festival of children and youth choirs performing together will contribute to this victory.

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