

Stasys Šimkus International Choir Competition, Lithuania

By Vytautas Miškinis, conductor, composer and President of Lithuanian Choir Union

Stasys Šimkus, the Lithuanian composer, conductor, music publicist, folklorist, teacher and mover and shaker of the Musician's Association is inextricably linked with the cultural life of Klaipėda, the largest harbour city in Lithuania. In 1923, after the land of *Lithuania Minor* had been returned to Lithuania, Šimkus founded a music school (conservatoire) here, from which many professional musicians have graduated. He formed a symphony orchestra and performed many concerts with a classical repertoire. The composer's greatest achievement is a collection of harmonised and popularised folk songs; he developed, re-created and supplemented some of the folk songs with his own music. Šimkus' choral creations and fabled choir conducting have become the standard of Lithuanian spiritual and musical self-expression.

A group of cultural operators in Klaipėda, led by Vytautas Blūšius, developed the idea of organizing the International Stasys Šimkus Choir Competition in honour of the composer for his outstanding contribution to musical culture, with the intention of encouraging choir activity and developing choral culture.



Prof. Ralf Eisenbeiß,
President of the Jury,
announces the winners

The first four competitions were held on an annual basis, then in 1979, it was decided to hold the contest every two years.

The first contest was held in 1976. Fourteen male and female choirs, as well as mixed choirs, from all over Lithuania took part in the competition. The second International Stasys Šimkus Choir Competition, dedicated to the composer's 90th birthday, took place in 1977. Twenty choirs took part in this competition. In the third competition, in 1978, thirty-one choirs took part.

At different times the chairmen of the Jury were Klemensas Griauzdė, Antanas Jozėnas, Lionginas Abarius, Uno Jarvela and Venno Lauļ.

Towards the end of 1988 the Aukuras Klaipėda Choir Association (in English: altar) was established and it took over the organization and other concerns of the International Stasys Šimkus Choir Competition. The first chairman of this organization was Robertas Varnas.

The first foreign choir took part in the eighth competition in 1989. Amongst the sixteen choirs was a mixed youth choir from Tallinn, Estonia. This choir was awarded a special diploma by the Jury.



Ralf Eisenbeiß and Vytautas Miškinis preparing the masterclass

The ninth Competition took place in October, 1992; sixteen choirs took part. This contest was marked by the participation of foreign choirs from Latvia, Estonia and Sweden.

The tenth International Stasys Šimkus Choir Competition took place in 1995. This was the first time the choirs were awarded with Minor (in the youth choir category) and Grand Amber (in the adult choir category) prizes, established by the Municipality of Klaipėda.

The winners of both categories were the Vytautas Didysis church chamber choir from Kaunas (led by Rolandas Daugėla) and Aukuras Klaipėda Choir Association (led by Vladimiras Konstantinovas and Alfonsas Vildžiūnas). The president of the Jury was Venno Laul from Estonia.

The twelfth International Stasys Šimkus Choir Competition, which took place in October 1999, saw the participation of choirs from Germany, Poland, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania: a total of nineteen groups. The Jury consisted of the chairman Venno Laul (Estonia), Jan Lukaszewski (Poland), Edgars Račevskis (Latvia), Vytautas Miškinis and Robertas Varnas (Lithuania).

In the second round, the Cantabile Limburg male choir from Germany, led by the excellent conductor Jürgen Fassbender, won the Grand Amber prize and the main award.

While preparing for the thirteenth competition, there was a change in the management of the competition. Robertas Varnas, a founder of the Aukuras Klaipėda Choir Association and its long-term leader, resigned from the position of chairman and Algis Zaboras took over his duties. The competition took place in October 2001, and although there were not many participants, they came from many nations. For the first time, there were choirs from Slovenia and Romania; Latvia and Lithuania also attended. There were three judges at this event: the chairman Vaclovas Augustinas, Algis Zaboras and Edgars Račevskis (Latvia).

The Eduardas Balsys Art Gymnasium female choir, from Klaipėda, conducted by Zita Kariniauskienė, won the Grand Amber prize.



Choir Laiks from Liepaja,
Latvia
Cond. Ilze Balode

The fourteenth competition took place in 2003. Eighteen choirs from Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Estonia, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Poland expressed their wish to participate in the contest. The Minor Amber prize was awarded to the Emilis Melngailis Girls Choir from Liepaja, conducted by Andris Kontauts (Latvia). The Grand Amber prize was awarded to the J.B. Foerster Female Chamber Choir, conducted by Lukaš Vasilek (Czech Republic).

Shortly before the fifteenth competition in 2005, Professor Algis Zaboras left Lithuania and resigned from the Aukuras Klaipėda Choir Association. Its former chairman Robertas

Varnas temporarily took up the position and successfully carried out all the competition preparation. Six people were on the Jury: the chairman Janis Lindbergs (Latvia), members Vaclovas Augustinas, Arūnas Pečiulis (Austria), Jury Rent (Estonia) and Alfonsas Vildžiūnas (Lithuania).

The Minor Amber prize was awarded to the Perpetuum Mobile Children's Choir from the Aleksandras Kačanauskas music school in Kaunas, conductor Beata Kijauskienė (Lithuania).

The Grand Amber prize was awarded to the Revalia male chamber choir, conductor Hirvo Surva (Estonia).

When the fifteenth International Stasys Šimkus Choir Competition was over, the management of Klaipėda Aukuras Choir Association changed; Robertas Varnas resigned from the position of chairman. In 2006 a new chairman, A. Šumskis, was elected to take over leadership of Aukuras Klaipėda Choir Association. He also had the responsibility of organizing the International Competitions and took over these duties.

The sixteenth competition was organized in 2007. Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Belarus, Ghana, Ukraine, Hungary and Denmark applied to take part. Honourable artists of choral singing were invited to judge the competition. Jean Claude Wilkens from Belgium, General Secretary of the IFCM, became chairman of the Jury. The other members of the Jury were Vytautas Miškinis, Hirvo Surva (Estonia), Maris Sirmāis (Latvia) and Robertas Varnas.

The Minor Amber prize was awarded to the Via Stella girls choir from Vecumnieki, directed by Liene Batna and Česlavs Batna (Latvia).

The Grand Amber prize was awarded to the Anima Sola vocal group of Ogre Centre of Culture, conductor Marīte Pūrīna (Latvia).



Female Choir Resono, Riga,
Latvia; Cond. Irena
Račevska

2009 arrived and brought the seventeenth competition. Groups from Latvia, the Russian Federation, Sweden and Lithuania came to Klaipėda. Five people were on the Jury: the chairman Gustav Adolf Rabus, (Germany), Hirvo Surva, Vytautas Miškinis, Romans Vanags (Latvia) and Alfonsas Vildžiūnas.

The Minor Amber prize went to the children's choir from Vydūnas Secondary School in Klaipėda, conductor Arvydas Girdzijauskas (Lithuania).

The Grand Amber prize went to the vocal ensemble Balsai, leader Egidijus Kaveckas (Lithuania).

The eighteenth International Competition was held in 2011. Fourteen choirs from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia applied to take part. Professor Gabor Hollerung, one of the former Artistic Directors of *Interkultur*, the International Music Competitions Foundation became chairman of the Jury. The team of judges who joined him were Ene Uleoja (Estonia), Aira Birzina (Latvia), Vytautas Miškinis and Zita Kariniauskiene (Lithuania).

The Grand Amber prize and 1.500 Euros was awarded to the University of Latvia mixed choir, Juventus (conductor Janis Petrovskis). The Minor Amber prize was not awarded.

The latest Stasys Šimkus International Choir Competition, the nineteenth, took place in Klaipėda, the Lithuanian coastal

city, from November 22nd to the 24th, 2013. Members of the Jury were the chairman Ralf Eisenbeiß, Artistic Director of the World Choir Games 'Interkultur' (Germany); Andrea Angelini (Italy), Aira Birzina (Latvia), Vytautas Miškinis and Tomas Ambrozaitis (Lithuania).

There were fewer Lithuanian choirs than expected (only eleven) because the final round of the National Choir Competition was held at the end of the same month in Vilnius.

The Minor Amber prize was not awarded.

The Grand Amber prize and 1.500 Euros was awarded to the Intis Youth Choir from Liepaja, conducted by Ilze Valce (Latvia).



Youth Choir INTIS, Liepaja,
Latvia: Cond. Ilze Valce

The Special prize from the Lithuanian Choir Union for the best programme was also awarded to the Intis Youth Choir. The Special prize from the Lithuanian Folk Culture Centre for the best performance of a composition by a national composer was awarded to the Laiks mixed choir from Liepaja, conductor Ilze Balode (Latvia).

The Special prize from the Aukuras Klaipėda Choir Association for the best performance of the obligatory composition, *Jerusalem Surge* by Vaclovas Augustinas, was awarded to the Vilnius Teachers' House mixed choir, Bel Canto, conducted by Artūras Dambrauskas (Lithuania), who also won the special prize from Klaipėda Municipality for the best performance of a contemporary composition.

Edited by Theresa Trisolino, UK