

The 2017 International Chamber Choir Competition in Marktoberdorf, Germany, 2-7 June!

Tim Koeritz, music journalist, teacher and singer

There were unfamiliar hip-hop sounds to be heard at this year's 15th International Chamber Choir Competition in Marktoberdorf in the south-western corner of Germany. For the first time the category "Popular Choral Music" was on the agenda. Even Martin Seiler, conductor of the pop choir "Greg is back" from Augsburg, grabbed a microphone. After all, singing with a microphone is an integral part of the vocal pop sound, and – as Martin Seiler emphasises – "Greg is back" considers itself to be "a pop choir unwilling to compromise: we are a choir that simply strives for the broad brush and the large stage and, fully equipped with microphones, also aims at a huge sound, a pop sound, so that the audience cannot tell whether they are in a concert by Coldplay, Genesis or one of our choir concerts: that is what we are trying to get at, and that's why I say "uncompromising" – and we weren't allowed to put that into practice here. Choir members are not allowed to have a microphone each, but there's just some sort of microphone arrangement for the entire stage, producing a somewhat emptier sound, and we were only permitted four additional microphones – in our case one for a beatboxer, one for the bass and two for soloists. When we make our own concert arrangements, we have, I think, more than forty microphones on

stage". They've usually also got their own technician at the mixing desk.



Consolatio Choir Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

However, in Marktoberdorf, Mecca of classical choral singing, the technical restrictions are likely to stay in place – thus Matthias E Becker, chair of the jury, in his first summing-up: “I believe that the use of individual microphones will not be possible, if only for reasons of time. We’d have to extend the festival by two days in order to allow all choirs their sound checks. I know it takes “Greg is back” five to six hours. I think that, in view of the fact that this was the first time, it all went very well. We had six applications, unfortunately two were not allowed to leave their own countries for political reasons, and therefore we had only four choirs. Next time we are bound to have more participants, and we will try to be more precise when advertising the conditions”. For Jürgen Budday, artistic

director of the Marktoberdorf competition, it was important “to introduce a new colour, so as also to appeal to a new audience. I think that in this we are totally up to date. And the thing that matters in Marktoberdorf more than anything else is quality. And meanwhile these choirs have achieved such high standards that I simply would like to hear them here”.



Consolatio Choir Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia
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Nevertheless it is quite difficult to define a pop and jazz choir as such. This was in ample evidence with the ensembles that did appear. Could the offerings of the choir “Los Cantantes de Manila” from the Philippines really still be described as pop music? E g in pieces like “Canta” by Guido Lopez Gavilan the choir, directed by Darwin Vargas, did meet the regulation that the programme had to include at least one item in the Latin style. But the uninhibited virtuoso shaping, the enormous vocal power and the charisma of the choir did not

sit comfortably with the choir's belcanto sound, something that does not belong in pop. Despite this, they ended up sharing first prize with the Detmold college choir "Pop-up". Apart from the Latin item, the category "Popular Choral Music" also demanded a rubato ballad and a new own arrangement of the jazz standard "Round (about) Midnight" by the jazz pianist and composer Thelonius Monk, for what the popular category requires is not so much a composer but an arranger of that which already exists. Whereas for the Augsburg choir "Greg is back" it is nearly exclusively the director of the choir himself who supplies the arrangements, Anne Kohler, founder and director of "Pop-up" has them written for her. For her there are clear criteria for what constitutes a good arrangement – "I find that what really matters is that the message of the melody gets across well, meaning that the instrumentations have to be right. Und that means that the bass lines need to be creative and inventive, and that the vocal percussion needs to be employed with a clearly dedicated aim, that the voicings have to be really singable, rather than lie around clumsily, that the ranges in which the tune is presented need to be well thought out. After all, in a jazz choir this is quite a different matter. If I place a tune with the high soprano, that will sound dreadful, because the sopranos will immediately sound "classical". Such a melody needs to be written for the high tenor range or for a really "fruity", rich alto range". As they were not only vocally stunning but also enormously secure stylistically, "Pop-up" was rightly awarded one of the two first prizes in the competition.



Kammerkoret NOVA, Oslo, Norway © Modfestivals Marktoberdorf

Of course vocal quality did also count in Category A, the mixed choirs, for whom this year wasn't quite the best we've ever heard in Marktoberdorf. Yet again, among the eleven choirs from nine countries, it was a Scandinavian choir, the Chamber Choir NOVA from Oslo, that walked away with one of the two first prizes. It is directed by Yuval Weinberg, an Israeli all of 27 years old, who also received the special prize for the best conducting achievement in the competition. He studied in Berlin and Oslo and has already been involved with several professional choirs as a guest conductor. Yuval Weinberg describes the typically Scandinavian sound of his choir as "placed very directly, 'in front', so to speak, and I find it possesses warmth. I am allowed to say that as a foreigner, as I don't come from Norway. It was something quite new to me – I've only been in Norway for two-and-a-half years". The outstanding non-vibrato quality and the particular

homogeneity of the choir came across particularly convincingly in the own choice programme, the second round, especially in the arrangement of a Norwegian folksong, where the opening soprano unison was quite fascinating. The special blend required for unison is probably the hardest thing for a choir or a section to achieve. "That is our aim", thus Yuval Weinberg, "that all the singers together sound like one singer, but that nevertheless everybody retains his or her own identity, and that's what we often work at. It's not that we all possess the same colour, but that, using the colours we have, we achieve a joint colour together".



ONE Chamber Choir, Singapore © Modfestivals Marktoberdorf

Homogeneity is also a basic requirement for the Romantic repertoire, with long, flowing phrases as another feature of importance – and that is something that the Asian choirs from Indonesia and Singapore just didn't manage. In the case of the Norwegian choir, we additionally enjoyed the detailed dynamic

differentiation which for example was to be heard in Rheinberger's "Kyrie" from his "Cantus missae". For this convincing performance the Chamber Choir NOVA from Oslo deservedly received a special prize for the best interpretation of a Romantic piece within the competition.

The compulsory piece for all choirs was the world première of Wolfram Buchenberg's "The Emigrant", a setting of a poem, over a century old, by the Irish poet Joseph Campbell. With his compositions for choirs, Buchenberg, himself hailing from the Marktoberdorf area, has enjoyed a long connection with the competition. The old Irish text mirrors the theme of flight and emigration, only all too present in our own day, in all its ambivalence. "The text shows" – says Buchenberg – "what happens within a person forced to leave home within the next five hours". It is a piece that makes considerable rhythmic and vocal demands on the choirs. For Buchenberg, the way the choirs negotiate the "violent changes of mood composed into the piece, from one second to the next, is of particular importance. That is one of the difficulties of the work. That's where the qualities of a choir are revealed".



A 4-day masterclass led by Prof. Maria Guinand, Venezuela © Modfestivals Marktoberdorf

In the end, it turned out that Chamber Choir ONE from Singapore, directed by Lim Ai Hooi, delivered this compulsory piece in the most lively way, in a transparent manner and full of expression. Here the bright young voices matched the spirit of the piece particularly well. Within the competition as a whole, this choir was awarded one of – in all – two second prizes. The other second prize went to the choir of Mendoza University from Mendoza. University choirs just about dominated the image of the competition – of the two German choirs which did not meet expectations, OPUS VOCALE and the Chamber Choir of the Collegium Musicum, the latter is attached to the Free University or rather the Technical University of Berlin. Here Donka Miteva, originally from Bulgaria, is in charge of the choir. She particularly liked the character of this competition which encourages togetherness by not only

being a competition but also setting up joint concerts and ecumenical services: “We all thought this was great. The entire choir was thrilled by the church service, particularly, as the ecumenical character of the service came across as very inclusive. In addition there were the musical contributions at so high a standard on the one hand from the Chamber Singers from Georgia, USA, and also – fortunately – from us. For us that was a marvellous experience, to perform again but within a different framework”.



Choirs of Category B (Popular Choral Music) singing together under the direction of Anne Kohler (Pop-Up, Detmold, Germany)
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Bearing in mind solely the comparison of achievements, the final summing-up of Georg Grün, chair of the jury in the category for classical choirs, was this: “This time there was little difference of standard between the contestants who, however, presented totally different characteristics, types

and repertoire, and thus it was very difficult – after all the jury is very international, from several continents, supplying very different points of view. Then everything takes a great deal longer. But personally I also feel that it's much more interesting than when it takes about five minutes to agree and decide upon the winner". In the end, even among the winners, two quite different types of choir, even of sound, were represented, for alongside the Norwegian choir that has already been discussed, it was a university choir from the USA, the Georgia State University Singers, that was also awarded a first prize. As opposed to the Norwegians they often go right to the brink, even forcing the sound into vibrato, and that not only when singing gospel music.

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Translated from the German by Irene Auerbach, UK/Germany



Tim Koeritz

Tim Koeritz, born in 1965 in Stade in northern Germany, initially studied to become a teacher of music and history in grammar schools, with piano as a first study, in Hanover and Freiburg on the western edge of the Black Forest. After also completing the pedagogical part of this training in Hildesheim he embarked on a two-year course in radio journalism at the Institute "Lernradio" attached to Karlsruhe Music College and

was awarded his diploma in 1998. Since 1998 he has been working and living in Munich, from which base he has worked as a freelance radio journalist for various German stations, among them Deutsche Welle and Deutschlandradio Kultur. His main interests – apart from contemporary music – lie in choral music. Part of his work as a music journalist is the writing of programme notes. Thus e g he is currently working for via-nova-chor Munich, the Theatergemeinde Augsburg with its concert series “Philharmonic Matinee” as well as the open-air series run during the summer, “Concerts in the Fronhof, as well as for the concert series of the Cultural Centre k1 of the town of Treunreut. As a music educator, Tim Koeritz has been employed since 2005 at the Munich Institute of Adult Education as a lecturer in music and music appreciation as well as in their department of general studies. There he teaches courses in music theory and music history as well as introductions to the concerts of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra. Furthermore he is active as a freelance piano teacher in Munich. Since 2005 he has been singing in the via-nova-chor Munich, a choir specialising in contemporary music. For several years he also fulfilled the voluntary role of chair of the Association of Friends of the via-nova-chor, a task involving fundraising, sponsorship, marketing publicity and organising concerts. Email: **tim.koeritz@t-online.de**