

The New Reykjavik Peace Choir Festival

By Arthur Björgvin Bollason, writer and journalist

The idea is really very simple: choirs from all over the world sing *the same song at the same time* for World Peace every third Sunday in February every year.

Or, in the words of the Icelandic entrepreneur, Ýmir Björgvin Arthúrsson, founder of the Reykjavik Peace Festival:

“We offer choirs (free of charge) the beautiful arrangement of the John Lennon song LOVE by the legendary English conductor and choir leader Ben Parry. Choirs will become PEACE MAKERS by taking on the task of learning Ben Parry’s choral arrangement of LOVE and singing the song LOVE at the same time as other choirs all over the world. We kindly ask all our PEACE MAKERS to register on our webpage (www.reykjavikpeacefestival.com) and record their singing of LOVE and share it with us on our YouTube channel for the world to enjoy. For those choirs who are interested in joining us in Iceland we do have a four-day itinerary with a focus on creating a peaceful memory of a lifetime singing together amid the magical natural wonders of Iceland.”

In February 2015, thousands of singers from all over the world sang and became *peace makers* in this first year of the Reykjavik Peace Festival. The moment in Harpa Music Hall, on the 22nd February 2015, when over six hundred Icelandic choir singers joined together to sing the song *Love* for world peace was unforgettable both for the singers and the audience.



Northern Lights

But how was the idea of the peace festival born?

Ymir explains that he and his wife, Hrefna, who have been guiding visitors around Iceland for many years, had a visit in 2012 from a Norwegian choir:

“After spending five days in Iceland’s untouched natural world with the beautiful and happy singing voices of this choir from the small Norwegian town Lofoten, something magical happened. We felt the happiness one choir can give and had a real desire for more singing and more happiness. Linking the singing to peace was an obvious thing to do as Iceland is known as one of the most peaceful nations on Earth, with no military bodies, very little crime and the belief that the world can live together in peace. Soon the idea grew into the wish to truly make the world a better place and to have ALL choirs from all over the world singing together at the same time for world peace.”



Harpa Dögg
Fríðudóttir – The
University of
Iceland Choir

Yoko Ono

Yoko Ono is an honorary citizen of Reykjavik. The Imagine Peace Tower, a memorial to John Lennon, has become one of the city's main symbols. The memorial consists of a tall light column, which is projected from a white stone foundation, with the words "Imagine Peace" carved into it in twenty-four languages. This light column shines up into the sky on certain days during winter. Witnessing the dancing Aurora and the Peace Tower together is truly something out of this world. When Yoko Ono was asked to be a part of Reykjavik Peace Festival she was all in favour of the idea and personally asked for *Love* to become its official song. *Love* is a song which John Lennon composed personally for Yoko Ono. As Yoko Ono herself writes:

"Reykjavik Peace Festival is a beautiful project that has the potential to make the world a better place. Choirs and peace lovers will sing John Lennon's song LOVE all over the world at the same time for World Peace. I hope with all my heart that we can unite people and nations living in conflict for at least five minutes every year in this peaceful moment"



Ben Parry leading the choirs singing in Harpa Music Hall

Ben Parry – A Living Legend In The World Of Choral Music

As Ymir Björgvin started to look for an artistic director for the festival he soon hit upon the name of Ben Parry. Parry was fascinated by the idea and declared himself willing to take part.

“The arrangement for both amateur and professional choirs written by Ben Parry is outstanding.” says Ymir. “It is a gift to choirs all over the world with the hope that the world will hear our voices singing for peace. Ben Parry will also be doing workshops and leading the singing in Harpa Music Hall (<http://harpa.is>) on 21st February 2016.”

Besides being one of Britain’s best known orchestral conductors, Parry has worked with Sir Paul McCartney and conducted many major film soundtracks, such as *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*. Parry was recently appointed the new Director of the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain.

Ymir Björgvin is delighted that Parry was willing to be the artistic director of the festival: “Having such a great “maestro” as Ben Parry shaping and living the idea of the Reykjavik Peace Festival is worth more than words can describe.”



Sign Language Choir & Choir
of Flensburg & Vocal
Project

Four Days Of Adventure In Iceland 2016

Choirs are already signing up to come to Iceland in February 2016 (18th – 22nd February) and join in the programme of peace, fun, people, nature and singing. Ymir says that the team of organisers is really looking forward to sharing the natural scenery, city, culture and people with the singing guests from different parts of the world.

Reykjavik Peace Festival is now officially part of the winter calendar of Reykjavik City, following the major success of its first year in 2015. The third week of February will from now on be Reykjavik Peace Festival week and the locals are looking forward to hearing the visiting choirs sing in a variety of locations, not least the final choral gathering in Harpa Music Hall.

The song selection for the choirs in Iceland will stay the same for 2016 as for 2015. This is due to the fact that this year's programme produced a general feeling of humble happiness as well as thirty minutes of continuous goose bumps in both the singers and the audience. The choirs singing in Harpa Music Hall will sing as one the following songs:

To Be Grateful, one of local hits from the hippy era:

<http://www.visir.is/section/MEDIA99&fileid=CLP33904>

Heyr Himnasmiður, without a doubt the favourite hymn sung by choirs in Iceland:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4dT8FJ2GE0>

LOVE, John Lennon's beautiful song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HybckK892uBY>

The detailed programme for visiting choirs can be found on the website of the Reykjavik Peace Festival (www.reykjavikpeacefestival.com). Ymir would also like to mention that the festival team is truly thankful for the generous support of both the city of Reykjavik (<http://www.visitreykjavik.is>) and the national airline Icelandair (www.icelandair.com) as well as a group of several legends in the world of music and culture.

"They have all been a driving force in making this wonderful dream come true."

Edited by Laura Massey, UK