

Thracian Choir Festival, Yambol, Bulgaria, or How to Save a Choral Event in Times of Crisis

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When you look at a map of Bulgaria, you find the Thracian region in the centre, situated beside the river Tundja (formerly known as Tonzos) that once was a cradle of civilization in this area. One of the most important towns on the river is Yambol, and only a few kilometres away you find an amazing ancient Thracian city – Kabyle (2000 B.C.). The people here consider themselves to be the repositories of the Thracian culture and they are very proud of their heritage.

The region and the town itself have a long-standing choral tradition: the first choir in Yambol was established in 1898 and, later on, fifteen new choirs were set up. In 1967 the music teacher Stefka Pastarmadjieva put together a children's choir which very soon became one of the best in Bulgaria. It won many prizes at international competitions and was named after Georgi Dimitrov, the founder of the Bulgarian Choir Conductor's School, as recognition of its artistic achievements. On the basis of this children's choir in Yambol, a large choral association, also called 'Prof. Georgi Dimitrov', was also set up. More than six thousand singers have taken part in the different choirs that make up the association over the last forty-seven years and it has become one of the leading cultural structures in the town.

The democratic changes in Bulgaria have brought years of

social transformation and the cultural institutes in the whole country have faced dramatic challenges, both organisational and financial. Unfortunately, support for the preservation and development of Bulgarian choral music drastically diminished and saving the choirs was left to conductors or, in some cases, to regional authorities, which do not always have a good overview of needs or enough resources to help.

The leaders of the Georgi Dimitrov Choral Association had the brilliant idea of looking for partners and they created the first Bulgarian cultural society on the basis of a public-private partnership. The three members of the Society are the Municipality of Yambol and two NGOs – the Georgi Dimitrov Choral Association and the Yambol branch of the Union of Scientific and Technical workers. The goals of the new structure were to preserve the choral tradition of the region and offer specific cultural services to society. As a part of its activities, in 2006 the Society set up a new choral event – the Thracian Choir Festival which was held every subsequent year with great success.

The good image of the Georgi Dimitrov Choral Association and the enthusiasm of the organisers have attracted many of the best Bulgarian choirs – more than sixty of them have taken part in the Festival. In addition, the Festival invited some high-level international choirs such as The Radio and TV Children's Choir from Bucharest, Romania (conducted by Voicu Popescu) and Camerata Musica Limburg, Germany (conductor Jan Schumacher), among others.



Romanian Radio and TV Children's Choir

As part of the Thracian International Choir Festival, there was also a round-table discussion focused on the problems of choir management. In the previous Festivals, the international expertise on this subject was presented by Sonja Greiner, Secretary General of the European Choral Association, Europa Cantat, and Pierfranco Semeraro, Vice President of FENIARCO, the Italian choral umbrella organisation, as well as by the Presidents of the leading Bulgarian music organisations: the Bulgarian Choir Union, the Bulgarian Choir Conductors' Association and the Union of Bulgarian Composers.

Everything was going quite well at the Festival when suddenly the Municipality of Yambol, during the worst period of economic crisis in Bulgaria (2011), decided to suspend its participation in the public-private partnership and withdraw its financial support for the event. That decision brought the Festival to a total standstill.

In order to keep the Festival, and itself, alive, the Yambol Choral Association created a new public cultural institution, a specific Bulgarian form of cultural house called Chitalishte. This type of institution had been set up from the middle of the nineteenth century all over the country and they have been the main centres for preserving the Bulgarian spirit and culture for more than 150 years. Today, these institutions are supported by the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture and they

are eligible for a State subsidy after proving the success of their work. The new Cultural House in Yambol was called 'Thracian Lyre' and, after two years of intense volunteer work, in 2013 it was recognised and supported by the Ministry of Culture. The small subsidy helped both the Choral Association and the Festival to survive.

In 2013, the Thracian Festival was reconstructed with the help of the new Cultural House and the two NGOs, plus some private sponsors. The choirs then paid small participation fees and a new element was added to its programme – an evening with authentic folk singing. The organisers started building the new image of the Festival, embracing the rich Bulgarian folk traditions.



Children's Choir, Yambol, Bulgaria

The seventh Thracian Choir Festival took place in the Town Hall of Yambol on 17-19 October. The first concert at the Festival presented some authentic Bulgarian folk singing groups from the Thracian region. The second day of the event was dedicated to modern trends in folk music: arrangements, new polyphonic compositions based on folk themes, and even some jazz arrangements were presented by the youth choirs of the New Bulgarian University (conducted by Georgi Petkov) and the Academic Folk Choir of the Plovdiv Academy of Music and Arts (conducted by Prof. Kostadin Buradjiev). The third concert presented a panorama of contemporary choral music in the country: 'Vocal Ensemble Spectrum', a brilliant example of

the abilities of the new-generation singers in Bulgaria, performed attractive arrangements in different styles, including modern pieces based on folklore, followed by the Choir of Medical Specialists (Sofia, conducted by Maia Vassileva) and the Mixed Choir 'Ave Musica' (Sofia, conducted by Tania Nikleva-Vladeva). At the end of this concert, the last two choirs performed the famous *Misa Criolla* by Ariel Ramirez together, accompanied by the ensemble Art Libitum with authentic instruments.

The organisers of the Thracian Choir Festival, encouraged by the audience, believe in the successful future of the event and hope to attract even more support from different partners. The leading team for the event (Vessela Pastarmadjieva, Artistic Director of the Festival and conductor of the Georgi Dimitrov Choir Association; Dr Angel Angelov, Director of the new 'Thracian Lyre' Cultural House; and Milen Alexandrov, Secretary and PR Manager for the event) deserve standing ovations for their wonderful teamwork, enthusiasm and great energy. They have proved how a choral event can be saved and developed, even in a very difficult situation, by having a solid vision and keeping up morale. They believe singing can unite people all around the world and cordially invite more choirs and ensembles to join the Thracian Choir Festival. You are all very welcome in Yambol, Bulgaria!