

What is happening in the Choral World?

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From the beginning of the pandemic the conditions for international choirs changed dramatically. While some states imposed a total ban on singing for longer or shorter periods, others allowed music making to continue, but with strict health precautions.

Lasting two years, this situation has had various consequences: the musical standards of many choirs have declined, singers have left their choirs, in children's and youth choirs two years of potential talent have been lost, and many schools have stopped singing altogether. Probably our greatest challenge, now that the pandemic is over, is to rebuild the singers' lost motivation and to persuade audiences to resume their former attendance habits. Things seem to be returning to normal in some states. However, it remains to be seen whether the disruption will have had a permanent effect, or to what extent new and positive trends may have emerged. However, it is not only the pandemic that disrupted the choral world. The energy and the financial crises, triggered in part by the war in Ukraine, also affected the running of international choirs and festivals particularly badly.

Against this background, the International Chamber Choir competition of Marktoberdorf, together with the European Choral Association and the Choral Festival Network (CFN) produced two surveys (one for choirs and one for administrators). They held a round table discussion under the auspices of the 18th International Choral Competition Marktoberdorf, with the aim of understanding the disruption and the consequent problems, needs and challenges of the

international choir scene.

The Survey

By the middle of June, 79 people from 29 countries had responded to the survey which focused on two issues: the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic, together with the energy and the finance crises, and the question of what sort of arrangements should be put in place to encourage choirs to take part in a festival or a competition.

The pandemic, the energy crisis, and the financial crisis

Following the pandemic, around 42% of choirs reported a clear drop in their musical standards. The same number, 42%, lost singers during the pandemic and 46% are now having difficulty in attracting new members.

24% of choirs and just under 19% of administrators found themselves having to cope with the effects of the energy and financial crises which followed on from the pandemic (the increased cost of concert venues, rents, travel costs, printing costs unheated halls, etc.) Festivals will be particularly affected, as they will be forced to reduce the number of their participants.

Prerequisites for participants in festivals and competitions

Undoubtedly, the cost of travelling to the event presents the first hurdle. Then accommodation must be found (and paid for). Here, many participants would like more support in finding and accessing accommodation (though not necessarily including financial help). Once on the course, they value the workshops and coaching sessions, finding them helpful in developing their knowledge and technique. Interaction with their fellow participants was also seen as very important. The joint concerts and leisure activities were an incentive to attending a festival or taking part in a competition.

The Round Table Discussion

Chaired by Sonia Greiner, Germany (European Choral Association and committee member of the International Chamber Choir Competition Marktoberdorf), the following made up the discussion panel: Kaie Tanner, Estonia (Choral Festival Network), Burak Onur Erdem, Turkey (European Choral Association and International Federation for Choral Music), Romans Vanags Latvia (Interkultur), Jeffrey Murdock, USA (ACDA) and Jürgen Budday, Germany (International Chamber Choir Competition Marktoberdorf).

The results of the survey were endorsed in principle by the panel. After the pandemic, choirs had to cope with psychological problems suffered by their singers, with reduced audience numbers and the increased running costs. The administrators, too, were affected by these problems and some Festivals have had to give up. Most however have developed a different way of working, though keeping their original image.

Kaie Tanner is herself a director of several choirs in Estonia. She has found that it was mainly older singers who left their choirs. This was due to the widespread fear of singing, being in crowded situations, or travelling on public transport.

But in her work with children and young people, she has also found pronounced effects from the pandemic. Young people aged between 12 and 19 are suffering from depression. However, once singing is no longer perceived as dangerous, it can contribute to a recovery from depression. So it is vitally important to continue singing with young people. And it is this group, of teenagers and young adults, who are returning to singing and to travelling in increasing numbers.

Burak Onur Erdem agrees that the number of participants attending international events is growing again. Responsible for organising the World Symposium on Choral Music of the IFCM

in Istanbul, he received numerous applications from choirs. But even here, the organisation was not without problems. The preparation time was only 9 months and this was interrupted by the severe earthquake that took place in February. The organisers immediately invited 200 music teachers from the affected areas to come to Istanbul to study ways in which singing can overcome trauma.

But symptomatic of the current situation, however, is that, for the first time in its existence, the European Choral Association for the Europa Cantat Festival has been unable to find a host town. Alternative formats are being developed, e.g. smaller festivals will take place in several different European countries.

Jeffrey Murdock reports that the American universities have heard from their students that while the 3 years with little or no music had left large gaps in their lives, the desire among young people to meet with others and share experiences had remained strong. It resulted in their society becoming more inclusive, which is a positive outcome. As a result of the increased use of social media during the pandemic students became much more aware of their social environment. Their awareness of political events has also sharpened.

Romans Vanags agrees that the loss of musical quality in choirs has been very noticeable. Even in Latvia with its strong choral tradition, many choirs have not been able to maintain their musical standards during the pandemic. Latvia supports its choirs more than many other countries. For example, during the pandemic, the setting for the famous Song Festival was renovated at a cost of round 100 million Euro.

Finally **Jürgen Budday** describes the concrete developments being made in the International Chamber Choir Competition in Marktoberdorf. The pandemic has resulted in a considerable reduction in the number of applications, possibly because

choirs have not yet regained the standard required. It has also become clear that fewer European choirs have applied, and more choirs from outside Europe, whose participation is only possible due to financial support from the Goethe Institute.

Overall there are signs that the international choral scene is recovering from Covid – despite the energy and financial crises. It is harder for competitions, where the focus is on musical quality, than it is for festivals where the emphasis is on meeting people and making friends. The current high costs have forced us to develop a new format (shorter duration and fewer participants.) But a much more difficult problem concerns the changed characters of the people. Many are suffering from psychological stress, or have developed phobias (of large crowds, of enclosed rooms, of catching contagious illnesses.) Yet singing is therapeutic and can reduce the recovery time from trauma. There is still a very obvious lack of motivation and lethargy. Online access has at least allowed people to experience events from home, although the opportunity of meeting people is completely absent. A further problem is that more and more people like to act at the last minute, so that application deadlines will have to be as close as possible to the event. However this will make the organisation of large events extremely difficult.

For these developments to succeed will require flexibility from the organisers and more forward thinking on the part of choirs. Added to that will be the considerable task of persuading people how therapeutic singing is for body and soul. On the practical side, it is vitally important that any financial support should match the current high prices, otherwise the quality as well as the quantity of the festivals will suffer, as the choirs have.

The Round Table discussion is available on www.kammerchorwettbewerb.org



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