

# EuroChoir 2018: A multicultural-musical experience

by Hannah Ewald

I am currently conducting 5 choir-groups in Hamburg. Looking at the choir-landscape, I am often disappointed: I miss a good and respectful communication within & with the choir, a pleasant und diversified atmosphere during the rehearsals, a reasonable and sufficient inclusion of the body into the music-making and the use of the human & creative potential of the choir. Therefore, I was curious and insecure, if I would feel comfortable in the EuroChoir for two weeks!

Already during the first evening I learned, that I wouldn't have to worry: **We started with a welcome-canon, during which we should walk and dance through the room to get in contact with the other choir-members.** Both conductors – Maria van Nieuwerkerken (Netherlands) and Mikko Sidoroff (Finland) – rehearsed after the canon already some of the 4-8-parted pieces. They seemed to be a well-experienced and well-prepared team. During the two weeks the outstanding cooperation of the conductors was the heart piece of the EuroChoir. Such a **respectful, acknowledging and supportive contact between colleagues I have encountered rarely.** When one of them was rehearsing, the other one sang in the choir most of the time. During a workshop at EUROPA CANTAT festival, Maria and Mikko talked about the advantages of their teamwork: The mutual learning and the fact, that four eyes and ears see and hear more than two was a centre point.

The warm-up was conducted in daily turns: Mikko, also yoga-teacher, mostly focused on a sporty warm-up and complex halftone-exercises. I was impressed by his persistent work on the musical expression and his crystal-clear, sensible and emotionally touchable conducting. Maria combined during the warm-up always musical aspects with group-dynamic-exercises and stage-presence: Keeping eye-contact with the other singers, fulfilling group-tasks while singing or singing with closed eyes while lying on the floor. Her confidence, that she will motivate the singers, to move out of their comfort-zone into an intense contact with each other and the audience made it work.

The rehearsals were always entertaining, not only because of the continuous change of conductor, but also due to the diverse repertoire.

Distracted thoughts and a passive taking-part was impossible, constantly the conductors appealed to the autonomy and creativity of the choir, for ex. by forming small groups to rehearse pieces or invent choreographies.

Each singer was respected by the two conductors: They learned our names incredibly fast, questions were answered friendly, ideas and proposals were heard, after the concerts we had feedback-rounds where everybody had its moment without being commented or judged and during the concerts everyone could chose to sing by heart or with partitions. The concerts didn't loose professionalism or uniformity, but gained liveliness.

The respectful cooperation between the choir-members was also stunning and encouraging - in none of the multiple choir-contexts that I've worked in, I experienced something similar. **I felt always appreciated and supported and at the same time,** I felt no pressure to take part in the group-activities besides the rehearsals. The soloists weren't envied, but appreciated.

The fact, that this ideal contact between people from all over the world that haven't met before, seemed so naturally, surprised and encouraged me.

I spent a lot of the rare free time alone, but the rehearsals were so team-building, that I never had the feeling to stand outside. The exercises of Maria, the feedback-rounds, the welcome-games of the ECA and the meals were certainly reasons for that.

Remarkable was the choice of the rehearsal- and concert venues, the homogeny choir-sound, the concentrated atmosphere during the rehearsals. The rehearsal-timetable was tough, but we had also a few free evenings and afternoons.

I have only a few ideas for improvement. The division into the hostel-rooms was not highly appreciated by most of the choir, nearly everyone had roommates from the same nationality. A mixture could have supported the intercultural exchange. In my opinion we could have worked a lot more on posture, body perception and stage-presence, exercises could have easily been integrated into the regular rehearsals.

**Inspiring for my work as a choir-conductor were the formats and the concepts of the concerts: The sequential arrangement of the pieces, the transitions between the pieces with movements or improvisations and the „Nielsen-experience “, how Maria called it. We sang this Danish lullaby three times, first while entering the stage, then with a choreography and finally while turning to the audience and singing the piece for a person in the public. This intense contact with the audience was no.1 topic of conversation outside the rehearsals, because it was **unusual, scary and emotionally touching** at the same time. Often trained during the rehearsals within the choir, the third run through of Nielsen was the most intense musical moment in all the concerts, that was followed by tears, hugs and standing ovations. I want to integrate this form of musical experience in my future concerts!**

Maria's exercises, that evoked visual, bodily and hearing contact between the choir-members and by the way caused a lot of laughter and movement in the room, I will certainly try out with my choirs.

Emotionally touching was the experience, that as a choir-singer I am never alone, and that choir-singing only works out as a real team. The years of standing alone in front of choirs made me forget, how that feels.

I am thankful, that through the EuroChoir I got to now Europa Cantat. I'm regularly visiting further educations about singing, conducting etc., but only within Germany. To experience this festival as a singer, listener and participant of several ateliers, was amazing!

My conclusion is: I recommend a participation in the EuroChoir and the EuroChoir itself as a project and I wish choir-singers of any age the experience: Singing (well instructed and in the right context) can bring together people from all around the world.