

Singing with a handicap – and without An Eye Opener

In November 2009 the Youth Committee of Europa Cantat organised a workshop under the title “Singing with a handicap – an eye opener” in the frame of the Europa Cantat General Assembly. The session was meant as discussion forum on making music with handicapped and making music with a handicap and a presentation of a series of events under the title of “Hearts-in-Harmony”. As a practical demonstration they had invited the choir “Petko Staynov” from Bulgaria, a choir with mostly blind and sight-impaired singers, conducted by Peter Matev.

The workshop turned out to be totally different than planned – once the choir started singing, the audience completely forgot about the fact that the singers were blind - they were simply thrilled by the wonderful sound and quality of the choir. What had happened? The audience had expected an amateur choir of blind people who sing together for fun and for the benefit singing gives to them. Somehow they had not expected a high quality performance. The Academy Choir Petko Staynov, however (named after the Bulgarian composer Petko Staynov who lost his sight as a child) is a professional choir initially supported by the Bulgarian Union of Singers. The singers are auditioned musicians who at the beginning received a salary for their work in the choir. Unfortunately the support of the Union was withdrawn ten years ago and the number of singers decreased as a consequence, since they only receive a small amount of money no. Some 80 percent of the singers are blind or sight-impaired, 50% are totally blind and a few singers are normal-sighted.

The choir has a broad repertoire including all genres of music, with a focus on Bulgarian folk and orthodox music. So what is the difference to other choirs? Since most of the singers cannot read, thus also not read music, they produce scores with the notes and the texts written in the Braille alphabet. Later they learn the music by heart so that they sing at concerts without any scores. The conductor conducts the choir as he would conduct any other choirs – only that he stands very close to the singers, uses his voices to help them, breathing and singing along the text for them to hear, or taps the rhythm with his foot.

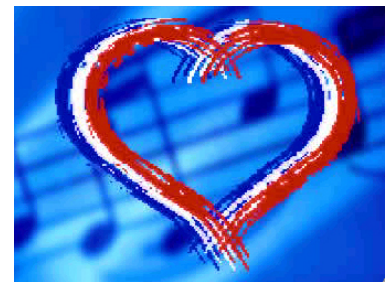


*The Petko Staynov Choir at the workshop in the framework of the Europa Cantat General Assembly in Sofia, Bulgaria
If you want to read more about the choir see http://sofiaecho.com/2001/05/17/628118_blind-choir-looks-to-future/ / Contact:
Petar Matev, mail: matev@spnet.net, address: 51 Vassil Drumev Street, apt. 33., Sofia, Bulgaria)*



Victoria Liedbergius, chair of Europa Cantat Youth Committee, introducing the Petko Staynov Choir at the workshop in the framework of the General Assembly of Europa Cantat in Sofia, Bulgaria

The workshop with the Petko Staynov fits into a series of events under the patronage of Europa Cantat, called “Hearts-in-Harmony”. The series was initiated in 2006 with a Gala concert, bringing together handicapped and non-handicapped singers on a big stage in the Paris Convention Centre. The event was organized by the French choral association A Coeur Joie in cooperation with a number of French associations for the handicap. It was called “Coeurs-en-Choeurs” (literally hearts in choirs) based on the motto by César Geoffray, the Founder of A Coeur Joie: “When voices join in song, hearts join in harmony”. For the first time in Europe, a choir and an orchestra of about 340 handicapped and none handicapped singers joined voices for this special concert. Further projects are being organised regularly in France.



This unique example and the belief that singing can help the social inclusion of handicapped young people, choral organizations in different European countries carried on the torch of “Hearts-in-Harmony”, organizing concerts, festivals and training course bringing handicapped and non-handicapped people together.

Choeurs-en-coeurs rehearsal weekend in France 2009

In 2008 the Norwegian children and youth choir organization “NoBU” organised a weekend in Trondheim where hearing-impaired and other children sang together, using sign-language and teachers and conductors could learn how to sing with hearing-impaired children.

In 2010 and 2011 three further Hearts-in-Harmony events will take place as part of the project “Uniting Youth in Song”¹ which receives funding from the European Union under the Culture programme:

On March 4th to 7th 2010 KÓTA and the Europa Cantat Central-Eastern European Centre in cooperation with the school for visually impaired children in Budapest will organise a weekend with visually impaired and non-handicapped children and young people. They have scheduled rehearsals, concerts, demonstration lessons, workshops, video and live presentations as well as a round table discussion on the pedagogy of working with visually impaired and children and young people. Guest choirs with blind singers from abroad will work together with the choirs of the school in Budapest, performing a joint closing concert with non-handicapped children from all over Hungary in a big church.

In Barcelona the children’s choir organisation SCIC and the Mediterranean Centre for Choral Music will work together with ONCE (organisation for the blind) and other organisations for the handicapped to prepare an event called “Cors amb Cor” (**choirs with heart / hearts in choir?**). In February 2010 they will organise a conference focussed on how to integrate handicapped people into the choirs of the region, on May 15th 2010 member choirs of SCIC and choirs with handicapped singers as well as individual handicapped singers will sing a concert in the Auditori of Barcelona, performing repertoire which each choir will have prepared in advance and which will have been rehearsed together during a big rehearsal day.

In Örebro in 2011 the Swedish International Centre for Choral Music – SWICCO will cooperate with different organisations for yet another Hearts-in-Harmony event focused on children with hearing difficulties. Further Hearts-in-Harmony events are planned for 2012 (in Flanders, Belgium) and the following years.

With Hearts-in-Harmony Europa Cantat and the choral world are hoping to contribute to a better inclusion of handicapped singers, not only during the EU Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion but well beyond.



At the Hearts-in-Harmony concert in Trondheim, Norway, in 2008

¹ The Hearts-in-Harmony events 2010 and 2011 are part of “Uniting Youth in Song”, a project coordinated by Länsmusiken in Örebro (Sweden) in cooperation with FENIARCO (Italy), SCIC (Catalonia, Spain), the KÓTA (Hungary), the festival EUROPA CANTAT Utrecht (the Netherlands) and Europa Cantat in Bonn (Germany). This project has been selected under the European Union programme “Culture 2007–2013”.