



Johann van der Sandt leads a Morning Sing at the 10th World Symposium on Choral Music

The world in song

Carol Carver and David Mennicke were inspired by an international choral symposium in South Korea. PHOTOS BY MOON GI KIM

The World Symposium on Choral Music is a one-week event organised every three years by the International Federation for Choral Music. The 10th Symposium, held on 6-13 August in Seoul, Korea, abounded with moments of inspiration and transformation. Ten local choirs were joined by 25 others from around the world, and 30 renowned conductor/teachers led global choral repertoire and gave presentations. It is easy to think that the silo of choirs and their music in your own country is the epicentre of the choral world; then you hear a choir from Inner Mongolia or Morocco or Indonesia and you know choral music is a worldwide phenomenon, thriving and growing in unimaginable ways.

Each group presented their music with excellence, giving audiences not only a rich palette of sounds but also visual elements that made it easy to attend eight hours of concerts per day. Rare was the choir that processed to the stage, stood in three rows and sang their programme, possibly due to the fact that many were from non-western countries – it gave cause to assess what a choral concert is about, and what it can be.

Concert sessions – where three choirs performed for about 30 minutes each – presented a wide range of repertoire and singing styles. Each concert session was well thought out, contrasting in elements and, for the most part, easy to access since most of them were on the campus of the National Theater of Korea. One notable session was given by the Wonju Civic Chorale, Roomful of Teeth, and the Inner Mongolian Youth Choir. Korean choirs are exquisitely trained, not only in singing, but in stage presence – what they wear and how they move; and

Wonju Civic Chorale gave a taste of the depth and breadth of Korean music, sung with a wonderful combination of Korean and western sound. The US ensemble Roomful of Teeth overwhelmed with their thoroughly 21st-century re-imagining of a cappella vocal music. Their stated mission is to ‘mine the expressive potential of the human voice’, which they put into action through yodels, grunts, audible exhalations, drones and other techniques from a wide variety of musical traditions. Their singing is fiercely beautiful and bravely, utterly



VocalEssence (USA) and Sofia Vokalensemble (Sweden) join three South Korean choirs for the closing concert



Bengt Ollén introduces rehearsal activities to develop imagination and expression of emotion



Lori Keyne relates how choirs sang Eric Whitacre's *Cloudburst* across the US/Mexico border



Naomi Faran includes special needs children in her Israeli Moran Choir



The colourful costumes and voices of the Inner Mongolian Youth Choir set the stage ablaze

◀ exposed – small wonder that in 2014 they won a Grammy Award for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance. And last, the young singers from the northern China province of Inner Mongolia set the stage ablaze with a gripping performance – in stunning national costume – of choral

Apart from attending concerts, participants could choose from 37 different presentations on new repertoire, methods, and insights. Some were striking in demonstrating the power of choral music to make connections between peoples. Lori Keyne, of Cochise Community College in Arizona,

hospitals; and André de Quadros, of Boston University and Manado State University, spoke about choral offerings in Boston prisons, and collaboration between Israeli and Palestinian choirs.

There was a rich array of repertoire-related presentations on topics including the New Zealand choral tradition (Karen Grylls), Latin American music (Maria Guinand), African-American Spirituals (Anthony Leach, with the Penn State Essence of Joy choir), choirs in the Philippines (Bienvenido Constantino and Eliezer Yanson), choral music by global female composers (Pearl Shangkuan), Chinese choral history (John Winzenburg), Korean folk music interpretation (Ki-Sun Lee), African lullabies (Yveline Damas), and Baltic and Scandinavian music (Mikk Üleoja).

Other sessions dealt with technique and performance practice, on themes such as Colonial Latin American Music (Cristian

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song and dance to the sound of the *morin khuur* (horsehead fiddle), the *yatga* (zither) and other distinctive Mongolian instruments with pure beauty and infectious joy. Hailing from the rural grasslands, these children of herdsman reminded us again just how far the art of choral music has spread.

shared a project where singers converged on the US/Mexico border, singing Whitacre's *Cloudburst* together on both sides of the wall; Naomi Faran, of the Israeli Moran Choir, showed how their programme includes special needs children in their concerts, and small ensemble visits to

Grases), how to teach overtone singing (Peggy Dettwiler and Stuart Hind), and acoustics in the choral setting (Harold Jers). Cara Tasher and James Hall explored practical and accurate voice teaching in the choral rehearsal; and Bengt Ollén and the Sofia Vokalensemble from Sweden shared rehearsal activities to develop imagination, relationship, and emotional ownership in each singer – one game had the singers move in small groups around the room to various emotion ‘zones’, changing their vocal delivery of their music to express joy, anger, love, and sorrow. Frieder Bernius talked about performance practice in works of Bach and Mendelssohn (aided by his Stuttgart Chamber Choir); and Federico Bardazzi and Leonardo Sagliocci’s talk on 17th-century Italian choral music brought performance practice to life. One very interesting insight they shared – if a historical source forbids a certain practice (e.g., no drums in church), it probably meant that someone was actually doing it at the time!

The multi-cultural exhibition area gave the opportunity to compare repertoire from many different countries. Much of it naturally reflected the culture of its country of origin, but there were clear influences from other countries: pop-influenced music from Japanese publishers, African-based pieces at a German store, Hispanic styles at an eastern European company.

The greatest benefits of this conference were the extraordinary connections with musicians from around the world: we were led in daily morning sings by experts from different countries; we probed, participated, and even played together in presentations; we enjoyed together (and, yes, critiqued afterwards) the performances; and we shared meals, subway rides, sights, musical ideas, literature, and business cards. Contacts were made with choir directors from every continent; the Facebook postings and email messages from new friends have continued daily.

Our experience at WSCM10 underscores the crucial part we all play in providing the world with the power of communal song. We certainly encourage all choral conductors to attend the 11th World Symposium on Choral Music, which will be held in Barcelona, Spain in 2017. ■

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