

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”. It was planned as discussion forum on making music with handicapped / with a handicap and included a presentation of a choir of blind singers. The workshop turned out to be totally different than planned – once the performance started, the audience completely forgot that the singers were blind - they were simply thrilled by the wonderful sound and quality of the choir, it was the music that mattered, not the handicap. The Academic Choir Petko Staynov is a professional choir initially supported by the Bulgarian Union of Singers. Some 80 percent of the singers are blind or sight-impaired, 50% are totally blind and a few singers are normal-sighted, and they are all excellent, auditioned singers. How else do they differ from other choirs? They produce scores with the notes and the texts written in the Braille alphabet and learn them by heart for the concerts. Petar Matev conducts them with his hands - and stands very close to the singers, using his voice and breath to help them, or tapping the rhythm with his foot.

The workshop 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 in the Paris Convention Centre. The event was organized under the name “Coeurs-en-Choeurs” (hearts-in-choirs) by A Coeur Joie in cooperation with French associations for the handicapped.

This unique example and the belief that singing can help the social inclusion of handicapped young people, and that we as organisations have the responsibility to enable common projects and to create an awareness of how to approach handicapped singers and our own prejudices, organizations in different countries carried on the torch, organizing concerts, festivals and training course bringing handicapped and non-handicapped people together.

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.

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 will organise a weekend in Budapest. They have scheduled rehearsals, concerts, demonstration lessons, workshops, video and live presentations and a round table discussion as well as a joint closing concert with blind or seeing-impaired as well as non-handicapped children from all over Hungary.

In Barcelona the children’s choir organisation SCIC and the Mediterranean Centre for Choral Music will work together with ONCE and other organisations for the handicapped to prepare an event called “Cors amb Cor” (choirs with heart). In February 2010 they will organise a conference focussed on how to integrate handicapped singers into the choirs of the region, on May 15th 2010 member choirs of SCIC and handicapped singers will perform a concert in the Auditori of Barcelona.

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. *Sonja Greiner, Secretary General, Europa Cantat, info@EuropaCantat.org / www.EuropaCantat.org*

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”.



*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://softaecho.com/2001/05/17/628118_blind-choir-looks-to-future/
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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



Choeurs-en-coeurs rehearsal weekend in France 2009



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