

Choralia magna 2024 International Conference on Choral Art, Hradec Králové, 18–20 October 2024

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Abstract: The article summarises the most important topics of the international scientific conference on choral art, which took place within the framework of the Choralia magna national festival of children's, youth and adult choirs in 2024 in Hradec Králové.

Key words: conference, choral singing, choral movement, culture, wellbeing, education, National Information and Consulting Centre for Culture (NIPOS), Association of Choirmasters

Choralia magna was the collective name for the largest choral event of the Year of Czech Music and the largest single gathering of non-professional choral singers since 1990. Choralia combined a national festival of children's, youth and adult choirs, an international conference on choral art, and a series of concerts for the Year of Czech Music. This event was the fulfilment of a long-held dream of the main organisers—four professional staff members¹ of the National Information and Advisory Centre for Culture²—to bring together all age groups of choral singers in one place. In its history, NIPOS had never organised such a large-scale choral event, and over 50 amateur

choirs of children, youth and adults met in Hradec Králové over four days, participating in 15 concerts, 46 workshops, lectures, debates and round tables, as well as a three-day international conference. NIPOS was able to rely on excellent co-organisers (the Association of Choirmasters, the Centre for Artistic Activities Hradec Králové and Jitro Primary Art School Hradec Králové), reliable and willing volunteers, and domestic and foreign partners (the National Awareness Centre, the European Choral Association, the Faculty of Music and Dance of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Králové, the Institute of

¹ Barbora Hanslianová, Zuzana Jandová, Petr Koronthály and Jan Pirner.

² Hereinafter referred to as NIPOS.

Arts – Theatre Institute, and the Czech Music Council), to whom many thanks are due.

The main theme of the conference was amateur and professional choral singing, an artistic pursuit that tens of thousands of people in the Czech Republic engage in in their free time. The organisers divided it into six thematic blocks on Friday and Saturday, with Sunday morning devoted to joint conclusions.

The first block, entitled **Caring for Choral Singing in the Czech Republic and Europe**, was devoted to cooperation between the international, public and private sectors. The session was chaired by Kateřina Klementová, who, together with Zuzana Jandová, introduced the “biotope” of Czech choral singing, highlighting its specific needs and emphasising that choral singing is one of the most popular leisure arts disciplines in the Czech Republic. NIPOS director Lenka Lázněvská summarised the basic legislative framework within which Czech culture operates, reminding attendees that its financing is not solely the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, but primarily of municipal and regional governments. Sonja Greiner, Secretary General of the European Choral Association, presented the wide-ranging activities of this multinational organisation and stressed the importance of the individual national

centres – it should be noted here that the Czech Republic currently lacks such cooperation. Mihela Jagodic followed this up with a description of the activities of JSKD,³ its parent organisation, and the counterpart of NIPOS in Slovenia, whose activities are extensive and reach deeply into all regions of Slovenia. The session concluded with a contribution from Richard Uhlř, chair of the Association of Choirmasters, a non-profit umbrella choral organisation that sponsors a number of choral activities, including progressive NIPOS shows for children and youth, as well as the activities of the Czech Choirmaster’s Choir. Jaroslav Vávra, president of the Union of Czech Choirs, was also scheduled to speak in the first block, but had to cancel his participation at the last minute due to family reasons.

The musicologist Eva Velická chaired the second session, **The Choral Movement as a Part of Culture**, which featured inspiring projects related to choral singing. Kateřina Bryndová summarised the origins and development of the Prague Philharmonic Choir Academy, a project that enables young graduates of music schools to learn more about professional choral singing and gain experience in a major choral ensemble. Musica Orbis Prague Festival Director John Tregellas introduced this successful international choral project and affirmed to the con-

³ Javni sklad Republike Slovenije za kulturne dejavnosti.

ference participants that choral singing remains one of his lifelong passions. Jiří Klusoň, a legal expert from the Ministry of Culture, presented on copyright and choral singing in the digital age, followed by choirmaster Monika Václová, who shared three perspectives on the role of the choir in the educational projects of the Czech Philharmonic, the Prague Cantilena and the mixed choir Subito. The session closed with a contribution from composer, publicist and editor-in-chief of the music stations D-dur and Jazz, Lukáš Hurník, who presented A Thousand Voices of Advent—the largest concert of the Year of Czech Music—where a thousand singers performed alongside the Symphony Orchestra in December.

Choral singing and wellbeing—a currently popular and widely discussed topic—was the focus of a separate block of the conference, led by the teacher and choirmaster Jiřina Jiříčková. All the presentations clearly showed the significant physical and psychological benefits of choral singing, as confirmed by both domestic and international research. These effects were explored from multiple perspectives: Lukáš Holec, choirmaster of the Medvídada children's choir from Český Krumlov, discussed the impact on children's choirs; Monika Kolasa Hladíková, a university teacher

and singer from Poland, examined the role of voice education; and Alena Tichá, a voice teacher, along with phoniatriest Jakub Dršata, presented findings from their long-term research. Scott Ferguson, an American choirmaster and university teacher, also shared his experience in wellbeing and transgender choristers.

Choral singing in an international context operates under different conditions in each country, yet choir directors and choirs have many things in common. However, with the exception of international competitions and friendly exchanges, Czechs have few opportunities to get to know the choral traditions of individual countries. Moreover, the wealth of foreign inspiration was so extensive that twice the allotted time would have been needed to cover it all. Jan Pirner filled in for the excused chairperson Lenka Dohnalová from ATI,⁴ while Mihela Jagodic stepped in to present the state of choral singing in Slovenia, and Latvian choirmaster Jānis Lapsa provided insights about the choral scene in his country. This was followed by an overview of choral traditions in the United States from Scott Ferguson, and in Poland from Monika Kolasa Hladíková. Milan Kolena, an experienced juror at numerous competitions in Europe and overseas and an organiser of choral festivals in Slovakia,

⁴ Arts and Theatre Institute.

⁵ Národné osvetové centrum.

shared his perspective on international competitions. Michal Stahl described the work of the National Awareness Centre⁵ and presented the current situation of choirs in Slovakia, and choirmaster Zuzana Buchová Holičková presented the conclusions of the pilot year of the Vox Choralis symposium for choirmasters of youth and children's choirs.

Marek Valášek, choirmaster and Head of the Department of Music Education at the Faculty of Education of Charles University, chaired the session **Choral singing and education**. His key question was whether our educational system produces well-trained choirmasters and choral singers. Experienced speakers from the ranks of professional choirmasters and teachers agreed that the roles of choirmaster and conductor, as well as those of choral and solo singer, require the same level of detailed study and rigorous preparation, without which excellence cannot be achieved, the quality of results being determined by the individuality of the particular person. Miriam Němcová, choirmaster, conductor and teacher, Magdalena Hajóssyová, long-time soloist and professor of singing, Adolf Melichar and Lukáš Kozubík, choirmasters of opera and philharmonic choruses, and Grażyna Wilk Biernot, solo and choral singer, shared their extensive experience.

The final session of the conference, **The Choral Movement as a Part of Society**, offered participants a completely

different perspective on choral singing compared to the previous sessions. It focused on disadvantaged children and minority groups, emphasising the choir as a social entity, as a place of safety and trust even in difficult environments. The session was chaired by Martin Rudovský—author of the first paper, dramaturge of the Prague Symphony Orchestra FOK, chair of the Pavel Jurkovič Society, and, above all, an active musician and singer—who presented his experiences with communal singing and the therapeutic function of music in children's homes. Brigita Müllerová, a choirmaster and teacher, continued the discussion with a description of the activities of the Rarášci choir and her path to Romani music. Educator Radka Jarolímková summarised her many years of experience with a choir of primary school children with special educational needs, while choirmaster Marek Stanka introduced the successful Prague gay choir Doodles. New hope for a shared future was presented by the choirmasters of the Czech-Ukrainian choir, Sonjašnyk Martina Sirová and Eva Beňová.

On Sunday morning, the conference opened with a performance by the children's choir Rarášci from Trmice, led by choirmasters Eva Beňová and Hana Šindelářová, with a dramaturgically original programme of Romani songs. This was followed by a presentation of the conference outcomes by NIPOS director Lenka Lázňovská and expert Kateřina

Klementová, and closed with an inspiring spatial composition, *My Siberia*, by Roman Zabelov and Markéta Labusová. The main goals of the conference were fulfilled – the conference helped to map the current state of choral art in the Czech Republic, presented its strengths and weaknesses, placed it in the context of Czech culture and presented inspiring examples from home and abroad. It also contributed to the further emancipation of the choral movement, allowing it to better and more precisely articulate its needs and demands and reach out to society as a whole. Additionally, the event demonstrated that choral singing also has an economic impact.

Choral singing has a long tradition in the Czech Republic and remains one of

the most popular leisure activities; statistical findings support its significance, innovative projects (such as the large-scale concert *A Thousand Voices of Advent*) help to promote it, and it has been proved that choral singing has a positive impact on human health and enriches the social life of the population. Although there are only a few professional choirs in the Czech Republic, the country boasts several thousand amateur choirs. Together with the organisers of the conference, we can therefore look forward to the next opportunity for a similar gathering.

The project was realised with the financial support of the Ministry of Culture, the Czech Recovery Plan and the European Union.

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