

BOYS' CHOICE – AN ANTHOLOGY OF CHRISTMAS CAROLS

With half a millennium of tradition to their name, its members remain young and curious:

THE VIENNA BOYS CHOIR

The Vienna Boys Choir may not be older than Christmas, but it is definitely older than most of the world's Christmas carols. The official founding of the choir dates to 1498, a good 300 years before the composition of most Christmas classics. The choir's actual roots go back to at least 1296, when Duke Albrecht of Austria referred to himself as founder of a music chapel in Vienna, which included a school of singing boys.

Given the choir's long history, the 100 current choristers are well versed in sacred music. Since the days of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, who "founded" the choir when he moved his entire court to Vienna in 1498, religious and liturgical music has been a major part of the boys' repertoire. It still is: Together with members of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the men's chorus of the Vienna State Opera, the boys perform during Sunday Mass in Vienna's Imperial Chapel.

Christmas music gives many boys their first taste of singing; most of their families will sing together at Christmas. Children and Christmas go together; the 100 or so choir boys are first and foremost very normal children – who happen to attend boarding school, tour internationally, and sing to sold-out concert halls.

They are often referred to as "Austria's singing ambassadors," they wear the state's coat of arms on their uniforms; still, the Vienna Boys Choir is a private, non-profit organization. In 2001, the Republic of Austria agreed to cover some of the school's running costs in recognition of services rendered, yet the choir still has to earn the lion's share of its budget. The choir runs a primary school and – in cooperation with the city of Vienna – a music kindergarten, both of which admit girls as well as boys. In addition, the choir offers a senior high school program focussed on vocal music. While the junior high school is tailored to the boys in the touring choirs, the senior program is open to girls and boys: the choir's mission and outlook have substantially changed from the days of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, when the choir performed exclusively for the court.

The imperial institution – where Franz Schubert and Joseph Haydn as well as his brother Michael sang as boys - was privatized after the first World War. Josef Schnitt, who was Dean of the Imperial Chapel at the time, re-founded the choir in 1924 under its new name. The Court Choir Boys became the Vienna Boys Choir; the imperial uniforms were replaced with sailor suits, then the height of fashion for children from "good" families. Like all uniforms, it was an outward sign that the boys belonged to a group, and that they were considered equal within it. Today, there is a dark blue uniform for travel and official appearances, and a white and blue sailor suit for gala concerts.

Further changes happened in the 1920s. The new independence meant the choir had to finance itself. Singing mass in Chapel did not generate income, and the boys started giving public concerts in Vienna and elsewhere. By 1927, the choir started to travel. Schnitt had his sights set high, and – almost as a matter of course - the first tour of the USA took place in 1932.

Today each of the four choirs (named Bruckner, Haydn, Mozart and Schubert) spends nine to eleven weeks of the academic year on tour. Since 1926, there have been more than 1000 concert tours in

over 100 countries. The boys from Vienna sing live for nearly a half million people each year – a figure that few cultural institutions in the world can match.

They perform with star conductors like Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Mariss Jansons, or Riccardo Muti. They hosted a visit of Japan's Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko in their home in Vienna's Augarten Palace. In December 2001, they sang a special service for New York's policemen and firefighters, and for the 9/11 victims in the small chapel on Ground Zero. The Vienna Boys Choir has sung at two Eurovision Song Contests and at five New Year's Concerts. The choir has an airplane and a train named after it. It all goes to show - the boys from Vienna are international stars, equally recognized and loved, whether in Japan, the USA, or Europe.

As with every big star, inertia is not an option; the young cultural ambassadors play a major role in defining the international image of Austria. At home, the choir's own image has undergone a change. Under its President and artistic director, Gerald Wirth, the choir shows intellectual curiosity, initiative, imagination, self-confidence. One of the most important innovations was the opening of the choir's own concert hall, MuTh, in 2012. The name – Music and Theatre – is a play on words, and shows what the choir is all about – the German word Mut means courage. At MuTh, the choir produces its own children's operas, and its own concerts.

The Vienna Boys Choir is a phenomenon. With more than 500 years of history and tradition, linked to names like Isaac, De Monte, Schmelzer, Fux, Caldara, Haydn, Gluck, Salieri, Mozart, Schubert, and Bruckner, they are an important part of Western culture and the evolution of Western music. The boys perform with the Vienna Philharmonic and other famous orchestras, conducted by excellent musicians. Composers like Benjamin Britten have written works for them. The choir continues to commission and perform contemporary works, thus securing a place for music as a cultural expression of our time. And – possibly by virtue of their travels – the boys attract tourists. Music lovers from around the world come to Vienna to hear and see them.

Public performances are not the only way the boys from Vienna interact with their audience. The choir has nearly 200 CD releases to its name, produced by an ensemble whose line-up inevitably changes every year - more often than any other music formation in the world.

The end of a choir boy's "career" is foreseeable; boys' voices change. Since 1498, about 7.500 boys have sung in the choir; change is one of the constants in a boys' choir.

Their repertoire is broad; the boys sing anything with equal aplomb, medieval works, baroque motets, pop music. On their tours since 1926, the boys have broadened their musical horizons; and they continue to do so. They learn about world music literally in passing; and world music is very much part of their repertoire.

In the same vein, the choir frequently cooperates with other artists. "Merry Christmas from Vienna" is a case in point - the boys asked Aida Garifullina to join them in "Silent Night", and Rolando Villazón to sing the solo part in "Oh, Holy Night". Two American classics, "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Let It Snow", were recorded with "phil Blech Wien". The fifteen musicians of this brass ensemble, formed in 2010, were either trained by members of the Vienna Philharmonic or are themselves members of the famous orchestra; as such, they know the choir boys from their joint weekly appearances at the Imperial Chapel in Vienna.

On this recording, the choir shows its openness and versatility; the boys alternately perform with a classical orchestra (their own Schubert-Akademie), a jazz band, or a cappella. And they remain true to one of the fundamental tenets of the choir – to always reach and inspire the widest possible range of people.

“It cannot be said that the choir boys were ever detached from the world. Programs forgoing success were never planned,” wrote music critic Franz Endler in 1974 (*Wiener Sängerknaben*, Salzburg 1974, page 70). This recipe for success has remained unchanged - the current Christmas recording offers classic carols alongside favorites from today. However, commercial success must not mean wallowing in blissful nostalgia. “The Vienna Boys Choir is not an instrument lost in the past but rather (an instrument which) – building on tradition – forms the future,” according to MuTH director Elke Hesse (*MuTH - Konzertsaal der Wiener Sängerknaben*, Wien 2013, page 21). The choir is not just an educational and a cultural institution but rather a five-hundred-year- old world brand, renewed continually by young media pros.

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