



Saskatoon Children's Choir wins in Vienna music festival



[Jon Perez](#)

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1 / 2 The Saskatoon Children's Choir perform in the 2026 Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival at the Musikverein in Vienna, Austria. | Saskatoon Children's Choir



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SASKATOON — The Saskatoon Children's Choir returned home not only as champions of their category in the 2026 Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival in Vienna, Austria, but with lasting

memories of performing in one of the world's most celebrated concert halls.

Led by artistic director Kerry Agnew, the group, founded in 1996 by Phoebe Voigts, topped the Treble Choir category after performing a demanding 20-minute competition program inside the historic Musikverein Vienna, which is regarded as one of the world's premier concert halls.

For the 34 choristers, aged 12 to 18, the victory capped nearly a year of preparation and marked the choir's first international tour since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted overseas travel. The 11-day journey included several days in Vienna for the festival before continuing to Budapest, Hungary.

For Agnew, the experience extended beyond winning. Rather, it was the chance to perform in the same hall where legendary composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Johann Strauss once stood, giving the kids a connection to centuries of musical history that few young performers experience.

"We were really proud to be part of the musical world there. To stand on the same floor that Strauss stood on and be in the same room where Mozart conducted is something you don't get in Canada. For these kids, it will be a lifelong memory," Agnew told SaskToday.

She said the choir began preparing for the festival as soon as the season started last September, carefully selecting repertoire that would meet the competition's requirements while showcasing Canadian music on the international stage.

"Our competition program consisted of six songs. Everyone [competitors] had to perform the test piece, *Petites Voix* No. 1 and No. 2 by Francis Poulenc, and we also had to include at least one Canadian composer," said Agnew.

She added that they chose two works by Canadian female composers, Katerina Gimon and Laura Hawley, and had the months of rehearsals designed not only to polish the music but also to prepare the singers for performing before an international panel of adjudicators and audiences in Vienna.

"It was a really remarkable experience for the choristers. To be on the stage in the Musikverein in Vienna — one of the biggest, most beautiful and well-known concert halls in the world — was incredibly exciting. They knew they were competing against choirs from around the world," said Agnew.

She said that the choir left the stage feeling proud regardless of the outcome because they believed they had delivered their strongest performance, with winning just a bonus, and it was never their primary objective; instead, building friendships and connecting with other young musicians.

"I try really hard not to put the focus on winning. That's not the spirit of what choir is about, and it's definitely not what the Saskatoon Children's Choir is about. We aim for kindness, humility and making connections with other choirs from around the world. That was more important than winning," she said.

She acknowledged the competition was particularly challenging because the choir's age group placed them in the treble choir category alongside university ensembles, professionals, and other highly accomplished groups, making the win more special.

The tour involved 44 travellers in total, including 34 choristers and 10 adults made up of musical staff and chaperones. Families also travelled independently to Austria to cheer on the singers, while the choir's parent committee organized fundraising events throughout the year to help offset travel costs.

Agnew said that beyond competing in the international festival, it allowed the choir to develop friendships with ensembles from across the globe, many of which have already extended invitations for future collaborations and exchanges.

"We were able to connect with choirs from around the world, and many of them have already said, 'Would you like to come and join us in two years or four years?' That's really what matters more. We'll find a new venue and a new country to take our kids to explore," she added.

The Vienna trip marked only the second time the choir participated in the Summa Cum Laude festival, with its previous appearance taking place over 20 years ago. The organization traditionally undertakes an international tour every two years, although those plans were interrupted by the pandemic.

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