

SUMMA CUM LAUDE

COMPETING AND CELEBRATING IN VIENNA

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A FRIDAY AFTERNOON IN JULY, THE CITY ACCUMULATES THE SUMMER WARMTH, TOURISTS STROLL LEISURELY THROUGH THE CITY CENTRE OR RELAX COMFORTABLY IN ONE OF THE NUMEROUS CAFES AND RECOVER FROM A MUSEUM VISIT. IN FRONT OF ST. STEPHEN'S CATHEDRAL, THE VIENNESE LANDMARK, MORE AND MORE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE GATHERING, WEARING TEAM COLOURS, SCHOOL UNIFORMS, OR FESTIVE OUTFITS. THE VIBE IS CHEERFUL, RELAXED AND YET EXCITED.

The young people from Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, Israel, Denmark, Spain, the USA and Canada to name but a few of their countries. In total 14 countries are represented this year at the 11th annual Summa Cum Laude Youth Music Festival, which is about to be opened with a festive celebration in St. Stephen's Cathedral. Following a short official welcome and introduction the almost 2000 participants will enchant Vienna with their music. Over the next five days, the students will walk in the footsteps of famous composers and musicians, and experience Vienna's atmosphere. The music of the students will ring out over the city from the very places where music history was made.

Rachel, 16, is visiting Vienna for the first time. Her choir the "Johnston Heights Secondary School Choir" from Canada has participated in the festival in the past. The choir was founded in 2008 at her school, in which music plays a major role. Rachel is a bit nervous, she will introduce her choir at the opening celebration. She knows the next five days will be very busy but for now she is focusing on tomorrow's competition in the Musikverein,

where her choir will sing, and of course they want to win.

"From the start of the festival the idea of competing was a central part of the festival," explains Jürgen Partaj, "hence the name Summa Cum Laude - referring to an academic grade for the highest achievement." Partaj is the artistic director and one of the founding members of the festival, and together with artistic advisors such as Grammy award winner Erwin Ortner, Ronald Smart and Georg Mark, he has shaped the artistic design of the festival. Festival logistics, such as touring and accommodation, are handled by the director of Concerts-Austria, Christian Bender.

The event extends over five days. Some of the highlights include the competition in the world-famous Musikverein, the workshops at Vienna's University of Music and last but not least the Gala Winner's Concert in the Konzerthaus. The Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival offers the rare opportunity to participate as a choir, an orchestra or a band. On the one hand, this is a musical enrichment for the festival, on the other, it allows schools and universities from far away to combine ensembles and give more students the opportunity to attend this unforgettable event.



The Gala Winner's Concert in the 'Wiener Konzerthaus' © H. Manzano



Participating choirs of the Wiener Konzerthaus
© G. Weinkirn

While Vienna still seems to be sleeping on Saturday morning, the Musikverein is bustling with life. Bus after bus arrives and young people flood into the halls of one of the world's most famous classical music stages. The Canadian choir has also arrived and is preparing for its decisive performance. The tension among the participants is clear. With focused attention, celli are unpacked, violins and harps tuned, the smooth running of the trombone slide checked, and, of course, vocal exercises undertaken. The conductors of the aspiring ensembles are pacing and reading music scores.

Rachel told her grandmother in Canada that she was going to sing at the Musikverein, and in preparation they had watched the famous New Year's concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on video. Rachel is just stepping out of the Golden Hall where she had been listening to the Thai Youth Orchestra. The orchestra had received a special travel permit during the year of mourning for the deceased king of Thailand, in order to present a programme of music written by the king. This music had been played 50 years ago in the Musikverein by the Vienna Philharmonic for the Thai king.

For choirs and orchestras there

are of course different categories in the competition. In the case of the choirs, there is a differentiation by age and another by voice type, resulting in four categories: mixed choirs, treble choirs, male choirs and children's choirs. An international jury, which is carefully selected for the festival, watches over the competition.

"The compulsory pieces are often selected with a focus on the Viennese classics as well as contemporary Austrian music,"

illustrates Partaj. "The long and productive history of music production in Vienna is impressive and has of course an influence on the festival." Commissioned pieces are also frequently written for the festival both on behalf of the organizers as well as the ensembles.

Since contemporary Austrian music is regularly chosen for the compulsory pieces, the ensembles inevitably dive into the Austrian musical culture; conversely, the ensembles have to present a piece from their home country. Thus the festival contributes to musical diversity and offers the participants a delightful insight into the repertoire of the other ensembles. This desire for musical diversity and intercultural exchange also shapes the remaining elements of the festival. "From the start, we emphasized the possibility of intercultural exchanges within the workshop concept, so that the ensembles could learn together and from each other. Therefore each choir has two workshops, one together with another international choir and a second individual workshop with a thematic focus,"



Israeli Choir Efroni at the MuTh, the famous venue of the Vienna Boys Choir © G. Weinkirn

describes Partaj. “We are really keen on the educational part of the festival, the opportunity to learn from each other and not just get a certificate.”

Over the years the festival has grown constantly and the workshop days of the festival bring Vienna’s University of Music to life – and no one could tell it is semester break. Music can be heard from the halls; students play in the courtyard or eat lunch in a huge tent.

“We found the festival online and thought it would be fun. The fact that it is in Vienna, in the heart of Europe, got the students really excited. And the workshops with the adjudicators are incredible and a really emotional experience,” reports Geoffrey Grogan, conductor of the New Jersey Youth Symphony, while he is having lunch with his orchestra. The sweat from the workshop is still visible on his face. The summer heat does not spare the University of Music.

“We are proud of the fact that the festival has created lasting friendships and cooperation between ensembles,” says the artistic director. “Over the years, the festival has repeatedly managed to build musical bridges, which are difficult to build in everyday life. There has been the encounter between a North American and an Iraqi orchestra or the joint concert of an Israeli and a Palestinian ensemble. Over the course of 11 festivals, more than 13,000 participants from 43 countries have performed in Vienna.”

With a happy smile on his face, Partaj also claims that the fact that the ensembles return is a compliment albeit unsaid. Only last year an Australian conductor participated with her ensemble after she had attended as a student several years earlier. Likewise Alan J. Holmes, conductor of the Johnston Heights Secondary School Choir, reports, “We had such a good time last time and our students really enjoyed it so much, we had to come back. You know it might be considered similar to North America but it is also different in so many ways. The differences in choirs, performers and countries is so nice to experience. And singing in the Golden Hall was really a highlight for us.”

It is midday on Tuesday, the preparations for the Gala Winner’s Concert in the Konzerthaus are in full swing. The winners of the competition, including the Johnston Heights Secondary School Choir, will perform in the sold out

venue - a logistical challenge that in the end will be rewarded with the radiant faces of the participants. A total of 14 ensembles will stage selected pieces from all over the world. After a successful evening, the participants of the Summa Cum Laude Youth Music Festival will be on their way to Vienna’s city hall for the farewell party.

After the diplomas and certificates have been handed out, the DJ turns the music on and the last remnants of tension from the competition and performance are gone. In the midst of the neo-gothic architecture, between snacks and savouries, the participants celebrate their achievements, new friends, music and the memories they will take home.

Rachel dances with her friends from the Johnston Heights Secondary School Choir in the historic City Hall. Tomorrow they will travel to Prague for the official extension of the festival. Others take off to Budapest, Salzburg or Munich for their tour, but all take a little bit of Vienna’s magic with them.

Edited by Mirella Dina Biagi, UK/ Italy



In the Vienna City Hall where the conductors received the diplomas and participants
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