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VIENNA BOYS CHOIR

Biography

Boys have been singing at the court in Vienna since the 14th century. In 1498, more than half a millennium ago, Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I moved his court and his court musicians to Vienna. Historians have settled on 1498 as the foundation date of the Vienna Chapel Imperial (Hofmusikkapelle) and in consequence, the Vienna Boys Choir. Until 1918, the choir sang exclusively for the imperial court, at mass, concerts and private functions, and on state occasions.

Musicians like Heinrich Isaac, Philippe de Monte, Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, Johann Joseph Fux, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Antonio Caldara, Antonio Salieri, Christoph Willibald Gluck, and Anton Bruckner worked with the choir. Composers Jacobus Gallus, and Franz Schubert were themselves choristers. Brothers Joseph Haydn and Michael Haydn were members of the choir of St. Stephen's Cathedral and frequently sang with the imperial boys choir.

In 1918, after the breakdown of the Habsburg Empire, the Austrian government took over the court opera, its orchestra and the adult singers, but not the choir. Josef Schnitt, who became Dean of the Imperial Chapel in 1921, turned the Vienna Boys Choir into a private institution. The former court choir boys became the Wiener Sängerknaben (Vienna Boys Choir); the imperial uniform was replaced by the sailor suit, then the height of Boys fashion. There was not enough money to pay for the Boys upkeep, and the choir started to give concerts outside of the chapel in 1926, performing motets, secular works, and at the boys request – children's operas. The impact was amazing. Within a year, the choir had performed in Berlin (where Erich Kleiber conducted them), Prague, and Zurich. Athens and Riga (1928) followed, then Spain, France, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (1929), the United States (1932), Australia (1934), and South America (1936). Since 1926, the choir has clocked up more than 1000 tours in 100 different countries.

Present

Today, there are 100 choristers from 31 nations between the ages of ten and fourteen, divided into four touring choirs. Between them, the four choirs give around 300 concerts and performances each year in front of almost half a million people. Each group spends nine to eleven weeks of the school year on tour. They visit virtually all European countries, and they are frequent guests in Asia, Australia, and the Americas.

The Vienna Boys Choir has a close association with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Together with members of the orchestra and the men of the Vienna State Opera Chorus, the choir maintains the tradition of the imperial musicians: as *Hofmusikkapelle* (Chapel Imperial) they provide the music for the Sunday Mass in Vienna's Imperial Chapel, as they have done since 1498. In 2016, the choir participated for the sixth time in the New Year's Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Mariss Jansons.

Repertoire

The choir's repertoire includes everything from medieval to contemporary and experimental music. Motets and lieder for Boys choir form the core of the touring repertoire, as do the choir's own arrangements of quintessentially Viennese music, waltzes and polkas by Lanner, Lehár, and Strauss.

Both the choir and the Chapel Imperial have a long tradition of commissioning new works, going back to Imperial times, when composers like Mozart, Haydn, or Bruckner wrote for the ensemble. Austrian composers Heinz Kratochwil, Balduin Sulzer, Wolfram Wagner, and Gerald Wirth have written works for

today's boys. Benjamin Britten penned a vaudeville which could be performed on tours, and Australian composer Elena Kats-Chernin wrote her *Land of Sweeping Plains* for them. The Vienna Boys Choir performs major choral and symphonic works, as part of the *Hofmusikkapelle*, and with other orchestras and men's choirs. They are regularly asked to supply soloists for large choral and orchestral works, such as Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*. In recent years, they have performed with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, the London Philharmonic, Staatskapelle Berlin, the Oslo Philharmonic and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Over the last decade, the choir has worked with, among others, Pierre Boulez, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Mariss Jansons, Zubin Mehta, Marc Minkowski, Riccardo Muti, Kent Nagano, Seiji Ozawa, Christian Thielemann, Franz Welser-Möst, and Simone Young. The choir also takes part in opera performances at the Vienna State Opera, the Vienna Volksoper, and the Salzburg Festival. Choristers appear regularly as three boys in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

Children's Operas

The boys love to act, and children's operas are an important part of the repertoire. The choir started performing operas in the 1920s, beginning with classics such as Mozart's *Bastien und Bastienne*, Weber's *Abu Hassan* or Haydn's *Lo Speziale*, later branching out to contemporary works. Benjamin Britten rehearsed his *The Golden Vanity* with the boys, and conducted the world premiere at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1967.

Over the last decade, the choir has produced a number of new operas. Gerald Wirth's *The Journey of the Little Prince* and *The Tablet of Destinies*, an opera based on the Babylonian myth of Anzu, and Raoul Gehringer's *Moby-Dick*, based on the novel by Herman Melville, were all shown at Vienna's Musikverein. Gerald Wirth's *Der Bettelknabe (The begging boy)*, a story set in medieval Palestine and Europe, was first shown in 2010; and again in 2015 and 2016 at the choir's own concert hall, MuTh.

World Music and Cross Over Projects

One of the choir's goals is to introduce the boys to as many different styles of music as possible: since the 1920s, the choir has collected music from around the world. In the past years, the choir has commissioned and produced a number of world music projects, *Silk Road*, *Between Worlds*, *Inspiration*, and *Pirates!*. As Gerald Wirth explains, We do not claim to play 'authentic' world music; instead, we create something from the original sources that is our own. We want to be faithful to the source in the sense that we treat it with respect.

The choir has been recording its music since the 1930s; the boys have appeared on practically every major label. In 2015, the choir signed a long-term partnership with Deutsche Grammophon. The first joint project was a hugely successful Christmas CD.

The Choir on Film: *Silk Road*, *Bridging the Gap*, *Songs for Mary*, and *Good Shepherds*

The choir's *Silk Road* project inspired film director Curt Faudon to make a film about the globetrotting choristers. For over a year, Faudon followed the Boys life in Vienna and on the road, filming the boys at work and at play, on and off stage, meeting and working with artists from Central Asia, China and India. The resulting 90-minute film is a clever blend of documentary, road movie, costume drama and music, with stunning footage from all across the world and an unusual, off-beat soundtrack which has the boys singing in Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, French, Japanese, Latin, Marathi, Maori, Savo Finnish, Tajik, Uyghur, Urdu, Uzbek, and German.

Faudon's second film on the choir had a limited cinema release in 2014; in *Bridging the Gap*, the boys sing with an Apache medicine man, perform with an entire Indian village and ham it up in a Peruvian train. And in New Zealand they are adopted into a Maori tribe, via song. *Songs for Mary* pays homage to the virgin in 21 beautifully filmed pieces. Last year, a new film was released: *Good Shepherds* takes an unusual look at shepherd carols and shepherd music from the Holy Land to the Arctic circle.

The Choir School

The choir maintains its own schools. Almost 400 children and teenagers between the ages of 3 and 18 study and rehearse at Augartenpalais, a baroque palace and former imperial hunting lodge in Vienna. Beginning with kindergarten, run in cooperation with the city of Vienna, boys and girls are provided with an all-round education. At age ten, the most talented boys are selected to join the choir and enter the choir's grammar school. All boys are assigned to one of the touring choirs. Academic lessons are taught in small groups. The school offers extracurricular activities ranging from all kinds of sports to attending a wide range of concerts, operas, plays, musicals and movies. The choristers are also encouraged to create their own projects; some form their own bands, others create short skits or films. All choir boys live in the choir's well-appointed boarding school, with two to three boys sharing a room.

In 2010, the choir launched its new senior high school for boys and girls. The unique curriculum for years 8 to 12 was developed in conjunction with the Universities of Music in Vienna and in Salzburg; it is designed to help young singers find their voice and discover and develop their talents, and to prepare young singers for university and for a career in music.

Most students retain a lifelong commitment to the Arts. Roughly a quarter of the school's alumni go on to become professional musicians, conductors, singers or instrumentalists. Almost all continue to sing. There are two male voice ensembles made up entirely of former choristers, the Chorus Viennensis and the Imperial Chapel's Schola Cantorum, who specializes in Gregorian chant.

Development and Funding

The Vienna Boys Choir is a private, non-for-profit organization, which finances itself largely through concerts, recordings, and royalties. The Ministry of Education and the State's Art Department help fund special projects, such as the production of new children's operas. Further development and projects depend on additional support: the choir is launching a new fundraising campaign in 2016.

The POK Pühringer Privatstiftung, based in Vienna's Palais Coburg is the choir's general sponsor. With its backing, the choir was able to build its own on-campus concert hall to facilitate opera productions in particular. The hall, which was built to include the baroque gatehouse and the old park wall, opened in December of 2012, with a joint gala concert by the Vienna Boys Choir and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Its name, MuTh, stands for "Music and Theatre". MuTh serves the entire community of Vienna with a wide range of acts, and there is special focus on providing a platform for young performers.

Visit us at www.viennaboyschoir.net

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