
Integrated by Music

Integrated by Music – Erasmus and International Students as Members of Charles University Chorus

Who would have guessed, that in a first floor room of a hospital, tucked away only metres behind Karlovo náměstí, beautiful music would be being produced. But that is exactly the case. The room is the Charvátův sál (Charvát Hall) belonging to the campus of the First Faculty of Medicine of Charles University and the music is coming from the Charles University Chorus (Sbor Univerzity Karlovy). Founded in 2001 by the then Rector of the University, Professor Ivan Wilhelm, it has been conducted by Haig Utidjian since its beginning. When I visited the choir during their rehearsal, the singers were hard at work preparing for their upcoming concert in the Prague protestant Saint Salvator church in aid of Sue Ryder Homes. After the concert, I caught up with a few of the international members to see what it's like singing with the choir.

My first question was to find out how much Czech everyone knew. We are, of course, in Prague so it's interesting to know how everyone is getting on linguistically! The majority said that they only know a few words - enough to get by! The exception to this was the American student Emma McCullough (from University of California, at currently a Fulbright Foundation scholar at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University). All of her research that she is doing here is in Czech, and she had even already done some singing in Czech while in America! The more interesting part for her was now being able to sing together with Czech people. Fellow American, Kim Foxen (from Manhattan School of Music, now studying on the ECES programme also at the Faculty of Arts), managed the impressive feat of singing the soprano solo for Jan Ryba's Christmas Mass entirely in Czech (despite knowing very little of the language) for the concert on December 2nd. When I asked her how she managed this, she said "I just sat for 4 or 5 hours and kept on repeating the words over and over again and listening to the recording. I would just try to mimic them and their sounds to get it in my head." But for Enrico Cicuttin (from Università degli Studi di Udine, now an Erasmus student in the Third Faculty of Medicine) who didn't find singing in Czech too difficult, had some other issues with the language: "it's a really strange language; I mean it's not the kind of language I would use to write music because it's full of consonants. They don't have so many vowels so it's a mess when you have to pronounce some things!" But the fun doesn't stop at strings of Czech consonants. Not only have the choir sung in Czech, but also ancient Armenian, Greek, French, and according to the conductor Haig Utidjian, around a dozen different languages since the choir began.

Everyone who I spoke to had a musical background, and all had previously sung before coming to Prague. Despite singing in different choirs, Christian Spinner (from University of Konstanz, Erasmus student in the Faculty of Social Sciences) had never had vocal training. He said: "Usually I play trombone in my home university's symphonic orchestra. But taking this big and loud instrument to Prague seemed a bit extreme to me. So I decided to attend the choir!" Enrico on the other hand, has been singing since he was three, but told me that there aren't really any opportunities to sing at his university in Italy because they have stopped the funding. In that respect, the Charles University Chorus are very lucky. Haig Utidjian told me that they are "extremely fortunate in that the Hlávka Foundation (one of the most prominent Czech educational charities) has been very supportive of our Chorus and Orchestra, and it is thanks to their generosity that we are also able to invite Prof. Jana Jonášová of the National Theatre to give regular master classes and workshops to members of our Chorus."

So with all of the different things going on, I thought it might have been difficult for the choir members to pick a favourite piece that they have sung so far this year. However the resounding answer was Dvořák's Mass in D. Despite being a Czech composer the Mass is in Latin, which, like Vahuri Voolaid (from University of Tartu, currently also an Erasmus student at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Prague) says, is usual for choir singers. It was with this popular piece, that the Charles University Chorus took to the stage in Vienna last weekend in the city's famous St. Stephen's Cathedral. The Vienna trip was something Emma McCullough was especially looking forward to: "I actually studied abroad in Vienna in 2007 for 4 months and I'm really excited to get the chance to go back because it's just a great city to be in at Christmas time. Also, the St. Stephen's Cathedral is by far the most important church in the country so that's really exciting too." In relation to all of the concerts, Emma also mentioned that the Charles University Chorus performs a lot more frequently than her choir at home; "the group I sing in at home is mostly music majors, much more selective, at least half grad students whereas the group here is mostly undergraduates. I think most of them only have a recreational musical background (as opposed to studying it as a major), so it's very impressive to me that we do so many concerts." Being a multinational choir also brings of course the benefits of getting to know many different people. Everyone I asked mentioned how the Czechs are very friendly and welcoming. But the benefits aren't just for the students... At the

rehearsal, I noticed that Haig Utidjian would speak half in Czech and half in English, but every now and then a word of French or Italian would creep in. He himself said that he thinks it does “help make our members feel welcome - or at the very least, it amuses them, I think! But one must be careful lest a Tower of Babel results - e.g. when one absent-mindedly speaks Greek to a Czech person, or forgets who is German and who is Czech, etc. - sometimes it can get a bit confusing, when I lose track of what language I am currently speaking, or end up making a multi-lingual pronouncement of the sort “Vážení, we shall now go to an excellent hospoda” - but which, somehow, everyone understands without fail!” *Hospoda* (pub) I would imagine is one of the first Czech words many foreigners learn (perhaps after *pivo* – beer) and both Christian and Enrico mentioned the trips to the pub as being great opportunities for getting to know the other members of the choir. And would my interviewees recommend joining the Charles University Chorus to other international students? A resounding yes. Vahuri emphasised that “some of the best friends I’ve made so far are from the choir” whereas Kim answered most enthusiastically here: “Oh my god yes! Singing yesterday (at the Saint Salvator concert) was one of the best experiences I’ve had abroad. It was so surreal to be standing next to professional opera singers - it was really breath taking and I’m so glad that I joined this choir. I would recommend it to everyone”.

If you want to see the choir in action, their next concert will be 19th December along with the Charles University Orchestra in the catholic Saint Salvator / Svatý Salvátor on Křížovnické Square near Charles Bridge at 7.30 pm. Haig Utidjian reiterated that “the event tends to attract large crowds each year, so early arrival is strongly recommended - as is warm clothing!” They will be performing the Jan Jakub Ryba Christmas Pastoral Mass (I would highly recommend it, having already been very impressed by it at the December 2nd concert) as well as some movements from Komitas’ Armenian Liturgy. Admission is free, but as a special charity is chosen each year by the chaplain, people are encouraged to make a donation as they see fit.

My final question was if there are any bad bits about the choir? It would seem, only one thing: saying goodbye to the Erasmus students at the end of their stay!

I am very grateful to all of the international students I spoke to, and the conductor Haig Utidjian for letting me interview them. It was exciting to find out about another activity on offer here at the Charles University. At the rehearsal I could clearly see how friendly all of the choir members were towards each other, and I think that this camaraderie really helps the group gel. This is then reflected in their togetherness at concerts and I believe you can hear the smiling in their voices!