

AMERICA CANTAT

A HISTORY IN BRIEF

BY OSCAR ESCALADA

Editor's Note: The America Cantat Organization in conjunction with the American Choral Directors Association will host America Cantat 8 August 21-31, 2016, in Nassau, Bahamas, at the Atlantis Resort of the Paradise Island. This will be the first time that the festival will be held in a non-Latin language country. The following article is a brief overview of the history of America Cantat. At the end you will find a preview of the events and workshops that will take place during the 2016 Festival.

The America Cantat Festivals were founded in Argentina in 1992 by Ricardo Denegri, Emilio Morales, Maria Susana Colombo, Luis Clemente, and Oscar Escalada to celebrate 500 years since October 12, 1492—the day Christopher Columbus arrived on the island that he named San Salvador, which today belongs to the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. The idea for the America Cantat Festivals was borrowed from our sister festival, Europa Cantat. In 1988, Emilio Morales participated in the festival in Pécs, Hungary, and when he came back he called us very excited, saying, “Hey, why don’t we do something like this here?”

America Cantat 1 was held in October 1992 in Mar del Plata, a beautiful city by the Atlantic Ocean in the Province of Buenos Aires. It was produced by the Sociedad de los Encuentros Corales. I remember that we had the pleasure



Photo 1. Oscar Escalada and Ricardo Denegri, founders of the America Cantat Festivals in 1992.

to meet the president of IFCM, Royce Saltzman; then executive director of ACDA, Gene Brooks; and Walter Collins, president of ACDA. Many other national and international renowned conductors were in attendance. International con-

ductors were invited to lead concerts, including Carlos Alberto Pinto Fonseca from Brazil, Alice Parker from the United States, and Eric Ericson from Sweden, who brought his marvelous Eric Ericson Chamber Choir. The gala concerts were held at the Auditorium of Mar del Plata. The hall was designed as one floor, which allowed us to seat all the choirs spread out along the balconies. Each choir sang one song as an introduction. The closing gala with the mass choir was conducted by Alice Parker and performed on the stairs of the Cathedral of Mar del Plata. (Photo 2)

The Latin American audience is very expressive; if they like the performance, they will demonstrate it to the artist with shouts, whispers, and sometimes by singing, “No se va, el coro no se va, el coro no se va, el coro no se va.” (They



Photo 2. Closing gala of America Cantat 1.

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don't leave, the choir will not leave, the choir will not leave, the choir will not leave.) I remember that this happened at the end of the Eric Ericson Chamber Choir's performance; Eric was astonished and couldn't believe such an explosion and excitement was going on. He told us later that he had never seen such an emotional way of expressing the audience's acceptance of the choir. When the choir left the stage, the audience gave a standing ovation and continued with their song, wanting the choir to come back and continue singing. The choir sang six more pieces, and people still continued with an enormous excitement. That was an unforgettable first experience.

America Cantat 2 was held in 1996, also in Mar del Plata. It was produced by the Argentine Association for Choral Music "America Cantat" (AAMCANT) using the same venues that had been used four years before but adding the central hall of the Grand Hotel Provincial of Mar del Plata, where the people could enjoy great choirs performing



Photo 3. Alberto Grau, Jose Antonio Abreu, and María Guinand.

early in the afternoon. For that occasion, we invited the Schola Cantorum de Caracas conducted by María Guinand and the Cuban group Exaudi conducted by María Felicia Perez. Great Argentine choirs were also invited such as the Estudio Coral de Buenos Aires conducted

by Carlos López Puccio, the Coro Universitario de Mendoza conducted by Felipe Valesi, and the Coral Femenino de San Justo conducted by Roberto Saccente. Erkki Pohjola came from Finland, and although he was not able to bring his Tapiola Children's Choir, he conducted the workshops for children choirs' conductors. I brought my Children's Choir of the Teatro Argentino, the Opera House of the Province of Buenos Aires, to participate as the "pilot choir." Other clinicians were Lynn Whitten, Jerry McCoy, and Robert Ray from the United States; María Felicia Pérez from Cuba; Elsa Lakschevitz from Brazil; Alberto Grau, María Guinand, and Oscar Galian from Venezuela; and Alberto Balzanelli, Felipe Valesi, Roberto Saccente, Luis María Serra, Damián Sánchez, Hugo de la Vega, and Néstor Andrenacci from Argentina. (Photo 3)

America Cantat 3 was held in Caracas, Venezuela, during Easter 2000. The festival was produced by Schola Cantorum de Caracas with María and Alberto leading it. It was the first time that we used a big theatre like the Teresa



Photo 4. A performance during America Cantat 3.

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Photo 5. The Arts Center housed workshops for America Cantat 4.

Carreño, and it was a fantastic and modern hall with many other smaller halls where the workshops were scheduled. (Photo 4)

I cannot forget the day we heard the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, the main orchestra of the Sistema de Orquestas Juveniles de Venezuela founded by José Antonio Abreu in 1978. After introducing the orchestra, a young man was invited to conduct the orchestra. He was just a boy of sixteen or seventeen years old. When he began directing, the audience was puzzled that such a young boy was charged with leading the orchestra. He conducted the Malambo by Alberto Ginastera, and gradually we were overwhelmed with his extraordinary musicality and precision—and he was conducting by memory! This young man was Gustavo Dudamel, who later became one of the most important contemporary conductors in the world.

Erkki Pohola introduced Songbridge, a great project of his that included original music composed by local composers in conjunction with the local children's choirs. The show was very touching because the conductors wrote their pieces with the participation of the audience. The Des Moines Children's Choir (United States), Coro de Niños y Jóvenes Ars Nova de Salta (Argentina), and Pequeños Cantores de al Schola (Venezuela) were part of the Song-



Digna Guerra with Oscar Escalada and Roberto Valera at America Cantat 5.

bridge at America Cantat 3.

America Cantat 4 was held in Mexico D.F. during Easter 2004 in the Arts Center of Conaculta. The festival was produced by Gerardo Rabago Palafox. Mexico has beautiful churches all over the city, and the organizers used many of them for concerts. The workshops were spread out in the Arts Center (Photo 5), and at lunch and dinner everybody met together under a big tent where they could make new friends and share experiences.

A historic moment for the America Cantat was when representatives of Argentina (Ricardo Denegri and Oscar Escalada), Venezuela (María Guinand and Alberto Grau), Mexico (Gerardo Rabago Palafox), and Cuba (Digna Guerra) signed "The Declaration of Mexico" with witnesses from IFCM (Jean-Claude Wilkens and Dolf Rabus). This was the first document where these countries agreed to work together with the aim of making it possible for other American countries to host the America Cantat Festival every three years. Thus, the Organización America Cantat, OAC

(America Cantat Organization, ACO) was formed.

America Cantat 5 was held in Havana, Cuba, during Easter 2007 and was produced by the Music Cuban Institute (Instituto Cubano de la Música) at the Palacio de Convenciones, a huge building where the People's Assembly takes place. Cuban choirs such as Exaudi, conducted by María Felicia Perez; the National Choir of Cuba, conducted by Digna Guerra; Schola Cantorum Coralina, conducted by Alina Orraca; and the Chamber Choir of Matanzas, conducted by José Antonio Méndez,



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gave the welcome, singing works by Cuban composers Roberto Valera and Guido Lopez Gavilan. The closing gala was held at the Teatro Karl Marx, and the Swedish choir Amanda and the Cuban group Vocal Sampling gave outstanding performances. The 4,000-seat hall was completely full.

Some of the outstanding conductors invited to lead the workshops were Electo Silva and Sonia McCormack from Cuba; Doreen Rao from Canada; Victor Alarcón from Chile; André Pires from Brazil; Robert Sund from Sweden; and Nestor Zadoff, Ricardo Barrera, and Dante Andreo from Argentina. The Songbridge was also included, but unfortunately it was without Erkki, who passed away some time before. An outstanding concert was presented at the Amadeo Roldan Theatre featuring Chucho Valdés and Omara Portuondo, a famous Cuban pianist and singer.

America Cantat 6 was held in Juiz de Fora, Brazil, during Easter 2010. It was produced by the University of Juiz de Fora, and Lazare Edwue me traveled from Africa to work on African music as part of a clinic. Great conductors such as Roberto Fabri, Sergio Sanção, Lincoln Andrade, and Pablo Trindade Roballo from Brazil; Horacio Corral from Argentina; and Marco Ugalde from Mexico were invited to lead the workshops. Brazilian conductor Samuel Kerr was leading the Common Singing workshop with a fantastic spirit of integration of the countries involved in the festival. He asked each foreign participant to sing some popular songs from his or her country, and with that he made a great composition. After this festival, the OAC decided officially that the Argentine Association for Choral Music "America Cantat" was going to take care of the organization of the festivals. It was at that time that I became president.

America Cantat 7 was held in Bogotá,



Leaders receive recognition at America Cantat 7.

Colombia, during Easter 2013. The festival was produced by the Corporación Coral de Colombia at the Cosmos 100 Hotel. The Swingle Singers from England, the Philippine Madrigal Singers from Philippines, Entrevoces from Cuba, and Witloof Bay from Belgium were invited. Some of the great invited clinicians were: Mark Anthony Carpio from the Philippines; Digna Guerra from Cuba; Hiran Monteiro from Brazil; Bob Harris from the United States; Ricardo Portillo and Silvana Valesi from Argentina; Elise Bradley from Canada (Photo 6); Luimar Arizmendi from Venezuela; Jorge Córdoba from Mexico; and Julian Gomez, Alejandro Zuleta, and Jorge A. Salazar from Colombia. We had also started an exchange program of clinicians and choirs with Europa Cantat, and we had the pleasure to receive Josep Vila from Spain.

AMERICA CANTAT 8

The America Cantat Organization is looking forward to hosting America Cantat 8 in Nassau, Bahamas. Following are some of the events and workshops that will be available. Please join us in 2016 for America Cantat 8 as we continue this tradition of uniting the Americas in song.

WORKSHOPS

Workshops are sites where choirs, individuals, conductors, teachers, students, and amateurs can sing repertoire that they chose when they sent in their application. Attendees will sit next to an unknown person who may speak Spanish, English, French, German, or Portuguese, and everyone will sing together. You will not only sing, but you will make friends. Everything is centralized, and the workshop venues will only be a short distance from the hotels. There are several types of workshops:



Photo 6. Workshop for children's choirs by Elise Bradley at the America Cantat 7.

1) STUDYING CHORAL WORKSHOPS

The studying choral workshops will be led by outstanding conductors who specialize in issues of their own countries. For America Cantat 8, there will be workshops from Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Colombia, the United States, and the Bahamas. Europa Cantat will send some representatives from Europe. If you are a singer, you will spend wonderful days learning new repertoire from American Countries; if you are a conductor, you will send your choirs home with new expectations and new music for your concerts. At the end of the festival, you will perform in a special concert for workshops, sharing what you have learned in your own workshop.

2) ONE-DAY WORKSHOPS

These are sessions of varied repertoire in order to let you familiarize yourself with a wide range of styles from tango to jazz to joropo to Cuban son to bossa nova.

3) CONDUCTOR WORKSHOPS

The conductors workshops will be led by great professors in choral conducting. You will be able to attend the workshop as an active participant or a listener. Either way, you will acquire techniques of conducting and style that will surely benefit your choirs back home.

4) CHILDREN'S CHOIR WORKSHOPS

One of the most important goals of America Cantat is to increase the number of children singing. For that there will be several children's choir workshops.

5) MUSIC TEACHER WORKSHOPS

These workshops will be focused on school music and school choirs. If you are a teacher, you will not want to miss these workshops, where you will learn techniques for all levels of children's choirs.

6) VISITING WORKSHOPS

If you are a conductor, you will be able to participate in this workshop, which will allow you to visit all the workshops offered in the America Cantat each day of the festival.

7) COMMON SINGING

Each morning, everyone will participate in a forty-five-minute workshop that involves sight-reading easy and fun repertoire so you can start the day with joy while warming up your voice.

TOURISM

The design of the festival will allow you time during the week to go to the beach, swimming pool, or shopping after the workshops. In addition, you will have a full free day in the middle of the week. Tours will be offered at special prices for attendees of America Cantat 8, or you can choose to spend the whole day at the beach enjoying the white sand, the sun, the palm trees, and the transparent water of the Bahamian sea.

HOTELS AND MEALS

The site where America Cantat 8 will be held is the Atlantis Resort at the Paradise Island. Everything you need will be there, and you will be able to choose rooms according to your budget, as there will be prices for "every pocket." There are a great variety of restaurants, so will have plenty of options for you and your group. 