

The International-Olympic Choral Festival A Report from Seoul

by Bradley Ellingboe

In the minds of the ancient Greeks the Olympics were as much an occasion to celebrate culture and the arts as they were an athletic contest. The 1988 Olympiad in Seoul, South Korea, was organized in the same spirit. A month-long celebration preceded the Games and featured arts from around the world. As a part of this, the International Choral Festival was held from August 17-23. Sanctioned by the International Federation for Choral Music and held in the fine, new Seoul Arts Complex, the Festival was a true sharing of choral styles and aesthetics.

Five choirs from across the globe were invited to participate by the Festival's organizing committee, which was chaired by Mr. Yoon Hak-Won, director of the famous Dae Woo Chorale. The choirs were: the Stuttgart Chamber Choir of West Germany; the Elmer Iseler Singers of Canada; the Ars Nova Chorale of Brazil; the Tokyo Ladies Singers; and the Saint Olaf Choir from Northfield, Minnesota. In addition to these groups five Korean choirs (the Dae Woo Chorale, the National Choir of Korea, the Seoul City Choir, the In-chon City Chorus, and the Suwon Civic Chorale) acted as hosts and participated in the Festival's final concert.

The guest choirs each gave a separate concert. These were presented on five consecutive evenings. The various choirs displayed a wide range of choral aesthetics, and it was fascinating to listen, night after night, to the audible results of their different choral goals. In hearing one choir the listener might be struck by an emphasis on rhythm while another group may have brought diction to the forefront. Usually the repertoire chosen reflected these emphases. While it is not intended as a review, this brief report will attempt to highlight some of the particular priorities of each group as perceived by this listener.

The sixty-eight-voice Saint Olaf Choir—the only collegiate group participating—had the honor of opening the Festival. Long known for their attention to blend, balance, and tuning, the choir's performance, under director Kenneth Jennings, reinforced that reputation. In addition, at least two other attributes were on

display, those being elegance of phrasing and a remarkably balanced program that featured the Bach double chorus motet "Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied" (historically a standard part of the choir's repertoire) and music of twentieth-century American composers.

The Ars Nova Chorale of Brazil is headquartered at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. However the thirty-seven members range in age from twenty to sixty. Directed by Carlos Alberto Pinto Fonesca, the listener was struck by a certain zest that can only be described as Latin in flavor. Rhythmic elements were highlighted whereby even the Randall Thompson "Alleluia" was given a dramatic urgency rarely heard in this country. The first half of their program also included works by Lotti, Bruckner, and Verdi, with the second half devoted to Latin American composers.

The Stuttgart Chamber Choir, under the direction of its founder, Frieder Bernius, sang an a cappella program of four large works: the *Cantus Missae* in Eb of Joseph Rheinberger, for double-choir; "As I crossed a bridge of dreams" by Anne Boyd, for twelve-part chorus; Poulenc's "Un soir de neige," for six-part choir; and "Drei Gesänge," opus 42, of Brahms. Within a relatively small dynamic and coloristic range these thirty-four professional singers explored every nuance of balance and phrasing. The repertoire was chosen to display these goals, and, within their boundaries, they excelled.

Canada's Elmer Iseler Singers are also a professional chorus of twenty voices who range in age from twenty to forty. Their program was highly accessible and included several well-known Bach chorales, three Spirituals, and a second half consisting of arrangements and compositions by Canadian composers. Their well-placed, vibrant tone was a particular joy, as was their obvious professionalism coupled with a warm stage presence.

The Tokyo Ladies Singers are a professional group of twenty young women, all of whom are recent University graduates holding degrees in vocal performance. Their director and founder is Mr. Tsugio Maeda who chose a program of Poulenc and Caplet in the first half, followed by a second half of Brahms's "Vier Gesänge für Frauenchor," opus 17, (with two horns and harp) and three popular Japanese numbers. Their close attention to text made all choices of articulation and the way rhythm was handled seem a natural outgrowth of the words.

A grand finale concert closed the Festival. The five Korean choirs and the Korean Philharmonic joined together for a performance of Mozart's *Krönungs Messe*. This was followed by folk-song selections from each of the countries represented. After intermission the Korean choirs and the five guest choirs, along with the orchestra, joined together for the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

And there, a few miles from the Olympic Village, the 500 musicians, assembled from around the world, raised their voices in the triumphant conclusion of Beethoven's masterpiece. When they finished the capacity audience applauded wildly and seldom have the words "Alle menschen werden Brüder" seemed more true. It was a fitting end to a week of sharing skills, ideas, and repertoire among some of the world's best choirs.

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