

Anti-Drug Campaign Sees Lithuanian Boys' Choirs Mushroom



Vytautas Miškinis conducting his Azuoliukas Boys' Choir

the campaign to lead more boys towards singing and away from criminal street-life.

Four Choirs At The Start Line

Four leading boys' choirs from four major cities met in November 2000 at the Lithuanian National Philharmonic and inspired the Choral Union's new initiative, which saw immediate results as in 2001 there were 9 choirs at the festival and 16 in 2002. Seven new boys' choirs were set up in a period of 18 months in both large cities and smaller provincial towns.

The new initiatives met with enthusiasm throughout the country as it became evident that singing can help in the fight against drug abuse and violence among young people, where teenage boys are the largest risk group. Drawing boys into artistic activity adds to their spiritual development and the formation of creative personalities. Singing builds a natural barrier between an easily-vulnerable teenager and the so-called "street influence".

This notion is strongly supported by facts from the history of the Azuoliukas choir. Since 1959, more than 10,000 boys have sung in the choir, while not a single one of them has committed an offence, since living inside the choir broadens views and provides numerous incentives to reach for worthwhile goals in future life. "The combination of the social programme and choral singing is unique and very important. Music and good-will bring more understanding, more self-confidence and more human warmth into the relationships between young people," says Mrs. Alma Adamkiene, Lithuania's First Lady.

The Project Gets International Support

In 2003 the National Committee of UNICEF became one of the major sponsors of the festival, which attracted 40 boys' choirs, more than half of them being less than one year old.

2004 marked a new stage of the festival's development as May was declared Child Protection Month. The project, which involved six local ministries, culminated in a big open-air concert in the square beside the Vilnius Town Hall. About 2,000 boys, representing almost 70 choirs from all over the country, sang before the massive audience which included the President of Lithuania, several ministers and the Mayor of Vilnius. A couple of hours later a second concert was held and the joint choir appeared on stage with the internationally-renowned Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra.

Several festivals, comprising tens of concerts, were held in different places, from prestigious stages to prisons. Their programmes included dozens of different pieces, from Lithuanian folk songs to Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms and John Rutter's Gloria. However, the festivals were not entirely about rehearsals and

concerts. The boys also took part in basketball tournaments. This is natural for Lithuania which could just as well be called "the country of song" as "the country of basketball".

Essential Incentive For Smaller Choirs

The festivals are a very strong stimulus for newly-established boys' choirs. Before 2000, the National Song Festival was virtually the only opportunity for choirs from all over the country to meet, but only once every four years. Obviously, it becomes very difficult to motivate boys to attend rehearsals if the choir has only one really big performance every four years. Some singers miss even this opportunity due to their voices breaking. The new annual festivals brought important motivation for choirs, especially in smaller provincial towns, to work hard in preparing the concert programmes which normally consist of about 15 different pieces.

"Through singing, children get closer to beauty and virtues essential to any human. In addition, they develop personal awareness and responsibility for their future," says Aloyzas Sakalas, the former chairman of the Save the Children Lithuania organisation, who is now a member of the European Parliament. "It is vital to give young people as many opportunities as possible to learn and develop. This will eventually add to the creation of a better society."

Training Seminars For Choir Directors

The Azuoliukas choir extended the festivals with training seminars, the first of which, held in the spring of 2002, brought together almost 100 professional choir conductors and music teachers from all over the country. The discussions covered issues of organisation and vocal training particular to boys' choirs, as well as the prospects of developing boys choirs' in Lithuania.

Several months later, the second seminar was held in the summer camp of the Azuoliukas boys' choir. More than 20 choral directors had a unique opportunity to observe the choir's life from inside, from rehearsals to leisure activities and parties.

I am more than sure that the summer camps are immensely important for the choir. They really help to form a single team from different personalities and add to the boys' individual progress.

First International Project On The Way

The projects aimed at developing boys' choirs in Lithuania will continue with a festival in May 2005 in Panevezys where at least 50 choirs are expected to come together for a programme including Jubilate by Bob Chillcot to be performed with a group of jazz musicians.

In addition, the Lithuanian Choral Union is launching its first international project, the Baltic Amber Pieces, this summer. Three boys' choirs from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia will prepare a joint programme which will feature choral pieces by contemporary composers of the three Baltic countries, and the Requiem by Andrew Lloyd Webber. The concerts will be held in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn with a symphony orchestra.

Rehearsals will take place during the Azuoliukas boys' choir's summer camp. Once again, a group of choral directors and music teachers will be invited to observe the creative process. After the project, a DVD will be released to highlight the key pedagogic aspects of work with boys' choirs.

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