



PLEASURE AND EXCELLENCE

the interaction between professional and amateur choirs

Tenso Professionals Meeting Palau de la Música, Barcelona 4-6 April 2013

report

The title of the 2013 Tenso Professionals Meeting was *pleasure and excellence* in collaborations of amateur and professional singers and choirs. The main question : how do we create effective collaborative projects that are rewarding for all participants, and that yield a result (concert or otherwise) that is still artistically relevant. The presentations of the invited speakers covered very different examples and approaches, and the ensuing discussion wandered in many directions, raised many important issues, and led to the formulation of several goals for Tenso Network and its members in its joint activities with amateur choirs.

All participants actively contributed to the discussion, thanks to the open and inviting setting in the beautiful rehearsal hall of the Orfeó Català in the Palau de la Música. The following is an recapitulation of the topics that were discussed.

The distinction between amateur and professional choirs is not always easy to make. Some top-level amateur choirs are clearly the next generation of professional choirs; children choirs are often the breeding school for the next generation of singers. Several criteria can be given, most of them practical :

- professional choirs consist of trained musicians, amateur choirs not (necessarily);
- amateur choirs practice usually once a week, changing that routine only when concerts approach, a few times per year, whereas professional choirs usually work briefly and intensely on the next upcoming project;
- amateur singers pay for singing in a choir, whereas professional singers are paid for their work;
- amateur choirs can decide not to perform certain repertoire, whereas professional choirs have an obligation (moral or other) to perform the pieces on the programme

For professional choirs, it is important that amateur choirs do not replace them at the concert stage, especially in times when budgets cuts are felt heavily in all cultural fields. At the same time, it is important for all professional music ensembles – and thus also for choirs – to create community projects with amateur musicians in their own ‘backyard’, and thereby involve the amateurs as audience and as stakeholders of their activities - not only out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*.

Collaboration projects should ideally show the difference between amateurs and professionals, highlighting their respective qualities. Another type of collaboration is where (high-level) amateur singers are asked to “fill the ranks” in order to perform repertoire that requires a large choir; also in these cases, the role of the professional singers, coaching and leading the way for the amateur singers, should be emphasized.



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Collaborations - what makes them successful?

Amateur and professional choirs have different qualities and the challenge is to combine these. For amateurs it can be a major experience to share the stage with professional singers. The amateur singers benefit from the experience of their professional counterparts (both in vocal techniques and as performers). The result, for amateurs, is often described as performing at a level that is “one step higher” than usual.

The performance of the professional singers, on the other hand, can be lifted up by the pride and enthusiasm - if not per se perfection - of amateur singers. Also the intense awareness of the amateurs of the meaning of the music and lyrics - resulting from working on the repertoire for an extended period of time - can give an extra dimension.

A valuable collaboration should involve more than stepping down versus reaching up. During the TPM, we looked at various interesting and rewarding examples, varying from individual coaching of professional singers to performing (new) large scale repertoire written for the combination of amateur and professional groups. Several conclusions were tentatively drawn:

- *the music should be the starting point*

Music that is written for the combination of ensembles performing at different levels seem to yield the most interesting results: the feeling of sharing the stage combined with an optimal setting for both the amateurs and the professionals to show their respective qualities

- *manage expectations*

For a valuable result, it is important to closely manage the expectations, of both the professionals and the amateurs. The amateurs want to “jump on the train”; for the professionals, it is important the train does not turn into a slow train that never seems to reach the final destination. Each group should be challenged at its own level. The conductors have a crucial role here.

- *the setting of collaborative projects*

The stage or medium where the project is presented is of the utmost importance ; it should allow for distinction between the choirs; their respective roles should be clear to outsiders. Regular concert stages may not be the best places to present collaborations.

- *good music, whether written for amateurs or not, will reach the professional stage anyway*

Newly commissioned music that is written (well) especially for amateurs will in the long run not only be performed by amateurs. At the same time, it breaks barriers for contemporary music in general. Tenso can have a role here, by (co-)commissioning music for amateur singers, offering the composers coaching and helping them to write music that will actually be performed with pleasure by amateur singers. Interesting music does not have to be necessarily complex and difficult to perform – on the contrary, one could say that it is a great challenge to write really interesting music in a non-complicated idiom.



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PRESENTATIONS & SPEAKERS

Jacinta Wetzer (NL, moderator) studied musicology at Utrecht University. Since 1988, she has been working as a producer and music director for Dutch classical music station Radio 4, with a special focus on choral music. She has participated in numerous festivals including the World Symposium on Choral Music in Rotterdam, Koortiennale Haarlem, and Musica Sacra Maastricht.

Elisenda Carrasco (CAT) described her work as conductor and coach with the *Obra Social* project of the Caixa bank. Since 1995, the *Obra Social* project has played an important role in the musical life of Catalunya, bringing together amateur singers and famous conductors, soloists, ensembles and choirs to perform major orchestral / choral works.

The amateurs are selected (they do not have to be able to read music, but they are expected to prepare before the rehearsals start) and coached during an intensive rehearsal period. The idea of the project is that it should be open to all: it actively outreaches to all layers of society.

Participation turns out to be a major event in the lives of amateur singers.

Coaching works on all aspects: musical and literal comprehension of the performed work, vocal techniques, rhythm, ensemble singing (listening...!)

Merlijn Twaalfhoven (NL) works with large groups of professional and amateur singers. For his *Thousand Voices*, he brought together 40 groups of 25 singers, each one led by one professional singer, a conductor and a producer. He composes music for these groups, based on their own preferences and backgrounds. The total work only comes together in the concert; only then the singers are aware of their role in the whole piece, which makes it an overwhelming experience. The logistics of these projects are a story in itself - working with stopwatches, and keeping strict time is the only way to make sure the music falls into place.

Chris Shurety (UK) is director of Contemporary Music for All. CoMA has commissioned many works for smaller and larger ensembles of very varied line-up and with performers who have no prior musical knowledge whatsoever. Composers of great renown have found it quite difficult to write for these ensembles; but some pieces have been so successful that they have been taken on the repertoire by professional ensembles. For composers, the enthusiasm and commitment of the amateur ensembles has often been a great change from the sometimes rather off-hand attitude of professional musicians. CoMA has not commissioned much choral work yet; it will be a challenge to extend the project to vocal music.

Sylvaine Davené (FR) opened the afternoon session with a short introduction to *Jeux Vocaux*, a method developed by French composer Guy Reibel to get amateur singers to express themselves vocally and eventually compose their own pieces. In coaching sessions, this method has proven to be a good way to open amateur ears to contemporary repertoire and as a mutual starting in collaboration projects, from Mozart operas to complex contemporary music.

Oscar Strasnoy (ARG) has composed several works especially for the combination of amateur and professional singers, where each group has its own clearly defined role. One such project, *Odysee*, was premiered in Paris in October 2012 and was again performed in Marseille in April 2013. For amateurs, these projects bring the desired "sharing the stage" while the professionals give coaching and support to the untrained voices. The clear division of tasks is one of the key success factors. Strasnoy is also a winner of a previous Maurice Ohana competition, writing a (piano) piece for different levels of performers. With hindsight, he felt that this constraint did not



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necessarily produce interesting work; however, it is important for a composer to learn to write for amateur performers.

(The Ohana competition 2013 will award a work for choir written at different levels, to be performed during the Tenso Days Marseille in September 2013.)

Josep Vila i Casañas (CAT) is conductor of both the professional Cor de Cambra del Palau de la Música and the large amateur choir Orfeo Catalá. Once or twice a year the groups share the stage in a large project. Working for both groups has given him much experience in managing expectations, making the most of the limits and advantages of both groups, with different qualities of sounds but also in the practical sense of different rehearsal schedules and approaches. The concert attended by the participants of the TPM was a good example of such a collaboration.

The singers of CCPM take on a mentoring role for the amateur singers; because of the clear division of roles, there is a general feeling of sharing and generosity, not of competition. The pedagogical impact of these projects (for both parties) is huge. The project provides enough challenge for the professional singers to make it worthwhile.

Martí Ferrer (CAT) is board member of the European Choral Association / Europa Cantat, and as conductor involved with many amateur and children choirs. He pointed out that choral music is also a way of storytelling, especially in the oral tradition of the Mediterranean. The link of music and language is important. For amateurs, the text is often a way into understanding the music, and with contemporary music this is even more the case. Amateurs work on a project for a longer period of time and have more opportunity to study the meaning and extratextual aspects of the lyrics.

Projects like *Song Bridge* (developed by Erkki Pohjola) have shown that children choirs can do fantastic work with contemporary music. Residencies of composers (where the composers actually get to work with the choirs they write for) are an enormous bonus for both parties.

Jānis Liepiņš (LV) works as a conductor with the youth choir Kamēr, the breeding ground for professional choral singers in Latvia and abroad. The standards of Kamēr are high: singers are expected to practice, come to rehearsals and to be involved in all aspects of the performances. Kamēr is well known for its adventurous commissioning. By working closely, together with the composers, on meaning and expression of the music the choir enjoys performing even the most abstract and complex new music.

Ramon Humet (CAT) will be composer in residence at the Palau de la Música in 2014, writing for the resident choirs and ensembles. He talked about the importance of residencies : for the composer to get to know the ensembles he writes for, but also to involve audiences who will adopt him as “their composer”.

He has written a cappella choral music for the Escolania de Montserrat, the boys choir of the Montserrat convent; writing for children or amateurs is a particular challenge. The pride of the amateur singers is an important factor for success - to give them material that is challenging, but that can be performed with pride and joy.

Humet advocates for special workshop for composers to write for amateurs - and ideally have that integrated in the curriculum of higher musical education - paying attention to subjects as diverse as notation, breathing / phrasing / fluency and explaining what the music should communicate.

Gregory Rose (UK) is both composer and conductor, and has been working with CoMA groups for many years, performing not only newly commissioned works but also ‘standards’ by Stockhausen, Xenakis, Berio, Cage and others [link to Gregory’s list]. He finds that the amateurs show great and



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sincere enthusiasm for the music that they perform. Like Chris Shurety, he has seen that good music written for amateur players and singers will make their own way to the professional world. It would be very valuable to extend CoMA's grassroots approach (everybody can join, regardless of level) to choral music; on the one hand, this seems an obvious step, on the other hand there will be special challenges - such as finding pitch, listening while singing, etc.

Rose emphasizes that amateur musicians, and especially young ones, are not afraid of contemporary music; it is usually the conductors that are reluctant, not having the expertise to find the right approach to the music and often afraid that the result will not be what was expected.

NKK train tour (NL)

(presentation given by Leo Samama, since Irene Witmer was ill)

In 2012 the Nederlands Kamerkoor celebrated their 75th anniversary with several projects involving close collaboration with amateur choirs. During the season, members of the NKK went out to amateur choirs all over the Netherlands and worked with them. This project culminated in a train tour through the Netherlands, with impromptu concerts in the trains and the halls of train stations performed by the amateur singers backed up by the professionals from the NKK. It was a very positive project, and it was met with great enthusiasm by amateurs. In the publicity, however, it had sometimes undesired effects, such as videos on youtube of amateur singers, labelled as "Nederlands Kamerkoor". It goes to show that it is important to make a clear distinction between the roles of the professionals and amateurs, and monitor the reports (both written and video) that are published for all to see.

OTHER ATTENDANTS

Anna	Becker	Cappella Amsterdam	NL
Tonči	Bilić	Zbor Hrvatske Radiotelevizije	CR
Marc	De Smet	Aquarius	BE
Veerle	Declerck	Mechelen hoort Stemmen	BE
Annemiek	Ebbink	Tenso Network Europe	NL
Babette	Greiner	Tenso Network Europe	NL
Bernhard	Hess	RIAS Kammerchor	DE
Anais	Humez	accentus	FR
Anna	Huuskonen	Helsingin kamarikuoro	FI
Per	Korsfeldt	Eric Ericsons Kammarkör	SE
Thomas	Kyørbye	Ars Nova Copenhagen	DK
Fredrik	Malmberg	Eric Ericsons Kammarkör	SE
Emmy	Meirlaen	Aquarius	BE
Juanjo	Morales	Cor de Cambra del Palau de la Música Catalana	CAT
Ivar	Munk	DR VokalEnsemblet	DK
Leo	Samama	Tenso Network Europe	NL
Egils	Štāls	Latvijas Radio Koris	LV
Sandra	Zandberga	Tenso Europe Chamber Choir	LV

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