

Armenia

Visit of Jean-Claude Wilkens and Sonja Greiner on invitation of the Ministry of Culture at the beginning of April 2009

Purpose and structure of the visit

Tigran Hekekian (conductor and director of the Little Singers of Armenia and Armenian Radio and TV Chamber Choir – which no longer exists - , director of a music school, professor of conducting at the conservatoire, Music Consultant for Europa Cantat and EC contact for Music Association of Armenia) invited Jean-Claude Wilkens and Sonja Greiner to Armenia from April 5th to 8th 2008, with the support of the Ministry of Culture.

The purpose of the visit was to investigate the possibilities of hosting an international event in Armenia, promoting the musical exchange between Armenia and the rest of Europe and the world, helping the Armenian choral world with specific problems they have and getting advice from IFCM and Europa Cantat.

The programme included a one-hour talk with the Minister of Culture, Ms. Hasmik Poghosyan (on a Sunday afternoon!), a meeting with around 20 Armenian conductors and composers (including the president of the Music Association of Armenia and the President of the Composers' Union - which also has the function of "Armenian Music Council" in the European and International Music Council -, a programme on morning-TV (about 25 minutes talking about the importance of choral singing, the effects of singing on the health and social development of singers and the cultural exchange between Armenia and other countries), and a Press-conference in the presence of the Minister of Culture. In addition Tigran Hekekian organized some sight-seeing, had a museum especially opened for us on Sunday and invited us to the Opening Concert of a Penderecki festival in the presence of the composer.

Tigran Hekekian organized the complete stay with the help of his staff and some (former) students. It became very clear that he is a prominent person in Armenia, with excellent connections, well-respected both by the Minister of Culture and by many conductors and composers.

Music education in Armenia

In our talks with Tigran Hekekian and one of his students we tried to understand out how music life is organized in Armenia. We spoke about the existing system of music education and found out that even though the Armenians do not feel very happy about it at the moment since there has been a decrease in the number of choirs and of quality choirs and singers and there seem to be almost no adult amateur choirs, the system of music education as such is not bad. There is a special music department at the pedagogical institute in Jerewan which forms teachers who give "song lessons" in elementary schools, and there are 50 music schools in Armenia (for a country of less than 3 million inhabitants). Theoretically each elementary school should offer "song lessons", though practically many, especially on the countryside, don't, and the contents are not what the conductors would wish for (though joining the Bologna process a new curriculum is currently developed). Also theoretically each music school should have a choir, but many don't. The conservatoire takes about 10-12 conducting students each year, but when they are graduated they have a problem to find a job. The reasons for the problems seem to lie in the difficult economy (a teacher earns around 100 USDollar a month and has to combine 2 or 3 jobs in order to make a living) and the fact that adults therefore have to work very much and do not seem to find the time for amateur arts. Also, the expectations seem to be that music should be professional, singers and conductors should be paid for their work. We felt that the notion of "singing for fun" (for adults) or volunteer work are not very wide-spread in the country.

Possible cooperation for 2009 and 2010 (and possibly longer)

It turned out that the minister and Tigran Hekekian had been discussing plans for a possible international event in 2009 connected to the 140th anniversary of the most famous Armenian conductor Komitas. Their first idea was to organize an international competition and they wanted to ask IFCM and Europa Cantat for support, advice and patronage for the event. We quickly made it clear that both IFCM and Europa Cantat were not very interested in supporting competitions and would probably not give their patronage to it. We then discussed what were the most important elements for our Armenian partners (celebrating the Komitas anniversary with some very good choirs from abroad, spreading Armenian repertoire to other parts of the world, lobbying for more and better choir singing with children in elementary and secondary schools as well as for choirs in music schools, encouraging adults to sing in choirs, making advocacy for the positive effects of singing on the health and social development of singers) and then discussed different ideas and possibilities, coming up with the following suggestion for a 2-year-programme which was presented to the Minister of Culture the following day:

For 2009: Komitas Festival hosting

- 6-8 invited choirs and vocal ensembles of high quality from 5 continents, representing different styles of vocal/choral music plus Armenian choirs (choirs suggested by IFCM + EC plus Armenian partners for local input)
- Congress with lectures and round-tables (mostly IFCM? Input from EC and from Armenia) including a focus on music from the Caucasus region (Armenia but also Georgia etc.)
- General Assembly of IFCM (IFCM)
- Seminar on children's and youth choir pedagogy (2-3 teachers: pedagogical aspects, voice-training aspects and movement, scenic presentation etc. / plus repertoire discovery? / mostly organized by EC) – for Armenian and foreign participants

For 2010: Komitas Festival hosting

- 4 invited groups
- World Youth Choir Summer Session (ICCM – with patrons IFCM, JMI, EC)
- small Europa Cantat Singing Week? (mostly EC plus Armenian partners)

This programme would fulfill all the wishes we had come across during our stay:

- promotion of Armenian music and especially of Komitas in Europe and the world
- promotion of dialogue and exchange between choirs/conductors in Armenia and abroad
- festival under the name of Komitas with high-quality music
- focus on music education, children's and youth choirs and the positive effects of choir singing

Organisation / finances

We indicated a budget of approximately 200.000 to 250.000 € per year for this programme. The Minister seemed to say (and Tigran also indicated this to us) that such a sum would be feasible. The largest part of the budget would come from the Ministry though some additional funding would be needed (sponsoring is difficult in Armenia, but is just starting). The Minister also said that paying a membership fee for the Armenian member association of Europa Cantat and IFCM should not be a problem (could be taken from the budget of the festival) and that she could also support some young conductors or young choral managers travelling to training courses abroad.

The budget would include a fee for an IFCM project manager and a fee for a Europa Cantat project manager (at least in 2009 the Europa Cantat fee would be lower than the IFCM fee since the work load on Europa Cantat would be lower). IFCM would designate a project manager and for Europa Cantat it could be Gábor Móczár from the Europa Cantat Central-Eastern European Centre. The Ministry would set up a legal entity, an “organizing committee” for the Komitas Festival.

Timetable:

The Europa Cantat Board will take a decision at its Board meeting April 10th – 13th in Hungary.

Jean-Claude Wilkens will write a more detailed project description and budget which will be sent to Tigran Hekekian and the Minister in the coming weeks. The budget for 2009 is expected to be decided before June 2009, so an official decision should be possible before the Symposium in Copenhagen in July 2008. (However, it is not clear if it will be decided early enough for us to be able to include the event and the children’s choir conducting seminar in the Europa Cantat brochure with the 2009 programme).

Jean-Claude Wilkens extended an invitation to the Minister of Culture to come to the World Symposium in July 2008, Sonja Greiner extended an invitation for the EUROPA CANTAT Festival in July 2009. In both cases the Minister could present and promote the event in an international setting.

Some more background information

In the meeting with the conductors and composers it turned out that many of them had already heard about IFCM and Europa Cantat, but very few of them had ever participated or even seriously considered participating in one of the events offered by our organizations, mainly because of lack of funds. They were very happy to hear that the Ministry would help some of the young people to be able to attend training programmes abroad. When we touched on the subject of music education, the group became very active and it was clear that this is a “hot topic” for them. For the young composers the main issue was how they could promote their music abroad and how they might find a publisher for their music. Concerning intellectual property rights it seems that even though there is an Armenian copyright association, Armenian composers are currently not receiving their share when their music is performed abroad. The conductors complained that they have a problem finding scores for their choirs in Armenia. Tigran also addressed the issue of how to produce CDs since they do not have a CD-producing company in Armenia. He was given some advice on the average costs of CD production in Western Europe and on legal issues connected to it as well as on the the OpusChoral project.

Finally we discussed the issue of the Music Association of Armenia (former choir organization) which joined Europa Cantat at the beginning of the 90ies (Marcel Corneloup had visited Georgia and had met Tigran Hekekian there). So far they never paid a membership fee (they obviously also never read the bills since Tigran thought the fee was much higher than it actually is – currently they would have to pay 250 EUR per year for Europa Cantat). Tigran Hekekian has always been the official contact for Europa Cantat for this association but it turns out that he has not had official relation with the association or a function in it for many years. He also informed us that the organization has not had a General Assembly or elections since 1989, so that it can currently not be considered to be democratic. The “Little Singers of Armenia” of Tigran are a kind of small, specialized organization since it has a membership of several children’s choirs, paid staff, a building etc, so they could also become a member association, but this would not really solve the problems. In the discussion it was suggested that the Komitas Festival could be used as a starting point for a new association (maybe a conductors’ association or simply a Komitas Festival Association which could also welcome composers and others), attracting and involving the young people and set up in a democratic way. This association could then become a member of Europa Cantat and IFCM to represent Armenia there on the long run.