

CŒURS EN CHŒURS (Hearts in Harmony)
Palais des Congrès of Paris – 6 May 2006

Two principles lay at the basis of a music event that was to take on international importance to a degree even the insiders hadn't anticipated: the first one holds that a handicap should never shield off an individual; and the second principle is best put in the wise words of the founder of the French choral movement, A Cœur Joie: When voices mix together in song, the hearts are ready to understand one another. These principles led to an initiative to unite on the stage in a single concert choirs of handicapped and those of non-handicapped singers, in equal numbers. The idea was the result of an encounter between former French Minister of Labour, Michel Giraud, and the president of the movement of handicapped choirs, Handivoix. Giraud had been a choral director in the A Cœur Joie movement in the 1960s. He called upon the present director of A Cœur Joie, Thierry Thiébaud, for an artistic contribution of the project. Thierry Thiébaud, who immediately said 'Yes', but who had no idea how vast the idea was going to be, met with choirs of the blind, autistic people, persons with multiple handicaps. On the basis of the repertoire they knew, he asked composer Norbert Ott to make vocal and orchestral arrangements - for the 70-piece symphonic orchestra of the universities of Paris generously lent itself to the event, the management of the Palais des Congrès in Paris offered its grand amphitheatre, seating 4,000 people, and a television station immediately jumped to the event.

The large French organizations of the handicapped, a regional A Cœur Joie group, as well as private and public sponsors were all invited to contribute their shares. A presentation of the project on behalf of the European choir federation, Europa Cantat, at the European Music Council meeting in Budapest in 2005 helped to spread the ideology behind the event. Europa Cantat has member organizations in over 30 European countries, and some of these are actively involved in such activities for the handicapped and the non-handicapped. It was obvious that Europa Cantat assumed a European patronage for the idea.

Choral singing, in itself an eminently collective art form, carries humanistic virtues which came to the fore particularly well during the day of the event, May 6th, 2006, in Paris. Manifold rehearsals in separation all combined into one whole ... on the very day of the spectacle itself! Conditions of transport and logistics, connected with the special requirements of such large numbers of handicapped involved in an event, meant that the first 'tutti' could only be realized on the very morning of the concert.

However, 400 musicians were the living proof, during two hours of music in a packed Concert Hall, that choral singing truly means sharing the same sources, that it can help to diminish the distance caused by a handicap and that it can push a person to go beyond his or her restraints. The concert not only presented the result of a musical endeavour, but also showed the phases through which the concept had passed on its way to realization, in particular the work done with the handicapped groups, with video sequences and interviews integrated in the presentation of the musical programme.

Europa Cantat, which had been awarded a grant by the International Music Council for this initiative by one of its member organizations, was well represented at the concert, among others by three representatives of the Norwegian Youth Choir federation, Nobu, who regularly organize events with handicapped persons and who will organize a large-scale such event in Norway in 2008, as one further member of Europa Cantat picking up the baton in a series of events in the coming years.

The concert finished with all the singers, two physically challenged soloists and the orchestra uniting in a performance of « You'll Never Walk Alone », which at the same time underlined everyone's wish to continue this joint expression of voices united, bearer of such intensive joy and true participation, a real factor of one's social inclusion in spite of one's handicap.

Thierry THIÉBAUT
Director À Cœur Joie France
Europa Cantat Board member