

Transcript of Mansfield University Concert Choir Goes Gold - Episode 1

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CHRISTIE MARTIN: Welcome to part one of Mansfield University Concert Choir Goes Gold. In July 2008 public relations director Dennis Miller spoke with Dr. Peggy Dettwiler, director of the Mansfield University Concert Choir. In this episode, Dr. Dettwiler discusses the group's trip, how she chooses the music, and you'll also enjoy a live performance from the world choir games in Austria.

DENNIS MILLER: First of all congratulations.

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Thank you, thank you. It was beyond my wildest dreams.

DENNIS MILLER: What were your wildest dreams?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Well I attended the World Choral Olympics, which we can't call Choral Olympics, which we can't call the Choral Olympics anymore actually. They got a lawsuit from the Olympics, saying you can't use the word 'Olympics.'

DENNIS MILLER: [Laughs]

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: So now everything is World Choir Games. Anyway, I attended the World Choral Olympics the first time they had them. So I went to Lentz, Austria for the whole ten days. They have workshops for directors as they have the Olympics at the same time. I used it to see what's happening and hear choirs from around the world, and go to sessions. At that time, I thought this would be really cool if I could ever bring a choir from Mansfield. When I saw that when it was in Graz, Austria, it was 2008, I thought "We're going to go." So that's where the dream started.

What I really like about these games is that you can go and not even participate as a competitor. You can go and participate and be adjudicated by the jury, and get your comments and not even put yourself in the competition. Their motto is "Singing together brings nations together." And they set up friendship concerts as well as these competition. They set us up to sing in Leibnitz, an area town, where we went on Saturday night after we competed. We sang with a choir from Brooklyn, New York, from South Africa, from Great Britain, and Germany. It was outdoors, and there were thousands of people in the audience. We got to mix with these other choirs. It's such a feeling of acceptance.

DENNIS MILLER: So there really is a kind of international team spirit.

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Yeah, exactly.

DENNIS MILLER: How many members in the choir this year?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Fifty-seven. That's by far the largest. I think our first year we had 39. I wanted to make it possible when I auditioned in the fall, for as many to go as possible, but I didn't have the choir. I didn't just fill in people who didn't qualify. They really all qualified. What was amazing about this year of auditions was that there wasn't a weak section. Sometimes in the audience you have a 40 point score. Sometimes there is a section that has generally lower scores than the other sections. Like Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass. This time we had strong figures in all areas and no really weak singers. I was also able to make it what you call a bottom-heavy choir. The ideal sound is more bass. More alto. Given it the foundation. We were able to do that. And yet we still had wonderful Soprano and Tenor sections as well. When you look at all the factors involved with 57 singers, we had 16 bassists. We had 14 tenors, 14 Altos, and 13 Sopranos, and that's just about ideal. So I knew we were set up to have a great choir. All year, the anticipation built and I wanted to make sure that they all could go.

DENNIS MILLER: How do you actually prepare for something this large? How do you choose the music?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: You know, that's a good question, because in this case there were some parameters. In the mixed youth choir category, we have to choose four pieces, four selections. They have to be within 20 minutes of pure singing time. They wanted one piece not from your own country. I chose Europe, Mendelssohn. They want one piece from your country, that represents your style. I chose "Sooner Will Be Done With the Troubles of the World," a Spiritual. They wanted one piece by a living composer, so I chose Eric Whittaker, and "Sleep" was the title of that. You had one free choice. I chose a fun closer called "El Hambo," which is a Swedish character of a dance.

One of the things that is unique about our choir, one of the signatures recognized in the USA anyway, is they change choral color. So I wanted to have pieces that have a different kind of sound that we could really show that we could adapt to the style. For instance the Mendelssohn wanted more soloistic, full sound. "Sleep" by Whitaker needs a very pure smooth blended sound with minimal vibrato. "Sooner Will Be Done," the Spiritual needs a full dark sound. "El Hambo," the Swedish Dance needed to have a bright, almost nasal sound. In working with the choir through the year in the warm-ups, we focus on changing our color and modifying our mouth position so we can do that. Now in the gospel spiritual category, this was limited to fifteen minutes, and basically you had to do something that was categorized to be gospel or spiritual. Coming from the United States, it's our music. We have to participate in that category, because that's us. The Europeans just absolutely love gospel and spiritual. They are just taking it on, and boy when you sing one, they just love it.

So, choosing that music, I wanted to have a nice variety between slow and fast, you always think about that. I knew that I wanted to do "Born to Die," which is a gospel piece by Len Burnett. It's a six and a half minute piece. So I had to choose the others so that they'd be within that fifteen minute time frame. I ended up choosing a program that was sort of thematic, in terms of Christian religion. We started with "The Word Was God," and it's a prophecy - "In the Beginning, the Word was God..." The second piece was "Mary had a Baby," a beautiful slow, romantic style spiritual about the birth. Third one was "Go Tell It On The Mountain," upbeat, fast, and joyful and it's about the mission. Then the last one "Born to Die" was about Jesus came to Earth, was born, and then died for resurrection of life. It's kind was the Christian story in music.

[Choir Singing]

[Applause]

CHRISTIE MARTIN: That's it for part one, with Dr. Peggy Dettwiler, director of the Mansfield University Concert Choir. In part two, Dr. Dettwiler talks about capturing the gold in Austria, the friends made in Austria, and the bonds of music. For more podcasts on everything from making movies to recording to the New Testament, go to podcast.mansfield.edu.