

For the Stellenbosch University Choir, under the baton of conductor André van der Merwe, 2008 was a dream-year. Not only was the Choir invited to participate in the fifth World Choir Games - the biggest international choir competition - in Graz, Austria, in July, but they were also crowned as champions in the Musica Sacra Category and runners-up in the Gospel and Spiritual Category in the Games. To crown it all, the Choir was named the world's Top Choir in the Musica Sacra (sacred music) Division by Musica Mundi and is currently ranked fourth in the world rankings of Top 1 000 international choirs. The Choir's manager, Lydia Meier, has more to tell.



# Dream-year for SU Choir

In 2007 the Stellenbosch University Choir accepted an invitation to participate in the fifth World Choir Games in Graz. At this point the enormous amount of planning to get the 79 choir members across the seas kicked off. The big stumbling block was money and every choir member had to collect and pay his or her own tour fees. But in the end the whole choir could go the Games, thanks to the generous financial support and donations from parents, the University and other institutions.

More than 440 choirs from 93 countries all over the world participated in this unique celebration of different cultures. Virtuosity was demonstrated in more than 600 performances in 28 categories in front of panels consisting of 75 international adjudicators. In addition more than a thousand concerts were given in and around Graz.

A number of choirs represented South Africa - more proof of the country's strength in international choir music.

André van der Merwe received a further honour when he was invited to serve as an adjudicator in a second part of the competition. The Stellenbosch University Choir was also not the only choir he conducted at the Choir Games. André also trains the Stellenberg Girls' Choir, which also won a first place in the competition.

André entered the Stellenbosch University Choir in three separate categories. In an international competition of this stature choral pieces with a high degree of difficulty have to be chosen. To have any chance at winning a gold medal, a choir's technique, intonation and interpretation must be exceptional.

André compiled the programmes carefully to exhibit all the facets of the Choir and choir members had to learn their music at home in the December holidays already - this tested each choir member's self-discipline to the limit. A lot of extra hours were spent on rehearsals and by the end of May the Stellenbosch University Choir was more than ready for the competition. Apart from performing in the week-long competition, the Choir was also invited to perform in two concerts.

For many choir members, this was their first overseas journey and even their first trip in an airplane! After travelling for almost 24 hours, the Choir reached their destination. They stayed in a youth hostel (for the Maties it was more like a luxury hotel) in a small town named Deutschlandberg outside Graz. This peaceful little town is nestled in the mountains close to the border with Slovenia.

For breakfast the choir members each enjoyed a few of plates of food and even made a sandwich for lunch as well! Where they found room for it all will remain a students' secret. Supper was served in the messehalle (mess hall) in Graz, with all the choirs eating together in the evenings. Meals were served to almost 20 000 choir members within three hours.



The SU Choir at the Prize Winners' concert in Graz

The respective categories were presented in cathedrals and other venues. The hallowed atmosphere of the cathedrals contributed to the success of every performance. For the South Africans the people's love for culture was an unfamiliar experience.

In an emotional moment during the prize-giving ceremony the Stellenbosch University Choir was crowned as champions in the Musica Sacra Category and also as runners-up in the Gospel and Spiritual Category. Furthermore, the Choir won a gold medal in all three of the categories in which it was entered. This, the culmination of many months of hard work,

was the highest praise which most choirs and choirmasters can only dream of. As a quite overwhelmed André van der Merwe put it: "This medal is yours. Wear it proudly and humbly, because to achieve this

with a mixed choir from Africa ... I think, this says it all. This is the Stellenbosch University Choir's greatest achievement, even greater than Bremen". (The Choir's previous participation in the World Choir Games was in Bremen in 2004.)

But each day was not filled by competition performances only. During the Choir's breaks, they could explore Graz. In no time the students learned how to use the trams and buses, and how to read the roadmaps. The biggest discovery however was the summer sales underway in shops.

After the competition the Choir spent two days in Vienna. It was amazing to see how choir members who have never been overseas were able to find their way into the city and back to their hotel in an afternoon, and could also find Strauss's statue and a couple of art museums in Vienna!


During an outing to the large St Stephen's Cathedral in the centre of Vienna, the Choir had the honour of singing two sacred songs in the church before the afternoon mass. Choir members, tourists and churchgoers were all deeply moved by this moment.

From Vienna the Choir flew to Istanbul, Turkey, with its narrow, grimy streets and teeming masses of tourists in the centre of the city. What a culture shock! The temples are almost too large and too ancient to describe. Then there is the Grand Bazaar - the biggest and oldest bazaar in the world, where you can buy anything. Within minutes all the choir members knew and used the word "inderim", which means half-price.

The Turkish bath is something which everyone must experience. It is a public bath (fortunately men and women separate) where you are soaped in, washed and rinsed with buckets of water. The concept of being scrubbed clean gains a new meaning here. There is also the boat trip on the Bosphorus Channel. The Channel separates Asia and Europe and connects the Sea of Marmara with the Black Sea.

### Stellenbosch University Choir world's best

After the Choir's return, its success story had a sequel. Based on its exceptional performance in the competition and on earlier performances, the Choir was crowned as the world's Top Choir in the Musica Sacra (spiritual music) Division by Musica Mundi and placed fourth on the world rankings of Top 1 000 international choirs. This is indeed an amazing achievement.

Yet the question arises whether the students themselves benefited from this international choir competition and also the tour. It is definitely one of the greatest gifts that any student can receive. This tour was invaluable for the group of Stellenbosch University Choir members: the preparation for an international competition; the self-discipline, sacrifices for the sake of a shared goal; experiencing new cultures and faiths; the expansion of their thoughts and horizons; and above all the amazing feeling of victory thanks to dedicated teamwork; all these things will stay with each choir member. They are life lessons which they will use throughout their lives. As a bonus, a strong sense of unity and life-long friendships were formed in the Choir. 

**"This is the Stellenbosch University Choir's greatest achievement, even greater than Bremen"**