

Learning Report of The Hong Kong University Students' Union Choir

This summer, we were very honoured to be a participating choir of the 2nd Leonardo Da Vinci International Choral Festival. We travelled all the way from Hong Kong to Italy to join this wonderful festival to enhance our cultural exposure and raise the choral standard of the Choir.

During our days in Florence, we stayed in a hotel at the historic center of Florence. With the advantageous geographical location, all rehearsal venues and competition venues were within walking distance. Not only did the shortened travelling time allow us to have more time to practise for the competition, but also give us the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of the city by immersing ourselves into the heritage of history.

We attended the Opening Concert in a music centre near our hotel. In the Concert, each participating choir performed the national anthem and an own choice piece. We chose to sing a Chinese piece so other choirs were able to appreciate the Chinese style of music. On the other hand, we were able to appreciate the differences in timbre of songs from different places, and how the culture of the different localities give rise to the amazingly wide variety of music.

Following the Opening Concert, we were honoured to be able to participate in a workshop held by Paul Phoenix, one of the Jury members of the Festival, who is a famous Tenor, the founder of PurpleVocals, and a former tenor of King's Signers. We prepared the piece *I Am Not Yours* for the workshop. Unexpectedly, what he has taught us was not only about the singing techniques or utilization of our voices, but something beyond singing -- to feel the whole choir and sing in one voice, to enjoy the moment as we sing with fellow choristers, and most importantly to hold the spirit to convey the messages behind each piece every time we sing. Looking at how proud the other participating choirs were when they saw our improvements, we were touched by how amazing music can be in connecting people from all around the world. The workshop was indeed an inspirational and an eye-opening experience to every one of us.

Following the workshop was the preliminary round of our competition, the Youth and University Choirs Category. The Choir from Westlake High School, Auckland, New Zealand put up a particular fabulous performance, causing us to fully immerse ourselves into their pieces. They also joined other categories and was selected as a category winner in another category that they applied for, which they totally deserved. We were honoured that the adjudicators liked our performances and chose us as the category winner.

Everyone was thrilled, and we quickly moved onto preparing for our Grand Prix competition. We were able to encounter so many beautiful choral pieces during the Grand Prix competition. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience to be able to listen to 7 other exceptional choirs representing their own countries in live. Their phenomenally high

standards have brought our understanding of choral singing to the next level. In particular, the Grand Prix winner of the competition, the Choir from Westlake High School, impressed everyone. Their voices were so powerful and inviting. Their strength has made us realise and fully understand our weakness of not being able to fully deliver the emotions and messages behind the song, which hinders the presentation of our interpretation of the choral pieces. We also tried our best and felt privileged to be chosen as the second runner-up for the Grand Prix.

The competition ended with an Award Ceremony and a Final Concert with performances from participating choirs. All teams were eager to exchange knowledge and genuine comments with one another as we rehearsed pieces together for the Concert. The fruitfulness of making music together was prioritised over the results. Many of us agreed on the high quality of the music and very much enjoyed the ceremony. We were particularly touched by the final individual performance by the Marylhurst University Chamber Choir. They had so much passion as they delivered their song *Nyon Nyon*, bringing the Concert to an exciting and fruitful end.

Throughout the Festival, we also performed in a number of Evening Concerts with other participating choirs. We performed different repertoires in various historic sites in Florence, sharing the joy of music and different genres of songs with other choirs as well as the general public. We exchanged experiences and comments before and after the performances. We came to understand that choral singing is not simply a sound-making process, but a spectacular means of communication which is meaningful and emotionally contagious.

After the competition, we spent the last few days of our Tour in Rome and some famous sight-seeing spots. We visited Cinque Terre, the UNESCO World Heritage Site that comprises of five old villages including Monterosso al Mare, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore. We also learnt the European medieval art and the architectural complexity in another UNESCO World Heritage Site, Piazza dei Miracoli. We visited the smallest country in the world, the Vatican City, appreciated the artworks inside the St. Peters' Basilica, and were amazed by the great architecture work designed by Michelozzo. We also had opportunities to taste the Italian ice-cream Gelato and combat the summer heat.

The 10-day tour was short, but educational. It enriched our knowledge outside of our own degree specialties. This journey of music makes us realise a much bigger world out there, waiting for our further exploration. The more we get to know about music, history and art, the more we know how limited our knowledge is, relighting our collective passion towards music. The memories that we shared in the tour, the warm hospitality that we received, the wonderful experiences we have had in Italy will forever be in the hearts of all choristers.