

Vienna Boys Choir boss on girls choir plan claims

By Thomas Hochwarter

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- **Director speaks out on Augarten building controversy.**

Vienna. Wiener Schnitzel, skiing, Mozart - and the Vienna Boys Choir. The capital's institution fits perfectly in this list of Austrian "trademarks". Founded more than 500 years ago, the choir is today one of the country's most reliable marketing warhorses.

Gerald Wirth, the Vienna Boys Choir's creative director, spoke to News on Austria about the ongoing building controversy at the Augarten park and recruiting trouble rumours which allegedly made bosses consider accepting girls in the near future.

It has been reported that the Vienna Boys Choir could soon change its priorities and open up to girls. But Gerald Wirth - who was a member of the famous choir himself - said interest in joining the choir among boys was still strong enough not to warrant such a move. "There are many boys interested in becoming a member of our four touring choirs, so we can still send those away who do not match criteria in test phases. Many simply have little experience in the artistic area. This is also because there is less music-making and singing going on in families these days."

What few people know is that girls have been taught at the institution's primary school since 1998. But despite this change of principles, Wirth is convinced the Vienna Boys Choir will never become mixed.

"The decision to educate boys and girls together made sense from a co-educative point of view," the father of six explained, adding: "We regarded this as a natural process and a good thing. But the girls will never join our touring choirs. One reason is that most of our repertoire is meant to be performed by boys' voices. Another one is that most pre-adolescent boys prefer to stay among themselves. They want to play football and get rid of their energy. This is one of the reasons many mixed choirs in Vienna eventually become girls choirs."

A little known aspect of the choir's activities are its many projects with schools, many of them focusing on campaigning for better integration of foreigners.

"I think we have a lot of responsibility in our double function as an education and cultural institution," Wirth said, adding: "We are not a isolated island of high culture but carry out many projects trying to encourage and promote integration and language learning."

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These projects, as well as choir performances, will soon have a new venue with a concert hall due to be opened in 2011. But the project has been hit by controversy since the choir got the go ahead from authorities to build it on a 1,000-square-metre site in the Augarten. There have been claims that hundreds of trees will have to be cut down though and the Vienna Greens have teamed up with environmental activists and a committee of residents to campaign against the construction. Only a few weeks ago, protesters were evicted by a private security firm after occupying the site for months. Green politicians are to launch legal action while campaigners have pledged they will not give up their fight.

Wirth, 44, said: "I have to say I think these groups tried to deliberately spread wrong information. What few people know is that these 1,000 square metres were declared a construction site ten or 15 years ago and that the site has been used as a parking lot since then."

Wirth became the choir's creative director eight years ago after returning from an assignment in Calgary, Canada and is responsible for various administrative aspects but also for contents of the boys' musical education. An important part of his tasks is arranging the touring schedule for the four choirs of 25 boys each.

"I determine the number of journeys and concerts. It is a great responsibility as I have to consider off-days and keep in mind how many performances are reasonable," the 44-year-old said. Speaking about fears the boys could be worn out by their intensive touring which takes them all around the globe, he said: "The boys always look forward to going on tour. They enjoy the experience and representing Austria."

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Printausgabe vom 14.11.2009



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The Sound of Music, with a score by Richard Rodgers and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, opened on Broadway at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre. Mary Martin starred as Maria, and Theodore Bikel played the role of Captain Georg von Trapp. The Tony Award-winning production ran for 1,443 performances. Productions in London, Japan, and Australia followed, as did the phenomenally successful 1965 film, starring Julie Andrews. What are some of the differences between the stage and screen versions? [More...](#) [Discuss](#)

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