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Vienna Boys Choir boss on PSP-mad boys and the boarding school 'problem'

By Thomas Hochwarter

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

As much as most Austrians are proud of their country's cultural heritage, institutions like the Spanish Riding School or the Vienna Boys Choir are criticised for what many regard as conservative and rigid structures.

Speaking to Gerald Wirth, creative director of the Vienna Boys Choir, the Austrian Times discovered who the boys of the choir really are – a bunch of PSP-playing, football-mad teenagers.



Wirth also spoke about the ongoing building controversy at the Augarten park – and recruiting trouble rumours which allegedly made bosses consider accepting girls in the near future.

There have been increasing reports that the Vienna Boys Choir – which also runs a kindergarten and a primary school – could soon change its priorities and open up to girls. But Gerald Wirth 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 which is a shame."

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 44-year-old 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. There are a few reasons for that.

"One is that most of our repertoire is meant to be performed by boys' voices. Another one is that – and there are of course always exceptions – pre-adolescent boys prefer to stay among themselves. They want to play football and run around getting rid of their energy. This is one of the reasons many of the mixed choirs in Vienna eventually become girls choirs."

Wirth – who was a member of the famous choir himself – said though that boys' spells as Vienna Boys Choir members end when their voices break, stressing that most boys go on to take a degree at the institutions upper grade school which is often the start of a career as a musical lecturer at universities or as a conductor.

Another little known aspect of the choir's activities are its many projects with Viennese 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 small, isolated island of high culture but carry out many multi-layered projects trying to encourage and promote integration and language learning."

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 Vienna Boys Choir got the go ahead from the Federal Economy Ministry in 2007 to build it on a 1,000-square-metre site in Vienna's Augarten park. 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 was careful with his choice of words when asked by the Austrian Times about the issue.

"I have to say I think these groups tried to deliberately spread wrong information. The main question is whether to react to all that or not. 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.

"Our main interest was to have a venue to perform the concerts organised in cooperation with Viennese schools. It is always difficult to find an appropriate, available venue for these events.

"We are constantly in touch with school authorities about new, mostly multicultural projects. The second district (of Vienna where the Vienna Boys Choir is based) is very multicultural. A lot of Jewish and Turkish people live here – this means a lot of potential and possibilities to cooperate. But many don't want to hear about that unfortunately."

Wirth said the new concert hall will be a competence centre for vocal music, adding it will be the Vienna Boys Choir's ambition to increase its partnerships with other schools.

"We want to create something for us – a venue for rehearsals – and for the public, considering our public responsibility and the fact we offer education regardless of the ethnic and social background," he said.

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," Wirth said, adding it was important for him to leave office tasks aside to work with the choirs on a regular basis.

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 many experiences they have – they learn to become independent and get organised when on the road, not forgetting the social aspect of being part of a group for a long time.

"They enjoy having to deal with a lot of people while touring and representing the choir, Vienna and Austria. One of my sons recently returned from touring with his choir. He told me it was so much fun and should have lasted much longer," Wirth said, laughing.

Wirth dismissed claims the Vienna Boys Choir always performed the same pieces of music – traditional,

well-known works by Mozart and Strauss – when touring the world.

He said: "We constantly rearrange our setlists. Most concert agencies and organisers expect us to come up with new ideas. They don't always want us to perform the same every time we go on tour. We cannot leave out Strauss, of course, if the Japanese want to hear it. But it is important to keep a project interesting."

Wirth said the year was structured in trimesters at the Vienna Boys Choir as the choirs tour two thirds of the year while four months were scheduled for their education. This structure, he concluded, made the boarding school system essential – an aspect which has always implied certain kinds of prejudices.

"Yes, the boarding school has a reputation problem," Wirth admitted, adding though that he saw no alternative to it at the moment.

"I am still convinced it is the best system for our time-intensive education. Offering a different model to the forty per cent of our boys who come from the Vienna area was considered. But in the end we decided not to introduce an alternative to the boarding school model – and I am not sure how many would choose to live at home if it took them up to two hours to travel by public transport every day," he said.

Asked whether there were strict rules at the boarding school, is it is notable how Wirth appreciates the chance to straighten out some more rumours about the Vienna Boys Choir.

"There are certain rules everyone has to obey, of course, but that's the same in every other boarding school. And I can tell you that 95 per cent of the boys have mobile phones, iPods or MP3 players," he said, adding with a broad smile: "And maybe seven in ten have a PSP (Playstation Portable)."

Wirth said the boarding school pupils were always encouraged to spend their free time actively. "Most of them love playing football or just running around outside, while some have to be more encouraged than others to do so. But that's normal, I think," he said, explaining watching TV is not banned either but was restricted to certain programmes and times of day.

Wirth said his role was very time-intensive but hugely rewarding. Asked how he dealt with stress he spoke of how much his family meant to him – and revealed a little secret.

"My wife and I have six children – three boys and three girls. One of the boys was a choir boy while the other two are at the moment.

"Spending time with my family is my biggest hobby and the best way to relax. We live in an old farm house in Lower Austria where we have some hens and ducks – so, I am actually a farmer," he said.

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