

Flanders to organise the 'most inclusive' Choir Olympics to date



CULTURE 11:22

In July of 2020, Antwerp's Sportpaleis will host the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games – for choirs. Flanders, specifically Antwerp and Ghent, will stage the 11th edition of the World Choir Games (WCG), an biennial event involving about 500 choirs from 80 countries.

At this year's WCG event in South Africa, it was announced that Flanders had won the bid for the 2020 edition. The Flemish government provided more information this week.

The WCG is the largest choir event in the world and attracts more than 20,000 singers, many of them youngsters. Both amateur and professional choirs can participate in a competition with almost 30 categories. There are, for example, “children's choirs”, “mixed choirs”, “jazz” and “spiritual”.

The event will take place in large concert and theatre halls such as the Sportpaleis and Ghent's Capitole, but also in churches and other venues. The singers can also take part in activities outside the competitions, like “friendship concerts” with other choirs in public venues. The WCG, run by the Interkultur organisation in Germany, furthermore offers workshops, seminars and open rehearsal sessions.

No less than world peace

Participants in the competition can win medals, but this aspect plays a much smaller role than in sport competitions, for instance. “People from many countries with different political views communicate through the language of music and learn to understand each other better,” said Günter Titsch, president of the WGC. This, he says, supports “the preservation and promotion of peace in the world,” the WGC's ultimate goal.

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Flanders' successful candidacy is a result of the ambition to bring more major international events to the region. VisitFlanders tourist agency launched the EventFlanders department specifically for this reason.

The government will spend some €7.4 million to make the WCG happen, but the economic return is estimated at €21 million. Financial gain, however, not the government's motivation when it launched its candidacy, according to Flemish culture minister Sven Gatz.

"We are more than accountants," he said. "Cultural participation strengthens social ties within one's own group as much as within a group of strangers."

He stressed the ambition to organise "the most inclusive" edition yet by reaching out to "certain groups who have normally been excluded from cultural experiences."

The practical organisation of the event is in the hands of Flemish non-profit Koor&Stem, which supports about 1,000 choirs and 35,000 singers and conductors across Flanders. Koenraad De Meulder, managing director of [Koor&Stem](#), confirms the emphasis on inclusion.

"There is a perception that choirs are part of a rather closed world, which we have to counter," he said. "We want to demonstrate that everyone is welcome to sing along."

Opening the door

Koor&Stem recently participated in the European project Sing Me In to provide youth choir conductors and music teachers all over Europe with the skills needed to involve youngsters with a migration background, including refugees.

The non-profit also co-organised the project De Stem van ons Geheugen (The Voice of Our Memory), which brought together people with dementia and their caregivers to sing in groups and ordered special compositions adapted to singers with a mental disability.

De Meulder hopes that the WCG will give another boost to such initiatives, and he further envisions a project with prisoners. He also feels that more attention has to be devoted to children's choirs in the further development of the choir culture in Flanders. "We have to show more children that singing together is fun," he said.

Koor&Stem is planning many activities to prepare the Flemish choir scene for the WCG. Last summer, two Flemish choirs – [Waelrant](#) from Antwerp and [Rise Up](#) from Neerpelt – took part in the WCG competition in South Africa.

Photo: Nolte Photography/Interkultur

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