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MUSIC

Singing songs and making friends at World Choir Games

By **Marcia Adair** Special to the Star

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RIGA, LATVIA—“I need more lips. I’m not seeing enough lips. Make sure you have your stage makeup with you. And your slippers. In your hand, not a friend’s. Check please.”

The 42 members of the [Oakville Children’s Choir](#) do as instructed, or at least make motions in that direction. When the hubbub grows too loud, artistic director Sarah Morrison gives a note and the choristers automatically complete TTC-style descending notes before giving their full attention.

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Lipstick, shoes, jackets and ID badges sorted, the group hops on the bus, crosses the Daugava River and gets ready to sing for gold at Riga Stradins University.

Thirty-thousand other choristers, some as young as 7, are doing the same at venues all over town as the 8th [World Choir Games](#) get underway. The biennial competition, the world’s largest for choirs, offers medals in 28 categories and earning one is serious business. Seven international judges listen to each category and award points based on sound quality, intonation, overall artistic impression and fidelity to the score. Like high jump or gymnastics, scores are calculated to two decimal places.

Oakville Children’s Choir has six choirs with choristers ranging in age from junior kindergarten to high school. Lauren Sharpe, 16, travels from Milton six times a month for choir rehearsals at St Simon’s in Oakville. “I was in easier choirs before and I wanted a the challenge of living up to the standards of older girls. A choir fairly close to me that is recognized as being really good was something that I really wanted to be in.”

The choir travels abroad every second summer and, after a triumph in the open competition at the 2012 World Choir Games in Cincinnati, they are eager to test their skill in the Champions category.

At the university, Oakville Children’s Choir takes the stage, resplendent in royal blue jackets, black trousers and just the right amount of lipstick. The usual polite applause is augmented by whoops, hollers and frantic flag-waving courtesy of the Finnish children’s choir Leticia. The two groups had met by chance at a workshop earlier in the day.

“While we were warming up, this woman walks by and starts singing along,” says second soprano Hannah Wieler, 17. “It was a Finnish folksong and all of her choir knew it so we started singing together on the sidewalk. Then we started singing other songs together.”

The first piece, “Past Life Melodies,” was all chanting and overtones; the second, a Finnish folksong with a first line translating roughly as “Great is the desolation of your shore.” A Spanish folksong followed and then OCC’s signature tune, “Mulligatawny MacBeth,” written for the choir in 2004 by Canadian composer John Govedas.

The choir had worked on the piece in a coaching session with Swedish choral conductor Robert Sund. Explains Wieler, who has been singing “Mulligatawny” for getting on 10 years, “It always is different when you have a different group of people. We have to problem solve and figure out creative ways to make it sound good.”

On this night, with vowels appropriately shadowed, consonants activated and overall energy set to dazzle, the choir seemed to relish the opportunity to end with an old friend. Afterward, the Finnish choir rushed backstage to offer their congratulations.

Like the Olympics, there are a lot of noises about peace and friendship at these sorts of things; a peace bell was forged in the Netherlands and installed for the opening ceremony.

“It’s sounds so like, ‘Oh, what a cliché,’ but it’s not,” says Morrison. “It was magical. The kids were on such a high. We had a personal best performance and then we got to share it with our friends from Finland and that’s what it’s all about.”

This connection is just one of thousands that will be made during the Games. Around the corner, Winnipeg choir Prairie Voices was serenading a bride and groom in the street. On a patio one night all the barbershop choirs, aided by the Rigan liqueur Black Balsam, engaged in increasingly drunken and hilarious rounds of one-upping. A sunset rendition of the William Byrd Mass for Four Voices sounded as mystical wafting up to a seventh floor window as it has in any cathedral.

For the all the hugging, the games are still a competition. Some choirs, like the No. 1 ranked University of Stellenbosch Choir from South Africa, don’t mess around, using the square outside the performance venue for a minute-by-minute performance analysis. Others, like the Oakville Children’s Choir, don’t have a title to lose and instead use performing for international judges as a motivation for improvement.

“The choristers love the competition. They love it,” says Morrison. “It’s excellent for them to be able to understand high standards in choral music and to have the discipline to work toward and achieve choral excellence. Competition pushes you up to that next level. The parent community is into the competition bit as well. Kids compete in sports, so this is no different.”

Two days after the performance, a hockey arena full of choristers danced along to “Gangnam Style” and set a world speed record for the wave while waiting for the prize giving to begin. That it was 9 a.m. seemed problematic only to those born before 1994.

The OCC Chamber Choir won a silver medal in Music Sacra the previous evening and, although no one would say it straight out, it was clear everyone hoped to do better in the Youth Choir Equal Voices category. When scores for their Finnish friends were announced, OCC shouted along with them. All six Canadian choirs in the building cheered when Newfoundland choir Lady Cove finished with 91.13 points, just 1.5 behind their category winner.

Then it was time for Category C3. Results were read lowest to highest. “I wasn’t scared before, but I am now,” murmured a chorister as the numbers were announced. Hands were squeezed tighter, breaths held.

Then, “80.13: Atlanta Youth Singers.”

“83.00: Miriam College High School, Philippines.”

“81.13: Robinson Select Women’s Ensemble, USA.”

And then: “81.63: Oakville Children’s Choir, Canada.”

The girls erupted, screaming and hugging, hardly believing what had happened.

Head chorister Blair Somerville, Morrison, choir alumna Victoria Mancini and accompanist Cheryl Duvall ran onstage to collect the gold medal, their smiles and waves seen easily across the arena.

“Gold!” said Morrison afterward, with the bewildered astonishment of someone who has just got what they were secretly hoping for. “I don’t know what to say!”

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