

## Vienna Boys Choir brings “Christmas in Vienna” to Akron

by Jarrett Hoffman



With Medieval roots and impressive singers age ten to fourteen, the [Vienna Boys Choir](#) didn't begin giving concerts outside Vienna's Imperial Chapel (Hofmusikkapelle) until 1926, but these days they're globetrotters. The choir of boys from all over the world spends up to eleven weeks of every school year traveling.

The Choir's latest tour, a 48-concert canvassing of the U.S., will bring them to E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron next Wednesday, November 29 at

7:30 pm. Led by conductor Manolo Cagnin, they'll perform holiday tunes, classical selections, and Austrian folk songs for “Christmas in Vienna,” part of Tuesday Musical's Fuze Series.

“What can I say? Christmas for me is good feelings, peace and quiet,” Cagnin said from the Choir's stop in Ames, Iowa. “The program starts with ‘Walking in the Air’ from the the 1982 film *The Snowman*, then we try to ‘walk and fly’ all over and see the Christmases in different parts of the world. Ukraine, France, England, America, Sweden — in every country there's a different color. The last song is *Feliz Navidad*, and that's Christmas in South America.”

One hundred choristers make up the VBC's four choirs of equal standing, each named for an Austrian composer with some association to the ensemble: Mozart and Bruckner both worked with the Choir, while Schubert was a chorister himself and Haydn frequently sang with the ensemble. Cagnin will lead the Bruckner Choir in Akron. The conductor has previously [compared](#) the four to the Houses of Hogwarts in *Harry Potter*, each with its own personal touch (but with no good-and-evil distinctions).



Cagnin said the character of each choir depends on the conductor. “They are absolutely my best friends, but we are totally different. One is from São Paulo, another one is from Hong Kong, another from Vienna, and then me — I’m Italian.” Following the bel canto tradition, Cagnin said he always tries to explain “the heart of singing in Italy,” emphasizing breathing and the meaning of the words and phrase markings — “what the composer means, not what I like.”

Most of all, Cagnin wants his choir to enjoy the music and communicate that joy. “Music is language, our style of life, and we have to involve the audience too. Naturally it has to be as perfect as possible, but the audience enjoys it when we are having fun on stage. That’s the point.”

The Bruckner Choir includes boys from Austria, Cambodia, China, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, the Philippines, and the U.S. — “every corner of the world,” Cagnin said, “and it’s a kaleidoscope of different personalities too.” How do they speak to each other? “The basic language is German, and from time to time we use English. But we try to communicate through the music, that’s the power of it. It’s a wonderful thing.”

One of those boys who came from far away to audition in Vienna is thirteen-year-old Matthew. A native of Hong Kong, with Thai and New Zealand heritage, he started singing at age eight before joining the Choir at ten. Going to a new school is scary, but one that’s 5,400 miles away? “Actually everyone was really nice, so it only took me a few days to a week to adjust,” Matthew said.

The Choir maintains its own schools — and for those worried about the boys’ education while on tour, two tutors travel along with each ensemble. Matthew described the typical daily schedule of class and rehearsal. “We have school from 7:00 in the morning until 6 pm, and we have two hours of singing every day of the week — and on Saturdays three hours. I think it’s a very good balance, it’s perfect.” He added that he gets to go home three times a year — Christmas, Easter, and summer — “but sometimes my parents visit Vienna.”



Aside from school and singing, sports play a big role in the Choir. While soccer is the most popular, Matthew said he prefers running and swimming. Cagnin joins in on the fun too. “I love sports,” he said. “We play soccer, volleyball, and basketball.”

For the conductor, that’s part of a broader effort to stay in touch with the kids in different ways, not just through the music. “When we have free time, we are like a family,” he said. “We are all together in everything, and we

talk a lot. To make great music on the stage, it’s important to know the children, and they have to know me as well. You have to be there every second for them, not only on the stage. So we enjoy sports and we scream. It’s a magical world. I think it’s been ten years that I’ve conducted the Vienna Boys Choir, and it’s the best choir I’ve ever had.”

Of all the places the Choir has toured, the conductor called the U.S. his favorite, while Japan is often the preferred destination of the boys. “In Japan everything is perfect and organized, and we are like gods. But it’s boring to me. America is a big country, and every single state is totally different — we can compare California with Louisiana. We’re really happy. Eleven weeks and forty-eight concerts — it’s a lot of work, but a lot of fun as well. We love America, and we are really proud and honored to be here.”

Closing out our conversations, neither Matthew nor Cagnin could pick a favorite holiday song. The chorister called himself a big fan of all of them. “They’re all quite nice — it’s actually extremely hard to choose.”

“I decide on every song,” Cagnin said, adding with a laugh, “and Matthew usually prefers one where he has a solo of course. But it’s difficult — no, I can’t say a favorite. Every single one is a different color, atmosphere, and world.”

But Wednesday’s performance isn’t just holiday music. “Our concert’s really a selection of different types of songs,” Matthew said, “so I think anyone would like it.”

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