

U. Singers take 1st place at competition in Germany

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MARKTOBERDORF, Germany — It seems that whenever Brady Allred and his University of Utah Singers enter an international competition, they walk away winners.

That happened in France where they received top honors at the Florilege Vocal de Tours International Choir Competition. And once again in 2006 in Tolosa, Spain, where they were awarded the grand prize at the European Grand Prix International Choral Competition.

And now Allred and his choir can check off yet another competition under the win column.

Tuesday evening, the U. Singers won first prize in the adult mixed choir category at the 11th International Chamber Choir Competition in Marktoberdorf, Germany — one of the world's leading choral competitions.

In addition to taking first place, they were also awarded a special prize for the best interpretation of a work premiered at the competition. That was for their performance of Nancy Wertsch's "Hail Holy Light," one of nine pieces receiving its premiere at the competition.

And the youth choir (made up of members of the Singers who are 21 and younger) took home third prize in their category.

All in all, it was a memorable ending to the ensemble's nearly four-week-long trip to Europe.

Allred is pleased with the result, of course. "I'm thrilled we were able to take first prize," he said. "I wanted the choir members to experience what the Marktoberdorf judges consider internationally excellent."

The jury panel at the competition consisted of seven members from Europe, Israel and Hong Kong.

They scored each choir according to guidelines that required the judges to describe them as "internationally good," "internationally very good" and "internationally exceptional." The latter designation signifies that a choir is among the world's elite.

Volker Hempfling, founder of the K?ner Kantorei and a frequent judge at Marktoberdorf, praised the ensemble. "Volker heard us sing in Yugoslavia and he told me the choir sings at the very highest level," Allred said.

The majority of the choirs at this year's competition came close to the Singers in talent and musicality. "There was a wide range of quality this year," competition founder and director Dolph Rabus said. "I was quite satisfied."

But what separated them from the rest was their stage presence, their sound and their attitude. "I told them before the competition that winning isn't the reason we're here," Allred said. "We're here to sing at our very best — at the highest level possible — with a lot of heart and expression."

That apparently was also what the judges were looking for. Jury chair Gudrun Schr?el, vice president of the University of Hannover, brought it up in her comments at the awards ceremony, where she noted that the "joy of singing" is the most important aspect of choral music.

"When I heard her say that I knew the jury understood what I was trying to do," Allred said.

While the youth choir didn't do quite as well as the main group, Allred is still happy with the result. "We only had 18 singers, and they had to compete against much larger ensembles, most of which were about twice their size," he said.

And unlike the other groups in the youth category, the Utah contingent didn't have many opportunities of performing its program by itself. "We rehearsed it alone only three or four times," he said. "There weren't many chances to do the whole competition program alone."

Allred is a veteran when it comes to choral competitions. He's entered a number of them over the years, and during that time, he has learned a few tricks on how to wow the judges. "The most important thing is the repertoire and how you perform it," he said. "It has to be as technically perfect as it can be, and then you have to add soul to the singing."

That obviously didn't go unnoticed by the judges. And it was certainly apparent to the host families with whom the members of all the choirs were staying during the competition. "Many of the host families came up to me and told me that there was a real presence about the choir," Allred said. "That's why we do a cappella music — so that there's a connection between the conductor and the choir and the choir and the audience."

Competing at the international level is also important for the contacts choir directors make. Since their win Tuesday, the U. Singers have been invited to tour China and they've also been invited to perform in Poland, Italy and a host of other European countries. "I've said for a long time that the University of Utah Singers are better known in Europe than they are in the U.S.," Allred said.

And Allred has just received an invitation to be the new music director of the National Youth Choir of France. "It would be a three-year appointment, and it would mean being in France for three weeks out of the year to rehearse them and perform."

Right now, Allred doesn't have any tour or competition plans for the U. Singers for next year. "I'm just going to wait and see. I'm always at a disadvantage because I lose half of the choir in the fall. I have to start over every year, and other choirs don't have that problem."

But there is still plenty of time to think about next year. At the moment Allred is still enjoying his choir's victory.

Deseret News music critic Edward Reichel, who holds a doctorate in music, is in Europe with the U. Singers. His trips is being partially financed by the International Chamber Choir Competition.

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