

# Theme

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## Concert Coeurs en Choeurs (Hearts in Harmony)

Palais des Congrès of Paris - 6 May 2006



Choral singing is in itself an eminently collective art form and embodies humanistic virtues, which would become quite evident during the preparation and performance of such an event. After a number of separate rehearsals were held, the choirs were brought together. Because of the constraints of transporting disabled people and the shortage of facilities equipped to accommodate disabled singers, the first “tutti” (all-together) rehearsal was held on the morning of the concert!

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Two principles lay at the basis of a music event that was to take on international importance to a degree even the insiders hadn't anticipated: the first one holds that a handicap should never shield off an individual; and the second principle is best put in the wise words of César Geoffray, the founder of the French choral movement, À Coeur Joie: When voices join together in song, hearts are able to understand each other. These principles led to an initiative to unite on stage in a single concert, choirs of handicapped and those of non-handicapped singers, in equal numbers. The idea was the result of an encounter between the French former Minister of Labour, Michel Giraud, and the founder for the movement of disabled peoples' choirs, Handivoix. Giraud was my first choir director within the À Coeur Joie movement in the 1960s. He called upon me two years ago, and said he wanted our International Choral Federation to become responsible for the musical direction of this event.

I immediately agreed without realising just how vast the project would be. I met with choirs of blind people, autistic people, and people with several disabilities. Working on the basis of their current repertoires, I asked composer Norbert Ott to make vocal and orchestral arrangements. The 70-piece symphonic orchestra of the Universities of Paris generously offered its services. The management of the Palais des Congrès in Paris (major conference centre) offered its grand amphitheatre — seating 4,000 people — and a television station joined in so as to ensure a live broadcast of the event.

The large French organisations for disabled people, the Parisian chapter of À Coeur Joie, and private and public sponsors were all invited to contribute. There was also a presentation of the project on behalf of the European choral federation, Europa Cantat. This took place during the European Music Council meeting in Budapest in 2005, and helped to convey the spirit of the event.

However, during two hours of music in a packed concert hall, 400 musicians were living proof that choral singing truly means sharing the same resources. Also, they showed that it can help reduce the sense of distance arising from the condition of being disabled, and that it can push a person to go beyond his or her own limits. The concert included not only the results of the musical endeavour, but also a description of the stages of the project from initial concept to realization — in particular the work done with the disabled groups — through video sequences and interviews woven into the presentation of the musical programme.

In a packed amphitheatre, Jeroen Schrijner and Sonja Greiner honoured the concert with their presence, having assured the patronage of the Europa Cantat organisation for the concert. Three representatives of the Norwegian Youth Choir Federation (NOBU) were present, in the absence of Kjetil Aamann and Erik Bjorhei. These three were present to witness the occasion: their organisation is responsible for planning regular events for disabled people, and will organise another large-scale event in Norway in 2008, taking the lead from À Coeur Joie and carrying the torch for such events in Europe.

The concert finished with all the singers, two disabled soloists, and the orchestra uniting in a performance of the famous «*You'll Never Walk Alone*», which at the same time underscored everyone's wish to continue this common expression of voices in unison, bearer of great joy and true sharing, a real factor in one's social inclusion beyond disability.

**Thierry Thiébaud**

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