

Leipzig, 10 May 2024

Musical exchange as it should be
The a cappella Masterclass with Stephen Connolly:
nurturing young vocal talent

Attending Stephen Connolly's masterclass at the **a cappella** Festival and Competition is invariably an enriching, entertaining, and enlightening affair. The vocal ensembles participating in the **a cappella** Contest come together to learn from Stephen, the audience, and each other how they can enhance their singing and performance. This is a unique opportunity to see and hear all the groups in a relaxed, supportive rehearsal environment open to the public. And a 'master' like Stephen Connolly – who performed with the King's Singers for over 25 years – listens attentively, offers analysis and guidance, and elucidates the various aspects that define what a cappella singing is or can be. Once the tuning is precise – when the chords and their notes align perfectly, and the individual voices blend and are in balance – much of the groundwork has been laid. Dynamics and arrangement as well as stage posture and movement contribute significantly to making a performance captivating and compelling. Often, it's the finer details, sometimes imperceptible, that can elevate an a cappella performance from good to truly outstanding.

Stephen Connolly quickly identifies areas for improvement and suggests tweaks that might not be immediately obvious to the casual listener. He consistently reminds everyone that his role is to propose ideas for experimentation, which might be adopted or discarded as needed. For instance, he alters the established standing positions of groups like the calens vocalensemble or Luminosa, questioning aloud and with the audience if these changes enhance the sound. Interaction with the ensembles and the audience is crucial and as rewarding as it is enjoyable. Audiences, irrespective of their musical background, instinctively discern what works and what doesn't – a realization that's reaffirmed at every masterclass. One of Connolly's longstanding beliefs, born from decades of experience as both performer and coach, is that the audience is paramount, the ultimate recipient of any performance. "Create a connection with them," he says. In other words, establish a

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rapport with the audience – through eye contact, open body language, and the intent behind your singing, the thoughts and emotions you wish to convey with the music, especially in wordless pieces like 'Das Raumschiff' by the quintet Lylac. Groups are encouraged to continually reflect on what messages or feelings (ideally positive ones) they wish to convey to the audience.

A recurring insight from the **a cappella** Masterclass is that groups accustomed to using microphones can, and indeed should, also perform effectively without them. This year, ensembles like Lylac and the Belgian group Just Vox demonstrated that they are more than capable of doing so. The groups in this year's competition developed a remarkable degree of harmony, singing together and being in tune with each other, making the masterclass a truly memorable experience. And when Stephen Connolly prompts the singers to "Feel it together!" and they respond in unison with "Okay!", it's clear everything is as it should be.

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24th Leipzig International Festival of Vocal Music **a cappella**:
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14th Leipzig International **a cappella** Contest:
8–11 May 2024

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