VIENNA BOYS CHOIR

In 1498, more than half a millennium ago, Emperor Maximilian I moved his court and his court musicians from Innsbruck to Vienna. He gave specific instructions that there were to be six boys among his musicians. For want of a foundation charter, historians have settled on 1498 as the official foundation date of the Vienna Hofmusikkapelle and - in consequence - the Vienna Boys Choir. Until 1918, the choir sang exclusively for the imperial court, at mass, at private concerts and functions and on state occasions.

Musicians like Heinrich Isaac, Paul Hofhaimer, Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, Johann Joseph Fux, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Antonio Caldara, Antonio Salieri and Anton Bruckner worked with the choir. Composers Jacobus Gallus and Franz Schubert, and the conductors Hans Richter, Felix Mottl and Clemens Krauss were themselves choristers. Brothers Joseph and Michael Haydn were members of the choir of St. Stephen’s Cathedral, and sang frequently with the imperial boys’ choir.

In 1918, after the breakdown of the Habsburg Empire, the Austrian government took over the court opera (i.e. the opera, its orchestra and the adult singers), but not the choir boys. The Wiener Sängerknaben owe their survival to the initiative of Josef Schnitt, who became Dean of the Imperial Chapel in 1921. Schnitt established the boys’ choir as a private institution: the former court choir boys became the Wiener Sängerknaben (in English: Vienna Boys Choir), the imperial uniform was replaced by the sailor suit, then the height of boys’ fashion. Funding was not enough to pay for the boys’ upkeep, and in 1926 the choir started to give concerts outside of the chapel, performing motets, secular works, and - at the boys’ request – children’s operas. The impact was amazing: Within a year, the choir performed in Berlin (where Erich Kleiber conducted them), Prague and Zurich. Athens and Riga (1928) followed, then Spain, France, Denmark, Norway and Sweden (1929), the United States (1932), Australia (1934) and South America (1936).

Present

Today there are around 100 choristers between the ages of ten and fourteen, divided into four touring choirs. The four choirs give around 300 concerts and performances each year in front of almost half a million people. Each group spends nine to eleven weeks of the school year on tour. They visit virtually all European countries, and they are frequent guests in Asia, Australia and the Americas.

Together with members of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the Vienna State Opera Chorus, the Wiener Sängerknaben maintain the tradition of the imperial musicians: as Hofmusikkapelle they provide the music for the Sunday Mass in Vienna’s Imperial Chapel, as they have done since 1498. Gerald Wirth took over as the choir’s artistic director in 2001.
The Wiener Sängerknaben recently completed principle photography for acclaimed director Curt Faudon’s newest mixture of feature film and documentary tentatively titled *Silk Road*. The film shows the choristers' normal nomadic tour life in Korea, Japan, Canada, the USA, Germany and on the Silk Road itself; the soundtrack will offer everything from medieval chansons and Renaissance music to masses and lieder by Schubert, and includes unexpected highlights from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, China and Mongolia. Though the choir’s history in radio, television and film dates from the 1930s to present, this marks their first feature appearance since Disney’s 1962 classic *Almost Angels*.

**Repertoire**

The choir’s repertoire includes everything from medieval to contemporary and experimental music. Motets and lieder for boys’ choir form the core of the touring repertoire, as do the choir’s own arrangements of waltzes and polkas by Strauss.

Both the choir and the Hofmusikkapelle have a long tradition of commissioning new works. Austrian composers Heinz Kratochwil, hk Gruber (himself a former chorister), Ernst Krenek and Balduin Sulzer have written works for the choir.

The Wiener Sängerknaben perform major choral and symphonic works, sometimes as part of the Hofmusikkapelle, sometimes with other orchestras and men’s choirs. They are regularly asked to supply soloists for large choral and orchestral works, such as Bernstein’s Chichester Psalms, Mahler’s Das klagende Lied. In recent years, they have performed with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, the Oslo Philharmonic and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Recent guest conductors include Pierre Boulez, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Mariss Jansons, Zubin Mehta, Riccardo Muti (honorary member of the Hofmusikkapelle), Kent Nagano and Seiji Ozawa.

Choristers also take part in opera performances at different opera houses, most notably the Vienna State Opera.

**Children’s Operas**

Children’s Operas are an important part of the repertoire: The choir started performing operas in the 1920s, beginning with classics such as Mozart’s *Bastien und Bastienne*, Weber’s *Abu Hassan* or Haydn’s *Der Apotheker*. Benjamin Britten wrote the vaudeville *The Golden Vanity* for the choir, and conducted its premiere at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1967 in the presence of HM The Queen Elizabeth II.

The choir also performs contemporary works. The successful production of Gerald Wirth’s *The Journey of the Little Prince* led to an invitation to stage Wirth’s *Die Schicksalstafel*, an opera based on the Babylonian myth of Anzu, at Vienna’s Musikverein. In 2004, the Musikverein hosted the world premiere of Raoul Gehringer’s *Moby-Dick*, a children’s opera based on the novel by Herman Melville. The first performance of *Märchen-Matrix*, based on fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, took place in 2006. The choir works with several stage directors from Vienna and abroad.
World Music and Cross-Over Projects
Since the 1920s, the choir has collected music from around the world. One of the choir’s goals is to introduce the boys to as many different styles of music as possible. The choir has commissioned a number of world music projects. As Gerald Wirth explains, “We do not claim to play ‘authentic’ world music; we create something from the original sources that is our own. We want to be faithful to the source in the sense that we treat it with respect.” Silk Road is the choir’s third world music project. The colorful journey along the old trade route was staged by Rebecca Scheiner, a stage director at the Vienna State Opera, and features songs from Uzbekistan and China, a qawwali from Pakistan, a ghazal from Iran and field hollers from Tajikistan, all sung in the original languages. Pirates tells the story of 18th-century pirates, using music from Yemen, Madagascar, the Caribbean and Latin America.

In the 1970s, the choir started to perform a cappella arrangements of songs by The Beatles. In 2002, the boys recorded a pop CD, including songs by Celine Dion, Madonna and Robbie Williams. The choir has contributed to a number of film soundtracks.

The Choir School
The choir maintains its own school. Almost 250 children study and rehearse in the Augartenpalais, a baroque palace and former imperial hunting lodge in Vienna. Beginning with kindergarten, boys and girls are provided with a complete musical and general education through the elementary grades. At age ten, the most talented boys are selected to join the choir and enter the choir’s grammar school. All boys are assigned to one of the touring choirs. Academic lessons are taught in small groups. The school has a band, and offers extracurricular activities ranging from sports (baseball, basketball, fencing, judo, soccer, skating, swimming, volleyball) to attending (pop) concerts, operas, plays, musicals and movies. The choristers are also encouraged to create their own projects; a number of them write, act and direct short sketches or films. Many of the school’s alumni go on to become professional musicians, conductors, singers or instrumentalists, in Vienna and abroad. Almost all continue to sing. There are two male voice ensembles made up entirely of former choristers, the Chorus Vienneensis and the Imperial Chapel’s Schola Cantorum. All students retain a lifelong commitment to the Arts.

Development and Funding
The Wiener Sängerknaben is a private, non-for-profit organisation, which finances itself largely through concerts, recordings and royalties. A contract between the Republic of Austria and the choir provides further means; and the Ministry of Education and the State’s Art Department help with certain projects, such as the production of new children’s operas. Further development and special projects depend on additional funds.

The POK Pühringer Privatstiftung, based in Vienna’s Palais Coburg is the general sponsor of the Vienna Boys Choir.

Gerald Wirth, the choir’s artistic director, received his first musical training as a member of the choir and at the Bruckner Konservatorium in Linz, Austria, where he studied voice, oboe and piano. He has conducted choirs and orchestras in many countries, and played and sung himself in a number of ensembles.
His first love is the voice; as is evident from his compositions: he has written two children’s operas, a Mass, motets and countless arrangements for choirs. He finds much of his inspiration in myths and philosophical texts. Many of his works have been performed internationally.

In 2001, Gerald Wirth became the artistic director of the Wiener Sängerknaben. While he is keenly aware of the choir’s rich tradition, Wirth also explores new ways to create and make music. He has instigated a number of projects involving world music, a cappella pop and film music.

Wirth believes that music has a positive influence on every aspect of a personality.