



SOUTH AFRICA IS

MARVELLOUSLY RICH

IN VOCAL TALENT, AND OUR

CHORISTERS ARE A SHINING

EXAMPLE TO THE WORLD OF

WHAT WE CAN

COLLECTIVELY ACHIEVE.

BY ISABELLA LO

IN TRUE

voice



if

If choir singing were an Olympic sport, South Africa would be in the lead with gold medals – five, to be exact. We’d be right up there with the USA and China, also leading the pack with five championship medals each. These were the actual results of the 7th World Choir Games, held in Cincinnati in the US in July, in which 364 choirs from 83 countries participated.

‘We should be shouting it from the rooftops. It’s an amazing achievement, considering we have nothing like the choral tradition that Europe has. It’s time we realised what an asset we have,’ says Bernard Kruger, director of Kearsney College Choir, which picked up a first for the scenic folklore category.

But it was Cape Town’s internationally acclaimed conductor and composer André van der Merwe, arguably one of the finest in the world today, who took home most of the accolades. He conducts the outstanding Stellenbosch University Choir, which won two firsts in the ‘Mixed Choirs’ and ‘Musica Sacra’ categories, as well as the phenomenal Stellenberg Girls’ Choir, which won two firsts in the ‘Music of Religions’ and ‘Musica Contemporanea’ categories, and is also ranked by Interkultur, the world ranking list for choirs, as number one in the world for children and youth choirs. André also conducts the South African Youth Choir (SAYC), one of the most exciting choral projects in the world today and a haven to ▶



Above: The vibrant Mzansi Youth Choir.
Right: Kearsney College Choir specialises in folklore, with lively gumboot dancing.



Stellenberg Girls' Choir is the top-rated children and youth choir in the world.

under-privileged yet talented youths from all over the country.

'South Africa has a wealth of vocal talent, and not only in the cities,' says André. 'Every year I audition high school learners for my SAYC in the townships. Sometimes people have very little in life, but they have received this amazing ability to express themselves through singing.'

Looking at the number of choirs in South Africa, there is indeed an impressive amount of collective singing going on.

Aside from the school and university choirs, pinnacle by the famous, globally sought-after Drakensberg Boys' Choir, we also have outstanding show choirs, like the two-time Grammy Award winning Soweto Gospel Choir, the wildly colourful Mzansi Youth Choir – which performed with Shakira at the opening of the 2010 Fifa World Cup – and superb male voice choirs, such as the African Zulu Male Choir, Cape Town Male Voice Choir and Cenestra Male Choir.

Cenestra Male Choir and the Cape Town Male Voice Choir recently returned from the Wales Choir of the World festival in London, held in the London Royal Festival Hall in the run-up to the 2012 Olympics. 'We might be amateur choirs, but we got a five-minute standing ovation,' says Rodney Kilgour, tenor and co-ordinator of the Cape Town Male Voice Choir. 'The feedback we got was that the South African choirs blew the audiences away.'

The Soweto Gospel Choir travels the world and has just been touring with one of the biggest classical artists in the world, André Rieu, before joining Johnny Clegg on his September tour. 'Everywhere we go around the world we have sell-out audiences. People love us,' says choirmaster and tenor, Shimmy Jiyane. Our famous male a cappella choir, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, also just came back from US shows with Johnny Clegg, hot on the heels of Graceland reunion shows with Paul Simon in Ireland, London and Europe.

If the word 'ubuntu' was translated to the language of song, it would be a choir. Ubuntu means 'I am what I am because of who we all are', which encapsulates how choirmasters and choristers alike describe the experience of belonging to a choir. 'The appeal of a choir is that once you start making music, you're all the same. As South Africans we need to buy into the spirit of that,' says Bernard.

And like ubuntu, a lot of hard work goes into that

rousing, sublime experience of a group of beautiful, harmonious voices. Rehearsals are frequent – three times a week is common – and long. 'No matter which choir it is, they all have to find the same discipline, and only once that discipline is in place will we discover the magic of freedom and expression in the music,' says André. The reward of choral singing, he adds, is enhanced self-discipline, leadership and meaning in life. 'When music is shared and communicated with integrity, it can change perceptions. In South Africa, choral singing plays a major role in cross-cultural understanding and making the lives of our youth more goal-oriented and meaningful.'

And what does the choirmaster get out of it? 'I'm a full-time freelance choral conductor and I am never drained by what I do. The young people in my choirs give me energy,' says André.

This discipline and teamwork has been distilled to a fine art in the Drakensberg Boys' Choir, the only choir school in South Africa, near Winterton in the heart of the Drakensberg. One of its famous graduates, Loyiso Bala, is one of the country's most successful R&B musicians and hosts the show *Call to Worship* on DStv's 1Gospel. The choir continually tours internationally, and participates in numerous festivals, two of which – Music in the Mountains and Christmas in the Berg – are hosted at the school. Among its accolades this year was being the most popular production at the Innibos Arts Festival in Nelspruit,



The prestigious Drakensberg Boys' Choir.

'Choral singing plays a major role in cross-cultural understanding.'

ANDRÉ VAN DER MERWE

where the choir performed four concerts with Chris Chameleon in the Sudwala Caves. In October, the choir and Chris Chameleon will join forces again for *Dreams*, a production to be performed at the Aardklop Festival in Potchefstroom.

'The boys have an extremely busy schedule with concerts, festivals and tours,' says Steven Wellbeloved, the choir's tours and operations manager. 'By the end of this year, the choir will have toured seven times. In September, two choirs will tour in opposite directions, one to the Eastern Cape, the other to Botswana and in December the boys depart on an international tour visiting Germany and Austria.'

The Drakensberg Boys' Choir has released a number of CDs featuring music ranging from traditional African to Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Kearsney College Choir and Stelleberg Girls Choir might not be in the same league musically as the Drakensberg Boys' Choir, but they're still hugely popular. Bernard says 'everyone was drawn to the South Africans' at the World Choir Games. So what is it that sets these choirs apart?

'We're entertaining,' says Bernard. 'These are just ordinary girls and boys, not all of them talented singers. But the X-factor is that we're unique, African choirs. Kearsney specialises in folklore, so there is drumming and gumboot dancing. It's vibrant and lively. Stellenberg Girls Choir gets the same audience response.'

South Africa's choirmasters agree that choral music should be elevated to a team sport. 'I dream that one day the teamwork of choral singing in our country will be recognised and celebrated as a sport activity,' says André. To this Bernard adds: 'Choral singing is actually the biggest team sport in the world!' **i**

Right: The Soweto Gospel Choir on stage with André Rieu.





REACHING HIGH

Kearsney College chorister **Warren Vernon-Driscoll**, 19, will soon be heading off to Berklee Music College in Boston, US, having successfully auditioned for admission. His ambition? To become a contemporary rock star. Warren sings as a high tenor in Kearsney College Choir, having been in the Drakensberg Boys' Choir until 2008 and in the SA Youth Choir during a six-month move by his parents to Cape Town.

Warren started playing piano in grade two. 'My teacher complained that I wasn't learning it fast enough,' he chuckles. His voice then became his primary instrument. 'I'm one of six or seven high tenors at Kearsney. Music and singing is the focus of my life and through it, I've seen a lot of the world already.' Singing in a group, he says, is all about trust. 'You have to trust your fellow choristers, that they'll give as much as you. It's a brotherhood.'

LEADING VOICE

Jabulani Nyathi, 15, is deputy head boy at Drakensberg Boys' Choir and a gifted tenor from Nelspruit.

'I was at Laerskool Laeveld in the school choir when I auditioned four years ago. My mother thought I was too young to go to boarding school, but I really wanted to go,' Jabulani recalls.

'Academic learning is just as important as the choir, which requires two hours of rehearsal a day, so we work really hard,' says Jabulani. 'To make music with others is to share. It's an amazing privilege.'

Jabulani says he has two dreams - 'I want to be very successful, maybe as an engineer. But I'd also like to be a musician and travel the world.'



FROM THE KAROO TO THE DRAKENSBERG

In 2010, **Stuart Campbell**, 13, was one of six boys to pass a Drakensberg Boys' Choir Grade 6-11 aural test, conducted at his school. 'I didn't think much of it at the time. Then we got the call to say he'd been accepted,' recalls Stuart's mother, Carol.

Just to get into the choir is daunting, with over 20 tests covering everything from aural (ability to hear and sing music) and music reading to choir etiquette, culminating in a solo performance in front of the entire school. You earn the iconic blue Drakensberg Boys' Choir waistcoat only once you've passed these tests and achieved concert status, like Stuart now has.

He learns about five songs a week - in various languages - and must pass those songs before being able to sing them in concert. When the boys tour, they don't sleep on the bus - they learn their music. 'They're constantly on the go, learning new songs and adding to their repertoire, aside from coping with the academic curriculum. Stuart would be nowhere else in the world,' says Carol.

'The South African choirs blew the audiences away.'