Rundfunkchor Berlin

on taking a pioneering new approach to choral music
Over the last 12 years Rundfunkchor Berlin has pioneered a new approach to choral singing that has won over critics and audiences alike. Choir director Hans Rehberg tells Andrew Anderson how they are reinvigorating choral programming and reaching more people than ever before.

Rundfunkchor Berlin (RCB) has never had a problem keeping busy. Ever since its formation in 1925 the ensemble has been in serious demand, both for its radio and TV broadcast performances and as a partner for major companies in the city – Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, Berlin Philharmonic, Komische Oper Berlin and Berlin State Opera.

“We sang in studios with symphony orchestras, released records and made radio productions,” recalls choir director Hans Rehberg. “Then whenever an opera company performed Parsifal, Aida or other operas with a huge chorus we’d join in. Every orchestra was keen to work with us because of the power, our beautiful sound, and the fact we could reach every single requested musical nuance.”

But then in 2005 Rehberg started to wonder if the choir could achieve more.

“Whenever we worked with Simon Rattle or Daniel Barenboim, it was always a joy to perform in front of an audience of 2,400 people,” he recalls. “But the same audience would not come to an a cappella concert without an orchestra or big name conductor on the programme. I thought: ‘there must be a way of bringing a cappella music to a bigger audience’, and that was the birth of our multidisciplinary concerts.

“It’s a simple idea, but one that industry figures including Jane Moss (artistic director, White Light Festival at Lincoln Center) and Tido Visser (managing director, Netherlands Chamber Choir, see page 22) say has reinvigorated and revolutionised the choral world.

As Rehberg tells me about the group’s first multidisciplinary piece, it’s easy to get caught up in his excitement for the concept. “I started talking with choreographers, directors and Simon Halsey – who was our artistic director at the time. There were many possibilities, but we eventually came to the idea of a choral ballet, which we would perform inside a church – The Sealed Angel by Rodion Shchedrin.”

Based on a story by Russian author Nikolai Leskov, The Sealed Angel premiered in 2005 and was an immediate success: “It was a very touching production, which we have since toured across Germany and Europe,” says Rehberg. “The real success though was that we got a much bigger audience. Not only did the a cappella fans come, but we got the dance audience too. There is a really huge community for dance in Berlin, as well as those interested in Russian art (the ballet’s story deals with Russian history), so we had three different audiences for one show.”

Following the success of The Sealed Angel, RCB began to make multidisciplinary projects a regular part of its seasons. While around 70% of its time remains committed to its work with orchestral partners, including Berlin Philharmonic, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin and Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, now 30% of its efforts go towards this new strand of activity.

“The main part of our work remains with these orchestras, which we have wonderful relationships with,” shares Rehberg. “It means we get to work with conductors like Simon Rattle, Christian Thielemann, Marek Janowski, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Daniel Barenboim and Riccardo Chailly on a regular basis. We also commission works through these partnerships. For example, in 2003 we commissioned A Relic of Memory from Marc-Anthony Turnage and performed the world premiere with Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Simon Rattle.”


But what really took its multidisciplinary work to the next level, and made the world take note, was 2012’s human requiem.

“We wanted to make a piece based on Brahms’ Ein Deutsches Requiem,” remembers Rehberg. “I asked Sasha Waltz & Guests to create a staged production – the result was human requiem, directed by Jochen Sandig.

“In human requiem the audience are asked to remove their shoes and enter a room. This ritual makes it feel like they’re entering a temple and creates a hushed atmosphere. Then they see an empty hall with no stage. ‘Where’s the choir?’ they think – and then the lights go down and they suddenly realise ‘wow, my neighbour is one of the choir’ as the singers are placed among them.’

This breaking down of barriers creates a profound emotional experience. Continues Rehberg: “The resonance is enormous. We receive letters after the performances and many reactions on social media. People are so excited and some said it changed their lives. Many people have written that coming to the show is the experience of a lifetime. It is a production where you experience something unexpected – and that is very powerful.”
One audience member called it ‘one of the most powerful and transformational concert experiences I’ve ever had’ while another said that ‘we were transcended into a place where only music can take us’.

Since that first show in Berlin, human requiem has toured to New York City, Hong Kong, Paris and Athens among others, with a trip to Australasia booked for March 2018.

RCB’s next multidisciplinary effort will be made with festival favourite Robert Wilson and the choir’s new chief conductor Gijs Leenaars. LUTHER dancing with the gods features Wilson’s trademark stylised approach to performance – strongly characterised by his individual use of make-up, costumes and lighting – synthesised with Bach’s lofty choral music, opening up new ideas and perceptual spaces.

“It’s a fascinating production that has a strong message far beyond the 500th anniversary of the reformation,” Rehberg adds. LUTHER premières at the newly opened Pierre Boulez Hall in Berlin (designed by Frank Gehry) on 6 October this year.

A key attribute of RCB’s multidisciplinary pieces is that they make the audience feel like they are part of something bigger, a quality that also applies to the company’s outreach work – especially its hugely successful Sing Along concert series.

“Sing Along is a day when participants and choirs from all over the world make a pilgrimage to the Berlin Philharmonie,” says Rehberg, a smile in his voice. “They come very well prepared – many have practised the pieces that will be performed at Sing Along in advance. Then everyone enters the Berlin Philharmonie and, led by Simon Halsey, they perform one big choral-symphonic work together.”

The day has proved extremely popular, with RCB selling 2,400 tickets in 10 minutes for its most recent Sing Along concert. Rehberg estimates that of the 2,400 people who come to the event around 1,300 join in with the singing, while a further 1,100 come just to listen. Pieces performed so far include Verdi’s Requiem, Britten’s War Requiem and Handel’s Messiah.

“It’s an incredible experience hearing the choir accompanied by more than a thousand singers in the audience,” he continues. “It’s been such a success that we’ve started celebrating the event internationally since 2010.” In 2017 Sing Along headed to Vienna, with trips to Paris (2018) and Barcelona (2019) next on the agenda.

RCB is just as keen to engage with youngsters, as well as grown-up singers: “You can’t start early enough with singing,” enthuses the choir director. “We run Sing Along for children, where singers from the choir go into schools in Berlin and teach them how to sing a piece before the children come to visit one of our rehearsals.

“Then at 10 schools we run SINGI, an initiative where we show teachers how to bring creativity into the whole process of learning and studying singing. We then put interested pupils together in a choir, and they act as advocates for singing. After which, these schools are involved in a Sing Along concert event.”

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Other RCB programmes include a masterclass series for young conductors, a six-month academy for students interested in becoming professional singers, and an annual choral symphonic project that allows students to perform alongside Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin or Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin.

What is it about the power of singing that brings people of all ages together? “Singing uses your whole body; it reconnects us with our physical senses,” says Rehberg. “Singing is an element that can be used whenever you need to find space for creativity. But most importantly it connects us together, it brings us closer – singing in a group is a very moving human experience.”