

Vocal Jazz from New York

It was probably the musical highlight of the year for all fans of polyphonic Vocal Jazz in Germany: A one-week camp in August 2019 with the New York Voices at the Bavarian Music Academy in the little town of Marktoberdorf. The ensemble consisting of four jazz singers and a trio has been among the best worldwide for more than 30 years. In total 75 participants from the German and international choral scene formed a marvellously varied group of choral conductors, choral singers, students of music and soloists.

Despite being a practised festival and workshop goer the workload of this week exceeded everything I had experienced before. From 8.30 am on all kinds of offers strung together until late at night: Individual sessions or master classes with single members of the New York Voices, coachings on interpretation or improvisation, singing at the daily "performance hour" or as part of a camp ensemble with close miking. Furthermore, there was a Q&A session with the US-based ensemble as well as "side by side" singing where one participant at a time sang together with a member of the New York Voices. The NYV were supplemented by a number of guest coaches.

„In our camps there are no prerequisites for attendance. It is a self-regulating process“, says Darmon Meader, tenor and musical director of the NYV. „We're always very impressed by the huge demand for our camps. We also encourage beginners but we expect everyone to arrive well-prepared. Everyone receives three choral arrangements in advance in order to prepare the music as there is no time to learn the notes during our rehearsals. In addition, two self-chosen solo pieces must be prepared and presented.“

Jazz singer Anne Czichowsky from Stuttgart was one of the supplementary coaches and also the chief organiser of the camp. She had spent the last two year advertising the week with the New York Voices. „During the early 2000s I took part in vocal seminars organised by jazz composer and arranger Frank Sikora from Inzigkofen.

Meanwhile I had come to the conclusion that I absolutely wanted to have a European Vocal Camp with the New York Voices in Southern Germany – each of the four is also a great teacher! Together with the Bavarian Music Academy and the Bavarian Youth Jazz Orchestra we had assembled a dream team second to none. And as a university teacher it is my wish to make such seminars accessible for my students“.

In the US similar camps have taken place for the last 10 years, although with a slightly different audience: Many participants are 16-18 years old due to very active choral and jazz programmes at High Schools. Here in Marktoberdorf the youngest participants were in their early twenties and there were also numerous semi-professional singers and teachers. The German audience is more grown-up than in the US. „In Europe many participants look for specific input. We value this a lot“, Meader says. „There is a very positive and supportive atmosphere. Next to

our musical objectives it is our ambition to provide an environment in which people can try out new things".

Concerts took place in nearly every evening of the camp. Solo concerts were performed by the campers and also the New York Voices sang, sometimes as a group, sometimes as soloists. They also formed a group with other coaches and performed with the Bavarian Youth Jazz Orchestra. One thing really stood out: NYV's singing is so authentic, I have never heard anything like this from a group before. They are fully taken up in the music. "You really must believe what you sing. Keep loving what you do. It is important to put emotions into your work", alto Lauren Kinhan explains. The audience feel this kind of love. "It is always the search for the deeper meaning, a stronger connection between this work and life itself. That is how authenticity is created – something that goes beyond the edge of stage. We try to transform each of our concerts into an emotional and connecting experience. That is why we pay a lot of attention to the lyrics and stories of our songs". Growing the understanding of the music and presenting it truthfully and honestly is what NYV keep wanting us campers to do.

But what does this imply for the work with choirs and ensembles? "We do this step by step", Kinhan explains. "First we look at the basics: blending, colours, rhythms, dynamics, articulation. Then we keep working on these aspects until we get to the text-based nuances. Who sang the song and what is it about? Is it happy or sad?" And: NYV consider every part of an arrangement as the melody. "No matter who sings the actual melody, he or she is not the most important part of the collective sound. We are very careful about each singer producing their line with utmost awareness." All of this belongs to NYV's agenda when working with choirs.

Another important aspect – especially with big ensembles – is considering the "choral perspective". If you want to make a text line swing, you must not place too much emphasis on the vowels, as it would be the case in a classical choir. The aim is the perfect balance between two opposing notions. Sounding like a section of the Count Basie Orchestra while telling a story! As if you'd be having a chatty dinner together. Plus: Every choir has its own sound. Discovering this sound is yet another objective of the four chief coaches.

During the coachings the four professionals embed their very different personalities. "Kim is spirited and spontaneous. Darmon tends to be more analytical, teaching how to arrange and the mathematics of music. Peter works with the lyrics and makes everybody laugh", the four say about each other. They all share a common goal: exploring and fostering everybody's strengths. The sessions were never about the New York Voices but about the participants. Their method is very motivating without being too friendly or effusive. "We try to make people work", says soprano Kim Nazarian, "and we do learn from our students all the time. You have to look into their faces to feel their reactions. Then you react. You need a lot of reaction capacity for this, just as with improvisation. At the end of such a camp we're totally exhausted, in a good way! It is because we have given so much energy to the people but we also receive too much from

the students, seeing how they get better. Sometimes it feels like raising a child: Taking someone's temperature and trying to find out what is best for him or her in that situation".

The music of the NYV is influenced by instruments. "Every now and then we sing a cappella but that is not our focus. In Germany, however, we are placed in this particularly popular scene and people know us", says Meader. "If you put us into the category of vocal jazz quartets with trio, you would find little more than Manhattan Transfer. So we feel more like a cousin of a cappella". Bass Peter Eldridge says, laughing, "Something like an illegitimate cousin or even a distant relative – hidden in the attic."

"It feels so good to give something back to a sector and genre that has provided us with positive energy for 30 years", says Nazarian. "Our mission is to keep vocal jazz alive". This is exactly what they have successfully done in this camp. As a result, there will be a second round from 23rd to 29th August 2020 when the New York Voices will return to Marktobendorf. The "Deutsche Chorjugend", the German lobby organisation for choral musicians under 27 years, will advertise scholarships for young participants!

Views from the choral scene

Martin Seiler, conductor of Greg is Back (Augsburg)

The New York Voices have their own (very productive) way to produce their songs. Kim Nazarian for example has a clear vision of how a song is supposed to sound and she absolutely knows how to implement it. Of course, they never talk about conducting technique or technical aspects but about the sound of something. You can learn a lot from that.

Charlène Thomas, member of Vivid Voices (Hannover)

Conductors should come here and absorb the energy that the New York Voices radiate. For nothing is more awkward than a conductor who doesn't move appropriately or doesn't feel the music. I think you can learn a lot about passion, groove and embodiment of the music. We don't just sing the material. We are the material. What is more, singing in smaller ensembles is a really good experience. Here we have learnt to stay calm and focused despite the complexity of the arrangements.

Anna Brandt, member of Bazam (Berlin)

The interesting thing about a vocal band compared to a choir is having both: ensemble singing and many solos. Here, you could do both one-on-ones to develop your capabilities as a soloist and a lot of ensemble work. Moreover, topics like advanced arranging were really interesting because in a vocal band you often do things yourself.

Felicitas Ammer, member of Pop-Up (Detmold)

It's just cool to sing in a different ensemble. Real swing can only be learnt from absolute professionals like here.

David Brooke, member of Jazzchor Freiburg

Here you could look at music and jazz from so many perspectives: arrangements, improvisation, solo singing. Of course, you might want to sing a solo as a choral singer, too. It was a really good ensemble to sing with. Another huge opportunity was to cooperate with professional band musicians.

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