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Berlin Radio Choir Embarks on Indonesia Tour

By Jaime Adams



Simon Halsey, principal conductor of the Berlin Radio Choir. (Photo courtesy of Matthias Heyde/Rundfunkchor Berlin)

One of the oldest and best-known choirs in the world, the Berlin Radio Choir was founded in 1925 and can look back on a long and rich history as well as numerous awards and accolades, including three Grammy Awards.

On Oct. 21, the Berlin Radio Choir, a popular partner for leading orchestras and conductors worldwide, will start its tour of Indonesia with a performance at Aula Simfonia Jakarta. Coming to Indonesia with 25 members of the ensemble, the Berlin Radio Choir is also scheduled to travel to Medan and Bandung.

The concert tour is part of the ongoing German Season, an Indonesian-German festival celebrating the long friendship between the two countries.

In each city, the Berlin Radio Choir will collaborate with local choirs: the Paragita Choir of the University of Indonesia, the choir of Bandung's Padjajaran University, and the e Deum Voice Choir of Medan, presenting a various program that features not only pieces by German composers, but also Indonesian works. Conductor Nicolas Fink has visited Indonesia twice over the past couple of months for rehearsals.

More than a mere presentation of classical music, the choirs are preparing a special interactive treat: for certain parts of the program, the audience will be asked to sing along with the choirs. The music sheets can be obtained from the event organizers.

Simon Halsey, Berlin Radio Choir's principal conductor and artistic director from 2001 to 2015 and still closely connected to the ensemble as Conductor Laureate, will be coming to Indonesia to conduct the three concerts.

Halsey, who hails from England, is widely regarded as ambassador for choral singing around the world; he is also known for initiating innovative projects in unconventional venues and interdisciplinary formats.

Prior to his departure to Indonesia, Halsey briefly spoke to the Jakarta Globe about the upcoming concerts, the joy of music and the collaboration with the Indonesian choirs.

Q: When did you first become interested in music? When did you know that you wanted to make a career out of it?

A: My parents were musicians, my father a famous choir conductor and my mother a singer. I wanted to be like my father! When I was 8, I was sent to a specialist choir school in Oxford and I just loved singing in church every day! I can remember wanting to be a conductor when I was only 10 years old.

You have worked as a conductor for many different choirs - despite the fact that it must have been a different experience with each choir, what was the one thing they had in common?

Everyone has to work calmly and happily to achieve the very best they can. So every group is different. The ultimate goal is the same but sometimes one sets one's sights lower and sometimes, as with the Berlin Radio Choir, only the best will do!

In your opinion, what makes the Berlin Radio Choir unique and stand out from the rest?

The sheer quality of the individual voices and the understanding of how to be part of an ensemble – [through] listening and cooperating. They know exactly what they are trying to achieve and work with the conductor to try to achieve that.

What are your expectations of Indonesia?

It's a very exciting new territory for me! I have no idea what to expect. Please surprise me!

How do you see the collaboration with the Indonesian choirs?

I'm sure it will be great fun and of a high level. My colleague [Nicolas Fink] has already been to work with your choirs in advance, and he is very pleased with the standards and the commitment of all the groups he has seen. I'm really excited - your choirs are so famous all over the world. We all have so much to learn from each other.

The Berlin Radio Choir often engages in a sing-along format. Could you briefly explain the concept of this format, and why you think it is important?

A professional choir needs to make friends with its public and with its fans, many of whom sing themselves. So we invite 1200 people to sing with us. It's the best possible sort of contact with our audience and joins the professional and volunteer worlds together. Collaboration and education are vitally important to me.

The interactive factor of the choir is a rather unknown format in Indonesia. What makes you think this will work anyway?

Put musicians together and it always works! The world needs all the collaboration and mutual learning possibilities it can get!

You will present works from Brahms to Schuetz and Schubert, but also include Indonesian pieces in the concerts. How do you perceive these Indonesian oeuvres?

We shall help your choirs understand our pieces and we look forward to having our eyes opened to your pieces – a direct collaboration from which we shall all surely learn!

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"Dalam Dekapan Damai: Berlin Radio Choir with Paragita Choir of Universitas Indonesia" Oct. 21 at 8 p.m. Aula Simfonia Jakarta, Jalan Industri Raya Blok B14 Kav. 1, Kemayoran, Central Jakarta For more information, call 021 3917467