

## GLOBAL AMBITIONS

By Shan Jie

The Vienna Boys' Choir, one of the most prestigious performing groups in the world, has been singing at the Imperial Palace in Austria's capital city for more than 500 years.

Since the beginning of this century, the choir has become more closely connected to China. In 2013, it hired its first Chinese conductor Jimmy Chiang.

As choirmaster of Haydnchor, one of the Vienna Boys' Choir's four touring choirs, the Hong Kong-born conductor and pianist is working hard to achieve his goal of becoming a globally recognized Chinese conductor.

**History of song**

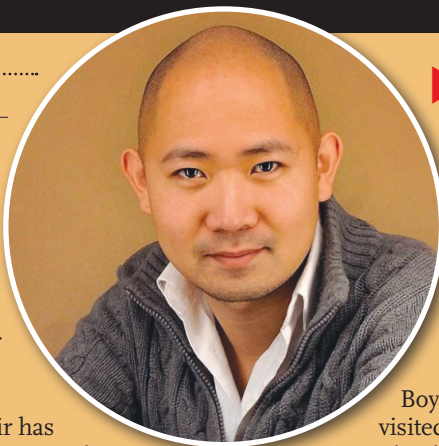
The Vienna Boys' Choir was founded by Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I in 1498 to perform at Vienna's Imperial Chapel.

Over the past five centuries, the court has attracted famous musicians such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Josef Anton Bruckner, while Joseph and Michael Haydn, and Franz Schubert were once singers in the choir.

In its travels around the world, the choir has completed more than 1,000 tours in 97 different countries and regions.

Today, there are 100 choristers between the ages of 9 and 14 who are divided into the four touring choirs named after famous Austrian composers associated with the choir's history, Bruckner, Haydn, Mozart and Schubert. The choir still performs much of their music.

Each year, the touring choirs give around 300 concerts attended by almost half a million people around the world. The choir regularly tours Europe, Asia, Australia and the Americas.



## ► Hong Kong conductor Jimmy Chiang talks about being the first Chinese to conduct the Vienna Boys' Choir

Boys' Choir first visited the Chinese mainland in 1992. Before that, the choir had already

visited Hong Kong in 1959 and Taiwan in 1963, according to representatives from Vienna's MuTh Theatre, where the choir usually performs.

Nowadays, tours of China have become regular events for the Vienna Boys' Choir – each year during China's National Day holidays in October, the boys perform in Beijing, Shanghai and a number of other cities around the country.

In 2008, the Vienna Boys' Choir released a feature film titled *Silk Road*, which depicted the nomadic life of the 100 choristers around the world as they perform in countries and regions along the ancient Silk Road. In the movie, the boys sang 25 songs from these countries and regions in local languages.

**'Great pressure'**

In 2013, Chiang joined the Vienna Boys' Choir and became the choirmaster of Haydnchor, the first Chinese to do so.

Previously, Chiang had been a conductor in Freiburg, Lübeck and Berlin, which led to him and his family having to juggle living in three different locations at the same time.

"I decided that we couldn't continue this way, so I decided to move back to Vienna, where I had lived for 16 years. Luckily, I was soon offered a position in the Vienna Boys' Choir," Chiang said. "I spent two weeks with the boys at a summer camp and it

went well, so I took the job."

As a choirmaster, Chiang is not only in charge of concerts and rehearsals, he also needs to help look after the boys during their tours abroad. Every day, he is with the children for at least three hours.

Chiang's oldest son is also a chorister in Haydnchor, but Chiang said he can't play favorites. "When we are touring, I have to keep my distance," Chiang said.

While the Vienna Boys' Choir was traditionally an all-European choir, today it is more diverse, with members coming from many different countries and regions.

"Choristers from different countries have different accents, even when singing, so it is really difficult to have them sing together," Chiang noted, adding that he always stresses that the children should learn German, so that they can better adjust to their new environment.

Although the choir has evolved over the years, it has still maintained a number of traditions. Every Sunday during the school year, the Vienna Boys' Choir performs at the Hofburg Chapel in the Imperial Palace. They also take part in programs with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and members of Vienna State Opera, Chiang said.

"Four years in our choir school, training every day, the older children help and teach the newcomers. It's like an unbroken bridge that has lasted 500 years," he noted.

"We are a choir with a long history and great reputation, which

puts me under great pressure."

**To be the first**

During the tour in Asia in 2015, Chiang's Haydnchor performed three Chinese folk songs during concerts. In addition to the famous "Jasmine Flower," they also sang Cantonese folk song "Moonlight" and "Bouquet for the Brave," a song from North China's Hebei Province.

"We sing more Chinese songs than the other three choirs. Of course that's because I'm Chinese, so I know what's good and what Chinese people like. I also am able to teach the children not only the words to the song, but also their meaning," Chiang said.

Chiang said learning to sing in a foreign language can be difficult at first, but the children manage to learn quickly just by listening. According to Chiang, they usually master a song in about one week. "Besides Chinese, we also sing in languages such as Turkish, Russian, Hebrew and local African languages."

"When we are performing around the world, I always feel very proud that I'm the first Chinese choirmaster in the Vienna Boys' Choir," Chiang said.

However, during his tours in China and elsewhere around the world, he has found that audiences sometimes have trouble with the fact an Asian could be the conductor of such an important choir.

For concerts in the Chinese mainland, promoters rarely mention that Chiang was born in China. "Some people think that I must be a guest conductor or an American-born Chinese," he said.

"In history, there have only been two globally recognized Asian conductors: Ozawa Seiji from Japan and Chung Myung-whun from South Korea. There have been no Chinese. I want to be the first one," Chiang said.

Zhang Hanyu and Chen Hui contributed to this story

The Vienna

Top: Jimmy Chiang Photo: Courtesy of Jimmy Chiang  
The Vienna Boys' Choir performs at the MuTh Theatre in Vienna on April 29. Photo: Courtesy of Lukas Beck

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