
The history of the German Centre for Choral Music

...how a folder in a physics student's bedroom became the world's largest choral music library...

Manfred Bender had a quite extraordinary life.

After completing his secondary school education, he spent eight years as a soldier in the naval aviation, married at 21 and was already the proud father of two children by the age of 22. He played guitar in various bands and decided to go back to school for another three years after his service to get his high school diploma. He studied natural sciences at the University of Giessen. During this time, he supported his family by working as a choir director, courier driver and as a construction worker during the semester breaks. He completed his training as a choir director at Hoch's Conservatory in Frankfurt in the early 1980s, graduating with B and A degrees.

It was the year 1983.

One Sunday morning he had the idea of digitally organizing his choir music, which at that time still fit into a normal Leitz folder, using his new Commodore C64 (the first PC with 64 kB RAM).

Manfred was a newcomer to choral music, and early contact with choir directors such as Herbert Helfrich, Wolfgang Hauck, Jürgen Faßbender, Ralf Otto and Frieder Bernius motivated him to search for choral works that lay beyond the popular norm.

So it made sense for him to find out where and how to find exceptional literature that was suitable for amateur choirs, but also had a value for him that went beyond the "pleasant".

At that time, every German publisher had an individually designed catalogue in paper form. This meant that a collection of catalogues published in Germany (around 300 publishers had choral music in their programme) required 5 - 6 metres of shelving. These had to be replaced every year because the new releases were of course not included.

And the same applied to all other western countries.

Manfred contacted publishers and expressed his intention to create a digital directory for searching for choral music, but most of them dismissed the idea, saying that choral music and computers did not mix. However, a few large publishers generously offered to provide him with choral music for free or at a dealer discount so that he could "enter it into his computer".

So, unfamiliar with the industry and naive, he set about creating (or trying to create) a complete digital catalogue of choral literature.

At the time, the Bender family's marital bedroom had a 5-part wardrobe, as was common. There was no longer enough space for shelves and a desk. So Manfred "sawed" the wardrobe from top to bottom into 2 parts (2 + 3 elements) and folded the "two-part" into the room by 90 degrees. This meant he could put a desk and a shelf next to it. Madrigals and motets joined astrophysics lecture notes on his desk.

Over time, more and more publishers found out about Manfred Bender's work, which stimulated their interest. Word got around about the "invasion" of Bärenreiter, Schott, Peters, Breitkopf and Co. into the Benders' bedroom, which led to more and more fellow choir directors "getting wind of it". Many signed up to "browse" Manfred's growing collection.

For quite a while, the Bender family patiently endured the family father's unusual hobby.

Of course, it didn't stop at the bedroom. Like an epidemic, every room was "infected". Hallways, basements, attics filled up and even some rooms in the house next door were rented and filled with shelves.

Everything revolved around choral notes.

Manfred: "I had read Goethe's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, but I may not have thought of it as being relevant to me at the time." He then began to buy sheet music when publishers told him that he would be happy to buy it individually, but not for free. And more and more was added."

When Manfred was at the limit of what was financially possible, someone came up with the idea that he should simply provide choir directors and choirs with sheet music for choir size. He could then use the proceeds to cover the costs of his "project" and order a copy for each of them for the collection.

No sooner said than done, Manfred set up a mail order business for choral music and asked all the choir directors in his area to please buy their music from him. In return, they could come and "browse" and have printouts of lists of works made from the ever-growing database.

He founded a "choir director's music club" which he managed on index cards. There was no fee, no obligation and you could come and do research seven days a week, even late in the evening after choir practice.

Manfred became more and more famous because his colleagues "spreading the word" was a good advertising medium.

Trial scores were made available to choir directors free of charge in a copy-protected format, and they then commissioned Manfred to obtain the original scores from the relevant publishers, or to produce licensed prints of out-of-print works or licensed individual editions of choir books.

Word of his activities spread throughout the country. Thomas Rabbow from the German Music Council invited him to Bonn and put him in touch with Jean Claude Wilkens, the then Secretary General of the International Federation for Choral Music (IfCM) in Namur. Manfred learned that there was someone in France who had the same idea: Jean Sturm, a genetic engineer and choirmaster of a Strasbourg chamber choir. He had developed a professional program to create an international database for choral music, on which choirmasters and musicologists from several countries were already working, and German choral music was not yet represented.

Manfred was asked to join the project. He immediately agreed, added the digital treasures he had already collected to the international database and dissolved into the system like sugar in coffee.

Many such "input sessions" followed in France, Belgium, Holland, Hungary and Switzerland. Around 20 choir directors and musicologists from all over the world sat around 20 networked

computers and entered stacks of choral works into the database - and Manfred was sitting right in the middle of them.

Today there is an intensive cooperation between the DCfC and the international database for choral music "Musica International".

He attended countless choir meetings, festivals, symposia and competitions all over Europe, and spent a whole weekend "locked" himself in publishers' offices in Cologne, Prague and Budapest in order to pack one copy of each choral work into his car before it could possibly fall victim to the dissolution of the Iron Curtain. At the time, no one at the border was interested in this.

In addition, he took part in choir camps organized by regional youth choirs, accompanied the World Youth Choir on tour, and thus got to know many composers, publishers and, last but not least, many choir conductors from home and abroad.

After 25 years of marriage, different ideas for the future had developed, the children had started their own paths in life and Manfred and his wife had also entered into new relationships.

So the music collector moved with all his choral works to Hofheim in the Rhine-Main area. A large house was rented there, and again the new family lived understandingly in the midst of choir notes.

Every four years, Manfred made his rooms available to the literature commission of the German Music Council for the selection of the compulsory choral works for the German Choral Competition. The same applied to literature committees of choral associations, professors who took their students on excursions to the choral music library. He organized publishing exhibitions at festivals, the German Choral Competition, Europa Cantat and IFCM symposiums, including in 1995 at the first European Symposium for Choral Music of the International Federation for Choral Music in Ljubljana (Slovenia), where he put together a large music exhibition for 60 international choral publishers.

The choir director's music club grew bigger and bigger (over 500 members) and became more and more well-known. On the sidelines of the German choir competition in Fulda in 1994 (in an ice cream parlor), the Music in Youth Working Group (AMJ) and Manfred agreed to work together. They felt that this huge project could not be managed by one person and looked for ways to support his work.

During this time, Manfred Bender became aware that what had started was no longer a private matter, but something that affected an entire industry.

<https://youtu.be/wBkovqvmPQ>

Jürgen Faßbender on the German Centre for Choral Music

It was Klaus Knubben †, the director of the Limburg Cathedral Choir, who, together with the mayor of Limburg, initiated the initiative to bring this special reference library to Limburg. After a presentation to the magistrate in Limburg, Manfred was offered the "Gothic House" Römer'2-4-6 for use.

As a national monument, however, it could not be used for residential or commercial

purposes, nor could it be rented to a private individual. The city therefore proposed founding a cultural association to support Manfred's project.

14 founding members came together and founded the association "Deutsches Centrum für Chormusik eV (DCfC)" in 1996. The statutes were prepared by the Limburg lawyer Dr. Mathias Schäfer, who also took over the role of second chairman for several years.



The “Gothic House” Römer 2-4-6 – one of the oldest half-timbered houses (built 1289) – Was the home of DCfC eV from 1997 – 2020

After the founding of the association “Deutsches Centrum für Chormusik eV”, the choir director’s music club was dissolved and the members were asked to switch to the “Choir Director’s Forum”, which was integrated as an organ into the statutes of the newly founded association “DCfC”.

This agreement included that the substantive work would be carried out by the DCfC and the membership administration and (as a new development) the collection of membership fees would be carried out by the AMJ.

This working group was terminated in 2013. Since then, the administration has been carried out by the DCfC itself.

In 1997, around 50 Billy shelves and 300 moving boxes full of sheet music were brought to the “Gothic House” in Limburg and, after being unpacked and re-sorted, were ceremoniously inaugurated.

The AMJ proposed organizing an annual meeting for the choir directors' forum in Limburg. New literature was to be presented, with Manfred Bender taking over the selection of lecturers and the grading matters and the AMJ taking over the technical organization (finances, location, etc.).

Frieder Bernius and Jürgen Faßbender were the lecturers at the first meeting of the newly born "Choir Directors Forum". Both rehearsed with the women's chamber choir "Carpe Diem" and the men's chamber choir "Cantabile" in the Cathedral Choir Boys' Music Boarding School, with the involvement of the participants of the first Choir Directors Forum meeting.

Due to the positive response, AMJ and DCfC organized such a meeting once a year in Limburg, which was exclusively about choral literature. Every year in January, two internationally renowned composers were invited to present their works. On average, 100 choir directors met at the Limburg Marienschule, at the Pallotinerinnen or at the Leo-Sternberg-Schule to learn new things, get up close and personal with famous composers and to cultivate mutual exchange.

From 2013 onwards, the meeting of the Choir Conductors' Forum was organised and hosted independently by the German Centre for Choral Music.

The composers listed here presented their compositions within 25 years.

meeting	Speakers	concert	subjects	
1996	Jürgen Fassbender (D) Frieder Bernius (D)	"Carpe Diem" and "Cantabile"	Presentation of the chamber choirs "Carpe Diem" and "Cantabile" (Ltg. Jürgen Fassbender), works by contemporary Scandinavian Composers; work with Frieder Bernius (unknown choral literature of the Romantic period ... presentation of his working methods); official opening of the DCfC by Limburg's mayor	
1997	Kurt Suttner Helmut Steger	---	New choral music for equal and mixed voices	
1998	John Rutter (GB)	---	Rutter presentation of own compositions; Singer of "Carpe Diem" and "Cantabile" (conductor: J. Fassbender) are there	
1999	Frieder Bernius (D)	Stuttgart Chamber Choir	Final rehearsals and concert of the Stuttgart Chamber Choir; Conversation with Frieder Bernius; visit to CARUS publishing house; Rehearsals: Cornelius and Bach motets Discussion about the 5th German Choir Competition 1998 in Regensburg	
1999	Volker Hempfling (Germany) Robert Sund (S)	Concerts of the Harmonie Festival	Rehearsals and concert of the Kölner Kantorei with Hempfling; New Scandinavian choral music with Sund;	
2000	Morten Lauridsen (USA)	Norwegian Chamber Choir	Lauridsen presentation of own compositions; Sheet music exhibition, peermusic publishing house, Hamburg; Choir and choreography (Joaquina Siquice-Rawe in Representation of Seraina Stoffel)	
2001	Wolfram Buchenberg (D) (Hans-Peter Schurz) Wolfgang Stockmeier (D)	---	Reading Session Buchenberg, Stockmeier and Schurz about Erdmann; tips from choir directors to each other	

2002	Bob Chilcott (GB) Vic Nees (B)	Norwegian Chamber Choir	Reading Session Chilcott/Nees Nees also presents works by fellow composers from Belgium
2003	Knut Nystedt (N) Dr. Matthias Becker (Germany)	Women's choir "Concentus"/ (Steinear Eielsen) Norway	Reading Session Nystedt (Scandinavian choral music), Becker (jazz choir literature); Interview with Budday/Schubach about the German Choir Competition 2002
2004	Javier Busto (ES) Sylke Zimpel (D) Hans Schanderl (D)		Reading Session Busto, Schanderl and Zympel (own choir compositions)
2005	Vytautas Miskinis (LIT) Stan Engebretson (USA)	Women's choir "Cant'Ella" (Bine Becker Beck)	Reading Session Miskinis (presentation of own compositions), Engebretson (presentation of new arrangements of spirituals, gospels, jazz)
2006	Alfred Koerppen (D) Heinrich Hartl/Kurt Suttner Bo Johansson (S)	"Carpe Diem" and "Sound Colors Giessen" (Axel Pfeiffer)	Reading Session Koerppen/Hartl/Johansson
2007	Karl Jenkins (USA) Max Beckschäfer Jaako Mäntyjärvi (FI) (Gabriel Dessauer)	Girls' Choir at Essen Cathedral (Raimund Wippermann)	Reading Session/Jenkins/Mäntyjärvi
2008	Werner Pfaff (D) Javier Zentner (ARG) Jürgen Golle (Kersten Lachmann)	Studio Vocale Karlsruhe Werner Pfaff)	South American choral music Jürgen Golle has his compositions presented by Kersten Lachmann
2009	Arvo Pärt (EST) (Tonu Kaljuste) Peteris Vasks (EST) (Jan Schumacher)	Ensemble Vocal, Hamburg (Cornelius Trantow)	Kaljuste presents works by Pärt; Jan Schumacher presents Works by Vasks
2010	Sven-David Sandström (S) (Christoffer Holgersson) Veljo Tormis (EST) (Hirvo Surva)	Maulbronn Chamber Choir (Jürgen Budday)	Holgersson introduces Sandström, Surva introduces Tormis
2011	Frederik Sixten (S) Josef Swider (PL)	Young Vocal Ensemble Hannover (Klaus-Jürgen Etzold)	Choral music from Sweden and Poland
2012	John Hoyby (DK) Hungarian composers		Hoybye rehearses his own works
2013	Ben Parry (GB) Jonathan Rathbone (UK) Jonathan Dove (UK)	Extrachord Monatbaur Martin Ramroth)	The Ex Swinglesingers enchanted the participants with highly professional C-Conductor Duet

2015	Eriks Esenvalds (LV) Rihards Dubra (LV) Will Todd (UK) (Rupert Gough)		Choral music from Latvia Will Todd presents his works.	
2016	Kurt Bikkembergs (B) Enjott Schneider (D) (Martin Winkler)	Camerata Vocale Limburg (Jan Schumacher)	Reading Session Bikkembergs/Schneider Bikkembergs presents Belgian choral scenes and his own works. Schneider presents his own works and gives a talk about GEMA.	
2017	Alwin Schronen (D) Gabriel Jackson (GB) (Martin Winkler)	Harmony Lindenholzhausen (Martin Winkler)	Reading Session Schronen/Jackson	
2018	Marton Jansson (S) Stan Engebretson (USA)		Reading Session Engebretson (Nezúe Choral Music from USA) Marton Jansson (Own works from Sweden)	
2019	Damijan Mocnik (SI) Martin Palmeri (ARG)	Chamber Choir of the Mannheim University of Music (Harald Jer)s	Reading Session Mocnik (Own works from Slovenia) Palmeri Music from Argentina and own works	
2020	Sigurdur Saevarsson (IS) Christian Baehrens (D)	Carmina Mundi Aachen (Harald Nickoll)	Reading Session Saevarsson (Introduces Iceland and own) Baehrens (own choral works)	



Tonu Kaljuste rehearses works by Arvo Pärt with 120 choir conductors

In 2016/17, the Limburg Choir Center expanded immensely. Almost 1,000 visits by choir directors each year demonstrated the great interest in the facility.

As part of the FSJ-Kultur placement, young high school graduates with an interest in choral music completed their voluntary year at the DCfC.

As everything living grows, the choir collection in Limburg naturally continued to grow. And as early as 2017, it became apparent that this wonderful old building, which had become an international "symbol" for choral music in the world, would no longer be able to withstand the static load after 24 years.



Masses for Mixed Choir

Firstly, there was no longer enough space. The load of the now more than twice as many choral works (365,000) was borderline, in the winter months it was quite cold on the ground floor and visitors had to read music with gloves and hats, although the biggest financial factor was the high heating costs. Apparently people were not so sensitive to the cold in the 13th century.

Architects in the city wondered whether the house would be damaged by the heavy load of paper. Some "authority theorists" from Limburg were worried that the choir works would suck moisture out of the wooden floor, which would lead to cracks in the floor veneer. In short, the association was terminated on December 31, 2019.

Together with Mayor Dr. Marius Hahn, they began looking for a suitable location, but nothing could be found without significantly higher costs.

The 24th choir directors' meeting could still be held in January 2020.

Manfred Bender (70) had already started packing the choir music in 2019 with his daughter Johanna (19) and the secretary Bernd Bendel (70). This took several months. And the Covid pandemic with all its side effects such as lockdown made the whole thing almost impossible. So Manfred and his two helpers had to pack in separate shifts because of the lockdown.

At first there was an offer from Marburg that sounded feasible. Unfortunately, this fell through in the autumn due to structural reasons, and so they were under time pressure with no prospect of a solution.

It was thanks to a detailed article in the press that the Hessischer Rundfunk drew attention to the problem. The Hessenschau and the Hessian radio programs reported on it and as a result, some landlords offered rooms, none of which were suitable from a technical point of view.

The businessman Manuel Rupp from the company WeLog Wetzlar became aware of the emergency situation through a broadcast by HR. He then offered the association affordable

rooms in his office and warehouse building as "asylum" with the words "It's not always just about money, promoting culture is also important to me. I'll help you."

A weight was lifted from everyone's shoulders. They had already considered the horror vision of storing the entire library in a barn or garage.

The move took place on April 18th. Bernd, Johanna, Manfred and 4 volunteers carried 55 Billy shelves, 850 packed moving boxes filled with choir music and a lot of furniture and office supplies from 4 floors outside, over the cobblestones to pallets that were about 30m below. These were loaded into 2 large trucks and driven to Wetzlar. (approx. 18 tons)

Within a few weeks, the entire inventory was moved to the first floor of the company WeLOG there, the library found shelter in modern, bright offices that are evenly air-conditioned and dust-free, and which are ideal as a reference library for choir directors looking for a place to work.

Here Manfred was able to carry out the urgently needed structural improvements to the library, adapting the sorting to today's needs without neglecting the "old". A small museum department was also set up in which choir books dating back to the 19th century are available for study.

https://youtu.be/gEsS6b_h10w

Mayor Dr. Marius Hahn thanks the DCfC on behalf of the city of Limburg.

After Manfred Bender has devoted 35 years of his life to building up this institution, he thinks it is important to think about the future of this collection. "As you get older, many things go slower and the clocks go faster," he says when asked.

Looking back with satisfaction doesn't help anyone. It's more important to move on.

The wonderfully suitable office space and the helping hands of Mr. Rupp and his staff are intended by both sides as a temporary asylum. The aim must be to make the German Center for Choral Music and its treasures into a permanent and privately or publicly funded institution, so that the world's unique "Noah's Ark of Choral Music" (WDR) has benefited more than just one generation.

If not in Germany, maybe in another part of the world...



Measure



Children's choir

Unfortunately, the restrictions during the three-year pandemic have put the institution in great distress. Visits by choir directors were not possible, the loss of sponsors and the cancellation of the choir directors' forum meetings led to financial difficulties.

For this reason, the move to Wetzlar could only be carried out with considerable difficulties. Nevertheless, Manfred remains confident that everything will be fine in the end.

THANK YOU LIMBURG!

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And so on