

Education

Choirs a sight for sore eyes

Greta Ng

MUSIC, FOR PERHAPS all but the occasional religious zealot, can transcend the boundaries that people so often draw between themselves and others. A choral performance particularly can restore that connection and, in trying times, even some long-forgotten sense of harmony.

That can literally be seen in the Hong Kong Inter-School Choral Festival's recent collaboration with New Sight.

It consisted of a virtual choir project in support of efforts to build the first eye hospital in Congo.

"This is more than just a regular music project," Kevin Lau, artistic director of HKICF, said.

"We want the kids to learn how music intertwines with so many aspects of life.

Launched by the Hong Kong Virtuoso Chorus, HKICF has been providing choral education to local schools since 2011.

Spanning Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Norway and Congo, the project brings together 50 choirs and more than 2,000 participants to perform an original theme song, *Love's Boundless Flight*, stitched into a music video.

"It would be incredibly difficult 20 years ago to put together so many videos from people in different countries," Lau said.

"It warms my heart to see Congolese children singing the song," he said.

New Sight was founded by Joyce Samoutou-Wong, a family doctor here, and her husband Henri Samoutou in 2012.

Since it pioneered the first non-profit eye care center in Congo over a decade ago, the charity has empowered local communities through eye services, training programs and education—including the country's first optical workshop to produce prescription glasses.

"This virtual choir is about helping children see the needs of the world, and not just that, but actually



exercise what is already in their hands to make a difference," said Samoutou-Wong.

"For this project, we're able to get about 50 students involved and they loved it.

"In Hong Kong, children are encouraged to reach for the stars, right? Whereas children in Congo really don't have the kind of opportunities that we sometimes take for granted," she said.

As their first eye center in the rural north of Congo was so remote that only the people within the area could receive help, Samoutou-Wong and her family relocated to Ouesso in 2019 to build a comprehensive eye hospital at the invitation of the local government, set to open by the end of this year.

She continued: "During Covid, our children started the country's first children's magazine from



the project Two Front Teeth. We partnered with over 30 schools, and that magazine has a national readership of 22,000 and is still growing. We see that health and education goes hand in hand.

"We're extremely proud of the work that we've been able to do and that's only been possible with supporters globally.

To be honest, my husband and I never set out to establish any charity.

"We're medics, we open a door to help people in need," Samoutou-Wong said.

HKICF has held virtual choir projects in support of health-care workers and the Children's Cancer Foundation.

What started as a platform to connect students online during the pandemic has emerged as a celebration of music, strength and love.



"A doctor is a career path that many children dream of embarking upon," said Lau.

"And for someone who has gone that far, sacrificing their personal comfort to serve people in dire need, it certainly provides them with the context for the song and I hope it inspires the children."

It has certainly inspired Byra Lam, a primary school student in one of the choirs.

"I want to tell the children and the people in Congo that even though we live on different continents, we'll still support each other, no matter what," said Lam.

For another student, Zandrix Lam, it's the lyrics that touch him.

"The line that I like the most in *Love's Boundless Flight* is 'love is everywhere.' It really is if we choose to find it."

To view the virtual choir, visit the YouTube channel of the Hong Kong Virtuoso Chorus. For further details, check out HKICF and New Sight's websites: <https://hkicf.com/> and <https://www.newsightcongo.com/>.

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