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Choir Tour of Europe Unites Students, Alumni for Ferguson's Final Performance

BY JULIA PEREZ | JULY 25, 2024

NEWS

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — A shared devotion to music and the legacy of a retiring choral professor united Illinois Wesleyan University alumni and students for an award-winning Collegiate Choir tour in Europe this summer.

Fern Rosetta Sherff Endowed Professor of Music J. Scott Ferguson is retiring after nearly 30 years as a music educator at [IWU's School of Music](#). During his tenure, he served as the Director of Choral Activities and led annual domestic concert tours during spring break and six international tours with Collegiate Choir, the school's touring choral ensemble.

His seventh and final international tour with Illinois Wesleyan musicians came in June as a group of 46 current students and alumni toured and performed in Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic.

"Like study-abroad programs, international choral tours are life-changing experiences," said Ferguson. "But these tours are especially impactful, because they heighten the awareness of our shared humanity at a level of intensity and personal intimacy that is only possible through music."



Current students and alumni joined retiring Director of Choral Activities Scott Ferguson for a final Collegiate Choir tour to Europe in June. The group is pictured here after being named overall winner of the Voce Magna International Choral Competition in Žilina, Slovakia.

Among several concerts, the choir performed in the Voce Magna International Choral Competition in Žilina, Slovakia, where they earned first place in the mixed choir category, a special award for best program and the grand prix award as overall winner of the competition.

"To me, our success at the competition reflected our preparation for every concert and annual domestic tour during my time at IWU. It was as if every choir was performing at the competition. I don't know how else to express this feeling. I was very proud of the choir as a representative of what we've shared over the past 28 years," said Ferguson.

Devin Johnston '14 joined the Collegiate Choir trip as an alumnus. While studying music education at IWU, he performed in the Collegiate Choir and Chamber Singers all four years. Johnston said learning and performing with Ferguson was a staple of his college days and the connection didn't end after graduation.

"Dr. Ferguson and I stayed in touch through the years, where he helped me get into Vandercook's graduate program for music education. He also had the Collegiate Choir perform an original composition that I wrote in 2017 and has invited me to give lectures to his Secondary Choral Methods students for the last three years," said Johnston. "When the opportunity came up to sing under his direction again, I came running."

A highlight of the trip for Johnston was the choir's winning performances in Slovakia, which he described as a victory and final send-off for Ferguson into retirement. He said the tour showcased the universal nature of music, especially as the Titans performed alongside choirs from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, witnessing choral traditions and shared joy from international performers.

"There is so much to see in the world. When the Collegiate Choir went to Germany in 2012, it was my first time on another continent. To this day, I can still remember just how much that trip broadened my mind and perspective about the world," said Johnston.

Reese Suddarth is a sophomore vocal performance major who participated in the Collegiate Choir tour, which served as their first international venture as a student. The opportunity to travel with the choir gave Suddarth a taste of European culture and "what it takes to be a musician in this capacity."

"This was an incredibly packed and wonder-filled experience," said Suddarth. "This kind of opportunity is special because it not only gives a choir the chance to travel abroad, but it allows us to experience what music is like in other cultures and experience it for ourselves outside of a classroom."

Attendees also spoke fondly of a brunch celebration hosted by Ferguson and his wife Eva at their log cabin home in the hills of Mariková, Slovakia. The IWU Collegiate Choir and members of the local folklore ensemble *Žrnovanka* then gave a joint performance to a packed concert hall.

Additional performances by the group featured a piece in Saint Kinga's Chapel 101 meters underground in the Wieliczka Salt Mine in Poland, and full-length concerts at the Penderecki Academy of Music in Kraków, Poland; and at Saint Nicholas Church in the Old Town in Prague.



The choir performs at Saint Nicholas Church in the Old Town in Prague.