

Music and the arts a highlight of summer gatherings

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Singing was the draw at a festival of choirs in the Congo, while in Venezuela, both plastic arts and music played a key role at the annual Baha'i summer school.

In the United Kingdom, the long-running Academy for the Arts gave 300 people the opportunity to focus on art, music, writing, or dance at a summer retreat. And in the United States, renowned Baha'i singer Narges and the Unity Bluegrass Band were among the performers who added an artistic element to the 50th year of the popular Green Lake conference.

All four events are sponsored by Baha'is and took place in August. Other seasonal events in a host of countries also featured the arts, including an annual Arts Week in both Bulgaria and the Netherlands.

The choir festival in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was the second such gathering since the annual event resumed after a 12-year hiatus caused by war and unrest in the eastern part of the country.

"Before the war, every year there was the festival," said Ahmad Parsa, a resident of neighboring Rwanda who attended part of the three-day event.

Some 16 choirs – mostly youth – presented original songs focusing on the life of Baha'u'llah and of the Bab. Each year, a theme is announced beforehand, and singers prepare new material.

The event is always in the province of South Kivu, but the exact locale changes. This year it was held in Sange, where local residents gave a warm welcome to the hundreds of festivalgoers and a Christian church allowed use of a property it owned for the venue, Mr. Parsa said.

At this year's seasonal school in Venezuela – held annually at the Baha'i institute in the city of Cabudare – a portion of each day was set aside for arts-related activities.

"We worked with clay for two days and then made papier mache instruments – tambourines,

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rain sticks, maracas – the other two days," said Nuriyeh McLaren, who helped plan the school.

"The last night we had a bonfire, and everybody took the instruments they had made and we sang songs and played them," she said. "One of the nights we also had a talent show, and people sang, danced, did mini-dramas on all different topics – Baha'i themes, cultural themes, taking care of the environment. ..."

Youngsters aged 11 to 15 had two sessions specifically dedicated to the importance of the arts and how to use them for service to others, she added. "In general, all the children's classes and pre-youth workshops had an artistic activity of some kind – painting, coloring, dramas, music, pasting, cutting, story-telling."

The theme of the summer school was "Hoy Te Sumas Tu" (Today You Join In), which is the title of a song written by one of the Baha'is. "It was taught and sung during the whole school, and everybody still sings it all over the country," Ms. McLaren said.

In England, the annual Academy for the Arts offered 19 different courses and attracted people from around the world, said Margaret Appa, who has been involved with the event since its founding in 1993.

"Participants work on one course for the week," she said.

Offerings included songwriting, watercolor painting, dance, public speaking, acting, audiovisual production, choir directing (the name of the course was "Leading a choir when all you can do is sing"), and drawing. A class on writing, both fiction and nonfiction, was titled "Write to change the world." Three of the 19 classes were designed for youths aged 11 to 16.

"It's very much a family event," she said.

The Academy for the Arts, which this year was held at Wellington College, Berkshire, is aimed at giving people an environment in which to study an area of the arts and develop their creativity.

"We work completely by encouragement," Mrs. Appa said, "to be warm and loving, but also to be challenging. We strive for excellence, but one person's excellence is not the same as another person's."

Participants also are treated to a schedule of evening performances, films, and talks by guest speakers – "something to stretch people," Mrs. Appa said.

"We have discovered over the years that some of the people, during the year, never go to a play, never go to a concert, never go to see a film," another of the organizers noted.

The Academy for the Arts has grown from about 25 participants its first year to this year's 300 – 270 students and 30 tutors and staff members.

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In the United States, the annual Green Lake Baha'i Conference in central Wisconsin – always known for its stellar lineup of speakers – this year celebrated its 50th anniversary with outstanding performing artists as well.

"The Green Lake committee has been superb at elevating the arts," noted one conference participant.

The singer Narges – who has performed at major international venues, including Carnegie Hall in New York, Tchaikovsky Hall in Moscow, and Winston Churchill Hall in London – had appeared previously at Green Lake and returned for the golden anniversary.

A special treat was a presentation by the Unity Bluegrass Band, an ensemble that had been popular in the Chicago area back in the 1970s and 1980s and had played at Green Lake once before, in 1977.

"They had not been together in 20 years, and they had a reunion there and performed to a very appreciative crowd," said Ellen Price, who was in the audience. "People were up on their feet, dancing to the music."

Performances were offered both on the main stage at the conference and at a coffee house. Among the presenters were the singer-musician Alessandro and two women who performed an original drama by Beth Carrier about events following the martyrdom of the Bab in 1850.

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