

Recollections by Choir members of special musical experiences

Margaret Duncan

New York churches have for many years held Community Sings in the summer. There are so many good choirs that you could attend a Mozart Requiem one week, Brahms the next, and so on. One day after a New York friend had walked me all over SoHo, Chinatown, Little Italy and Brooklyn, I popped in intending to watch just a few minutes of the Mozart Requiem back at St. George's Church. I politely declined a score... till I saw everyone in the audience had one and was singing along. So after years of listening to this work and loving it (but never having sung it or anything else in a choir), I was suddenly finding out moment to moment how it actually went! Every thrill was followed by the next so quickly. Needless to say, I couldn't leave! There were world-class soloists and an excellent conductor, who would sometimes turn to chat to us and encourage us. There was such a feeling of community in that church that night. May it all soon return.

Christine Norris:

Long before I had the privilege of joining the choir - and I can never be grateful enough to Debbie Lewis-Bizley for that :) - I went to high tea at Guillaume at the SOH. My sister was visiting from Adelaide and we love a high tea so I booked this one that featured arias sung by a member of Opera Australia. I can't tell you any details but from the first note I was in heaven. I do not mean the music was "heavenly". I mean I was in heaven. To think heaven is real is one thing, but to experience it as reality is a gift I cannot describe. With the choir, I have had many moments when the barrier is gone so my heart is full of gratitude.

Naomi Roseth

Many years ago I was at the Opera House listening to Mahler 5 concert. My husband sat to my right and a stranger to my left. Mahler's music lifts me to higher spheres and this concert was no exception. At the end of a rousing ovation we turned towards the exit. The man on my left tapped me gently on my shoulder and pointed out that I left my handbag behind. Men may not relate to this but for a woman to leave a handbag is like leaving an arm behind. I just never do that. I thanked him profusely and muttered something about not understanding how this could happen to me. He said: "I am not surprised. I sensed that listening took you somewhere else". To this day I cannot imagine what vibes I was transmitting. What was it about my behaviour and reaction to that music that could be picked up by a total stranger with whom I did not exchange a word?"

Roger Pratt

Growing up in the fenland marshes of England offered little by way of classical music experience, but there was the annual Kings Lynn Festival, the highlight of which was a concert by the Halle Orchestra conducted by Sir John Barbirolli. As an eager 15 year old I went to my first serious concert, seated just a few rows from the great man. The first work on the programme was Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, the Pastoral. I knew that you didn't clap between movements, and most of the audience seemed also to know that. There was desultory applause at the end of the first movement but a scowl from Sir John quelled that. So we all counted the movements, and at the end of the fourth the audience erupted,

clapping and cheering. The problem was, of course, that the Pastoral is unusual in having five movements. Sir John's shoulders slumped. Finally, when the applause subsided, he looked over his shoulder and said "I might have expected that from a farming community". We all mistook his point, thought he was commending us, so we all cheered and clapped some more. He eventually struggled through the final movement, leaving the audience in some confusion as to what it was, but we clapped and cheered anyway. He never came back.

Judith Dallas

Back in 2014 Kevin and I arrived in Leipzig on their June long weekend. Unbeknown to us it happened to coincide with the global annual Gothic festival weekend. It was a sweltering hot day and we couldn't work out why everyone was dressed in black leather, tattoos and piercings everywhere.

We had booked tickets at the Opera House for the Mozart Requiem performed as a ballet with full choir orchestra and soloists. We were surprised to see a large representation of the gothic crowd in the audience. The performance was amazing We had the added pleasure of stunning images created by the ballet to this wonderful music. An experience we will never forget.

John Moore:

Way back in 1971 I was in the city of Hannover, West Germany and i had been staying with pen friends. One night they decided to surprise me with something that would greatly entertain me but they wouldn't say what it was. Come evening we drove off and arrived at Hannover's famous baroque gardens. I then suspected that some musical performance was going to occur as rows of seats were located in the pathways as well as there was an orchestra tuning up on a structure nearby. This structure in itself was most interesting as it was a raised garden 2 or 3 metres above us, presumably built centuries ago and had plants growing all over it. The undergrowth made it difficult to see the orchestra, but maybe that was intentional.

At this point I was sighting posters that were giving me a clue on what was to happen. The posters were referring to the performance being a celebration of Handel's birthday. I than thought, well that's nice, we are going to hear baroque music in the baroque gardens (In those days I had very little knowledge of Handel's music). As the night set in I then realised that some sort of performance was going to occur in the vicinity of one of the ornate pools. What happened next blew me away. The orchestra starts playing and out from the bushes came several dancing couples dressed in the costumes of Handel's time. They immediately start dancing the minuet around the edge of the pool. Simultaneously a row of bright white ground set fireworks were lit as a backdrop to the dancers. This made them silhouettes to us in the audience. The image was like watching one of those monotone rotating picture wheels of the 18th century.

As all had been kept a secret from me I was totally dumbstruck and knew It was something I would never forget. Unfortunately, I do not recollect the Handel piece/s that were being

played. The night continued with more chamber music in a small concert venue nearby but the crowd was too numerous to make that appreciative, but notwithstanding it certainly was a memorable time.

Carolynn Everett:

A concert in Warsaw ...

It was April 2013, and we were in Warsaw. Several months previously we had booked tickets for a concert to be given by the European Union Youth Orchestra, under the direction of Vladimir Ashkenazy.

We have always enjoyed Ashkenazy's concerts with the SSO here in Sydney, and the EUYO has a sterling reputation. These exceptionally talented young musicians, chosen from member countries of the EU, get together each year for some weeks of rehearsal before going on tour, and this was the last night of the 2013 tour.

As we left the hotel that night we discovered that there was a political demonstration in the square outside, and the city centre, including all public transport, was basically now in lockdown - so our plan to catch a train to the concert was no longer possible! The friendly concierge at our hotel finally found us a hire car driver who was prepared (for a price!) to get us to the concert hall by various back streets. This hair-raising trip obviously took longer than normal, but somehow we arrived at the concert hall right on the dot of the starting time – only to discover that the concert had been put back half an hour, to allow for the late arrival of other concert-goers who had encountered similar problems to ours.

The Filharmonia Narodowa - Warsaw's Philharmonic Hall – is over one hundred years old. In spite of (or maybe because of?) its age, the hall has excellent acoustics, and we thoroughly enjoyed the orchestra's magnificent performances of music by Lutoslawski, Ravel, and Poulenc.

The finale of the concert was Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring". Throughout the night the tension had been building, with these amazing, enthusiastic young musicians absolutely loving every minute of this year's final performance, and the air was just electric as the Stravinsky began. For the next 35 or so minutes these brilliant young musicians gave Ashkenazy everything they had, the music just surged with energy, and it was absolutely magical! As the music built, and built, and built to the last section you could feel the excitement both on stage and in the audience, and at the end the audience simply exploded into applause.

We have heard many performances of "The Rite of Spring" (*and we hope that we will do so again some day!*) but this one was simply outstanding, and it was an absolute privilege to be there.

Kerry Foster:

I was spending time in Wadi Musa, southwest Jordan, and had extensively explored the ancient city of Petra, exhausting myself in the heat, with the wonders of the magnificent

architecture carved into the cliff faces and the spectacularly coloured rock formations. I had visited the spring where Moses is said to have struck the rock and brought forth water, which still flows today. I had spent a day in Wadi Rum, the vast desert made famous in the film "Lawrence of Arabia"; my fascination with the vast variety of rock formations grew. Yet I was curious about "Little Petra" a remote canyon behind the main valley of that famous city. It claimed "the best view in the world" – really??

The guide drove me to the entrance, and left me to find my way. It was quite simple – a kilometre or so walk through a meandering canyon with steep, cave-studded rock walls, ending with a rugged gorge, at the foot of which, would be a rough hewn sign in hand-written English, "To the best view in the world."

It was September 2014; the Gaza war was not far away. There were only a few western tourists: four Germans were leaving as I arrived. The canyon was now empty – wonderful for photography! Excessive digital exposures later, I reached the sign. The climb looked rather rocky and intimidating- but there were some steps formed in the stone. It was very hot, but I had hat, sunglasses and a backpack with water and my camera. Come on. Fifteen to twenty minutes climbing. The steps became irregular boulders, and the ascent steeper. Fine sand from the eroding sandstone made hand, as well as foot grip, hazardous. Was this really a good idea? Were my knees up to it? Can't turn back now...

My breathing was becoming irregular. I was confronted by a huge rock-fall blocking most of the remaining ascent- and the top still looked a long way off. Anxiety was increasing. I stopped to drink some water and my sunglasses slipped off and down a deep crack. The glare. I must get them. Laid down on the rocks, wriggled about, and finally, my arm was just long enough to retrieve them! More water. Panic? Be rational. Was this a life threatening situation? – Yes, a slip from this height, tumbling over rocks for hundreds of feet would definitely finish me off. Slow the breathing. I was contemplating my next move when I heard whistling- quite tuneful! Relief- at least there was another person around. To my surprise a rather wild looking Bedouin, wearing jeans, T-shirt and back-to-front baseball cap, sprang from the rocks above demanding to know if I was alone. No. I lied. Rapid fire questions followed: Was I married? Where was my husband? Why wasn't he here with me? Why didn't my friends come with me? More lies. Why are you here? The truth. I just want to see the "best view....". "Well, you are going the way," he snapped. Internally,- keep calm- I haven't much money left and a disappeared westerner wouldn't be good for the local tourist economy. And my chances of survival with this rather wild looking man with a staccato approach, were better than the rocky alternative. Warily and respectfully, "Could you please show me the right way?" His manner changed immediately, "Yes- you must come this way." He helped me squeeze past the rock-fall and led me to the top. By this time my initial quest had become rather secondary. "Would you like a cup of tea?" Yes please! (Bedouins make wonderful tea from desert grasses.) He boiled water on a primus stove in a cave. We sat at what felt like the top of the world, talked and drank the tea. This was wonderful. I felt welcome and safe.

But that wasn't all. My rescuer then produced a rough-looking piece of what looked like 1950s one inch plumbing pipe with a few holes in it, put it to his lips, as one would a flute and started playing! I listened with amazement! After some time, he insisted I try. Needless to say, my primary school skills with a recorder many decades ago, and all the diligence I could now muster, were quite irrelevant. I could not elicit a squeak. However, with "the best view in the world", cups of tea and live music in the wilderness, what more could I ask for?

Richard Griffiths:

Last year's production of Madama Butterfly by Opera Australia was brilliant. Fabulous singers, great orchestral playing, and understated staging which subtly contributed to the changing moods of successive scenes. The whole opera is a bit of a tear jerker, and the last scene is absolutely heart-rending. Opera Australia told the story in a most compelling and absorbing way. We could not but be enthralled from start to finish.

The night we were there, at the end of the final scene there was absolute stillness and silence throughout the auditorium for several seconds. Muted applause started up, eventually swelling to a huge sound. After some time and many curtain calls, the cast made it clear that they were going home. We in the audience still did not move for some time – we were still digesting the story, the music, and the wonderful way OA had related such a poignant tale. Even when we did move, there was no jostling on the way out. People stood aside for others, conversations were struck up with strangers – it was just such a magical end to a wonderful evening.

Joan Sample:

We were in The Veneto in Italy with a small music tour group. We were taken to a medieval castle and seated on the ground floor of a tower. An orchestra of ancient instruments started playing Monteverdi and suddenly members of I Fagiolini gradually appeared above us singing. The sound was so beautiful: it was "spine chilling."