

AUTUN, FRANCE

Friday, July 18, 2008

3:00pm, Autun

Bonjour, everyone!

It always amazes me how much can happen in just a day. I suppose I should be used to having the group immediately hit the ground running (it's happened this way on all of our European tours), but it's still difficult to have less than 24 hours of recovery time. The good thing is that my dear colleagues rarely complain and are always consummate professionals. But it's more than a lack of grumbling - it's the fact that, even when fatigued, they still perform well. And last night's concert was no exception. (I'll get to that in a bit.)

Yesterday was indeed full. I hadn't been on French soil for much more than a day and I was already in planning meetings. The directors of all the choirs met at Lycée Bonaparte (it's actually where the man went to school as a boy!) and we had a rather intense informational session. The Italian director, Paola, is a total gem and we hit it off immediately. The Hungarian director doesn't speak a word of French and I got the impression that perhaps he doesn't speak English either (although he might just be a quiet person), so I didn't get to talk to him. The Romanian director didn't show up (it was obvious that the festival organizers were wondering where the Romanians were in general). The meeting was conducted in French but the organizers spoke slowly enough that I was able to make out the details and later deliver the info to the Rosies.

A little later, there was a quick meeting/rehearsal with all the choirs (still no Romanians). We had to learn a couple pieces we'd be singing for the opening of the festival later in the day. I also had a short meeting with the Rosies and we figured out what we'd be singing in the evening. It's nice to be able to work with such flexible folks, that's for sure.

We decided to have a rehearsal at the Cathedral at 4:00pm yesterday. We were all dead-tired but knew it was the smart thing to do in order to be ready for the concert (we opened the festival with our performance last night). Le Cathédrale Saint-Lazare is a gorgeous (11th-12th-century) church that has architectural and design features unique enough to make it quite famous in France. See more about it [here](#).

They play a CD of vocal music continuously in the church, and the control panel was in a locked room, so we got worried that we'd have to rehearse competing with the recording. We eventually found someone to turn it off. Our rehearsal ended up drawing a lot of tourists and several ended up coming to the concert later in the evening.

I should mention that while Autun – the more I see of it – is a gorgeous city, it is not a typical tourist destination. It should be by all accounts, considering the Cathedral, the impressive square, the Roman ruins, etc. But because Autun has an insignificant train station, and because it is not well-connected to the national transportation system, it has managed to stay surprisingly untouched by non-French tourists. (Famous last words, I know, but you've gotta trust me on this one.) Even after the concert last night, when hundreds of people had just poured out of the

church, we had absolutely no problem finding a street café at which to have a celebratory drink. I was walking back to my hotel at about 12:30 and there was not a soul on the streets. This is a gorgeous French town in the middle of summer and it's just as sleepy as can be!! And I should mention that you can get a decent glass of wine here for close to nothing (eight of us shared two "pitchers" of wine and paid 7.50 Euros).

At 8:00pm last night, all the choirs assembled on the steps of City Hall, where there was an official proclamation issued to open the festival. We all sang the songs we learned early in the day, and each choir also sang two pieces from their home country. We chose *Hawai'i Aloha* (what could be called the people's Hawaiian anthem) and *Jesus the Light of the World* (an old-time tent revival song). During the Italians' number, the organizer sneaked up the steps and asked me if we would sing another, so we finished that part of the ceremony with our brand-new arrangement of *Balm in Gilead*, featuring a descant written by Monte Mason of the Gregorian Singers in Minneapolis. Everything went very well, although Ginna and I agreed later that we prefer "our other music" to spirituals.

After a hot and sweaty jaunt up the hill to the Cathedral, The Rose Ensemble gathered and prepared for our concert. It was supposed to start at 9:30, but by the time people finally got situated in the church, and the priest and various officials gave their welcome speeches, we didn't walk out on stage until 10:00pm. Doesn't seem like a big deal, I know, but remember that this was only our second day here and we'd been going non-stop since morning. We had a little pep-talk in the green room (the sacristy – where else?) and all decided that we were tired but felt good and were ready to perform.

The concert really went well and I left the stage very pleased. We had decided on a program of only early European music, with a large dose of medieval French repertoire. Some would say that was daring, but it turned out to be a marvelous choice, as countless people complimented us specifically on our programming. The church was overflowing with people (standing room only) but once we began, the massive audience turned eerily silent. They clearly appreciated the program, which was enhanced by our choice (a need, really) to announce our selections from the stage. Heather, John and Tim all did fantastic jobs and spoke beautiful French. After their song introductions, each actually received applause! (I suppose it's not every day a French audience hears Americans singing medieval chant and polyphony from the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, let alone speaking pleasant French.)

We received two thunderous curtain calls and decided to sing an encore of Sergey Khvoshchinskiy's *Bogoroditse Devo, Raduysia*. Poor Bill Hudson (visiting singer from Indiana) had only rehearsed it once with us, and we were already massively handicapped without Mark Dietrich (indeed, neither Dustin Wirth nor Mark came with us on this trip), but it still turned out fine. In fact, we sold all of the "Fire of the Soul" discs we brought for the night.

It's hard to describe with words, but there is something so profound about singing in a medieval European church. Add that to the fact that we were in a 12th-century church, singing 12th-century sacred music, and you will hopefully understand what I'm talking about. We are so insignificant in the grand path of history, there is no doubt. But to be part of a musical "lineage" of nine centuries makes one truly appreciate art, music, architecture and history on a whole new level.

It's times like that when I feel blessed.

The night turned slightly chilly, but we were drenched from performing (I don't recall the last time I sweated that much in concert) and were happy to relax outdoors at the café. It was a full moon and just as it rose above the top of the Cathedral, an army of narrow strips of clouds moved quickly in front of the moon's glowing surface. (It looked like a perfect werewolf sky, if that helps.) Then the moon caused what I can only describe as an upside-down "night rainbow" and cast onto the lower clouds the most incredible curve of dark yellow, purple and blue. As the entire sky became deep indigo, the towers of the cathedral looked even more majestic. It was one of those moments when everyone stopped in their tracks and simply stared in awe at the utter beauty of the union of sky, moon and building.

We had a 9:00am rehearsal this morning, which is for *Requiem* by Gabriel Fauré. (This director heard that some of his distinguished colleagues went to bed at 5:00am, but news sources report that he pretended he didn't know a thing...) The *Requiem* will be sung by all the choirs (with a full orchestra) at the end of this particular festival (July 25 and 26). Needless to say, we were all a little tired and not in the mood to sing (especially a piece that we all already know so well), but it's fun to sing with the other choirs and to work under a French conductor.

I should mention that there was a short review of last night's concert in this morning's paper that said: "*Avec ses voix d'anges et sous la direction de Jordan Sramek, le chœur américain a enchanté le public autunois.*" (Jordan's rough translation: "with the voices of angels and under the direction of Jordan Sramek, the American choir enchanted the Autunian audience.") (Read the full article [here](#)).

I am officially tired and I'm going for a walk. We have the whole night off, and I'm thinking about asking the Romanians if they'll let me hitch a ride on their tour bus. I would like to hear them in concert (many good young voices in that group). Not sure what the rest of The Rose Ensemble is doing tonight, but tomorrow's 9:00am rehearsal will come soon enough.

A bientôt –
Jordan