

Friday, August 1, 2008

On the road from Vaison la Romaine to Donzère

Bonjour, everyone, and greetings from beautiful Provence!

It's been several days since you've heard from me and I apologize for making anyone worry. Free time has been almost impossible to find, and typing on my laptop on the bus (the time when I usually write to you) is nearly impossible. It's great to have a cute little coach just for us but the ride is crazy-bumpy. And because of busy highways (it's vacation time for many French people), we are forced to take winding country roads almost all of the time. That all said, there's a lot to tell and I hope I'll be able to adequately fill you in on all our activities over the past week.

We arrived in Vaison la Romaine on July 27 after a long and hot bus ride from Autun. We were fortunate, however, to have the coolest bus driver in the world, Roland, who has been our transportation and dear friend for the last several days. His driving is pretty crazy, I must say, and poor Kris spends much of the rides on the floor (she suffers something awful from motion sickness), but he is amazing at maneuvering this bulky bus through the narrowest of streets.

Vaison is a breathtakingly beautiful little city. Like many towns and villages in this incredible region, it's rich with history - specifically Roman ruins and a medieval quarter that almost made me weep. What's great about it is that, in spite of the hefty presence of tourists (especially Dutch and Germans), it maintains the elegant charm of a relatively small town. The medieval quarter is impressively well-preserved, with most of the buildings still being used as dwellings, and the "newer" part filled with cafes, shops and restaurants.

The region's terrain and climate is definitely Mediterranean: it's rocky, dry and hot, with lavender and olive and fig trees everywhere, but it can also be lush and green, with rolling hills and little farms all over the place. Most buildings boast washed out stone, and flowers grow in pots, on trellises and in tiny gardens everywhere. And, of course, there are the vineyards. Provence produces 60% of all the wine consumed in France and it definitely shows. Vineyards here can be massive, sprawling over hundreds of acres, or they can be small little plots of land tucked between a road and field of brilliant yellow sunflowers. It was 40 degrees Celsius the first day we arrived (that's over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and definitely a change from the 75-80 we had every day in Burgundy). It hasn't even thought about raining here, and the nights are clear and spectacular. The stars are so bright (I think that's Venus I see shining so brilliantly); the other night I witnessed the most impressive falling star I have ever seen.

We are housed just outside Vaison (only about a 15-minute walk to the medieval quarter) in what could be called a boarding school or a retreat center. I understand it was originally constructed to serve as a music school but it can now be rented by any type of group. The rooms are simple and clean, there's a nice cafeteria on the grounds, and the whole complex is situated at the edge of a forest inhabited by two beautiful white horses (I'll bet you thought I was going to say unicorns) and the most cacophonous empire of cicadas I have ever heard. We are served breakfast and lunch here each day (although we get back to camp so late most nights that many of us miss breakfast, which is only served until 9am) and the food is really good. Typical Provence fare means using what is fresh and never smothering anything in a sauce like you would find in, say, the Loire Valley. Lunch is always served buffet style, and usually features fresh garden produce like tomatoes, cucumbers and lettuce, along with various cold salads using things like lentils, red beans, celery, corn and red cabbage. There's always a good selection of cold

sliced meats (lots of pork) and often there's some roasted chicken or even fish. Of course, there's always plenty of cheese and hearty bread (not the typical French baguette, but more towards a rustic Italian-style bread), and dessert is usually a tiramisu-like delight or a selection of fresh fruit. Rosé is king here, and chilled pitchers are served with every meal, although you can ask for red and they'll happily bring it (available chilled or at room temperature).

Dinners are a lot of fun, as they are almost always served to us in the towns where we perform. We've had everything from a simple picnic on the grass outside the church to a sit-down dinner in a local restaurant (mmm, j'adore le canard). This has really been great, because it gives us a chance to get a feel of the various villages, the local people and the food. There is almost always a reception of some sort following the concerts, and we just love socializing with the audiences afterwards. (There was also one night when we were served homemade crêpes before the concert. Oh my god, you've never had crêpes like this.)

I've been giving lots of post-concert, hurdy-gurdy demonstrations (so what else is new?) and we've all been working on our French. Of course, Tim and John and Heather deserve the most credit, as they have been introducing pieces from the stage; I'm so proud of them for doing this, and the audiences appreciate it enormously. (Additionally, people can't believe that we are real live Americans who speak French.)

As for our music-making, things couldn't be going better. We are here at a festival that exclusively showcases award-winning choirs, and we are one of only four here (the others are from Taiwan, the UK and Italy). I chose a medieval-heavy first half for our concert program (even more French music than the last festival), with a lighter second half of all Hawaiian and American selections. This has all worked well for a number of reasons. One is that the venues we perform in each evening are adorable little 11th-12th-century churches in various villages throughout Provence, and the acoustics are simply stunning (seriously, folks, we have lucked out in this department). Another is that the audiences are enthusiastic, warm and are exceedingly vocal about how rarely they hear medieval vocal music (especially French). That said, our Hawaiian/American music is also highly praised (most people here have never been exposed to this repertoire).

I should also mention that, in spite of the churches being 800 degrees, and our overall feeling of fatigue, we are singing at a consistently high level each evening - and loving every minute of it! I am still amazed at how much concert attendees appreciate our programming, although I must admit that after having seen several other choirs perform over the last few weeks, I can see, perhaps, why. Don't get me wrong - the other choirs are damn good but their programs often lack variety, and even the "folk" sets end up being clumsy choral arrangements of otherwise gorgeous traditional melodies. I'm really proud of the way I assemble our programs but I'm even more proud of my colleagues for being so flexible.

The women have been doing incredible work on this tour, singing stratospherically high lines of Hildegard von Bingen with seemingly no effort, and 20 minutes later pounding out a Southern Harmony tune (foot stomping and all). But the men also deserve a lot of credit, as they have been without Mark and Dustin and more or less "forced" to sound and perform like a section twice their size. I should mention that our performance in the glorious cathedral in Vaison was recorded by a professional engineer and what I've heard so far of the CD is fantastic. I'm going to make sure to get a copy to our friends at Performance Today. Who knows, maybe there's enough material for a special rebroadcast of a Rose Ensemble European concert appearance?

I'll write again very soon, I swear. (But please remember that my internet access time is extremely limited and it may be hard to send another update for a few days.) Warm greetings to all!

Jordan