

August 2, 2008

On the road from Vaison la Romaine to Melun (just outside Paris)

Bonjour, everyone!

We are currently in the middle of the most grueling journey we've endured thus far. Not only are the July vacationers on the move, but it is common for many French people (especially Parisians) to take off the entire month of August. And the "big move" is happening today. The freeways are too packed to even bother with them, so we are slowly making our way through the countryside on this likely 11+ hour journey.

Roland, our bus driver, has been a complete rock over the past few days, enduring very long trips and an utter lack of sleep time. I really don't know how he does it. Of course, laws for bus drivers are very strict here in France, requiring them to take a nine-hour break between hauls (in addition to 15 or 30-minute breaks here and there), but it's still a stressful job and even with a good map and a GPS system, we've been lost more than once. The French government is smart about several things when it comes to the freeways, however. On weekends, for examples, there is a complete "black out" for any semi-truck drivers. This means that for Saturday and Sunday – all day –they are forbidden to drive (they pack the parking lots of rest stops along the freeways). It eases the congestion, of course (no six-lane highways here, remember), and also the pollution. Speaking of pollution, I should mention that there was one day last week when the government enforced a national speed limit, requiring all drivers to stay under a certain speed in order to curb air pollution. Can you get over that? I think Americans would go crazy if that happened!

We've been fortunate to have with us for the Vaison festival our friend Anne-Lise Blin (and her husband, Eric). Some of you may recall that we met Anne-Lise by chance in Italy last June at the Legnano festival (she's a friend of Francesco, one of the Legnano organizers). She got along so well with us in Italy that she decided to volunteer in Vaison to be our assistant and translator. Anne-Lise comes from a family deeply rooted in the French choral scene, and at one time she worked for a sub-department in the French government that advances the greater enjoyment and understanding of choral music. (Yeah, you read that correctly; boy, does the US have a lot to learn...) Anyway, she's a no-nonsense, smart cookie and it's been a pleasure to have her taking care of us over the last week. I have also enjoyed getting to know Eric, who is a dancer and a generally wonderful person, and has his own company in their town of Lille, called "Theatre Decomposition." Eric and Anne-Lise make me laugh a lot, as does my dear and crazy friend Bill Hudson (filling in for Dustin as a tenor on this trip), so I've been smiling in spite of the often-weird situations I find myself in.

A few difficult discussions have taken place over the past week about whether or not Kim would be able to dance her beautiful hula in the Hawaiian sets, because the concerts took place in churches. On a matter of principle, I can understand this. But I had mixed feelings, because as it turns out the other choirs sang piles of pop music and non-Christian repertoire, while the ancient hula we wanted to present is one of the most sacred in the genre. The upshot, thankfully, was that we not only gave great shows (alas, without Kim's hula) but the presenters raved about how easy-going, accommodating and professional we were. This is a good thing, and it certainly will help us get more work in the future. We don't want these appearances to be "one-shot deals"; we want to continue to perform in Europe as much as possible.

Yes, it's beautiful here and it's been a wonderful cultural exchange, but I firmly believe now, more than ever, that if The Rose Ensemble – an American ensemble – is going to fully understand its medieval and Renaissance European repertoire, it has got to understand the cities, people and venues for whom/which the music was written. It's just a simple fact: there are few acoustical spaces in the States that can compare with a 12th-century European church. I know I've been going on and on about this fact on this string of blogs, but something has really hit home with me on this tour.

Additionally, I feel stronger than ever about changing the way Europeans think about Americans as performers and, to a lesser degree, people. It seems things with the last American choir they had (the only other one since 1992, I might add) did not altogether smoothly, so I have a feeling the organizers didn't know what to expect from us. Of course, the festival grapevine reported the morning after our first concert that we were amazing, but even so, I was stressed and anxious much of the time this past week, in spite of all the fun, beauty and great music-making.

While in Vaison, I was really happy to be able to meet with Barney Smith, one of the founders of the fantastic UK group Voces8. Some of you may recall that we met this stellar ensemble in Spain last November and we've been in touch with them over the past several months. They sang on the Vaison festival, and while our social time with them was ridiculously brief, Barney and I did have a good planning meeting in preparation for Voces8's collaboration with The Rose Ensemble on our Candlelight Concert next February. We've decided to present the "Great Service" by English Renaissance composer William Byrd, which is a monumental piece that has most likely been performed in Minnesota only on a handful of occasions. Barney and I have a great rapport and I'm very much looking forward to collaborating with the whole group next winter!

Well, once again it's been an amazing tour and I give big kudos to the musicians of The Rose Ensemble for their hard and incredible work. I also thank all our supporters for making our important work possible. The group leaves for the States on Sunday morning but I'll be in Paris for the next few days. I'll be meeting with the organizers of Festival d'Ile de France, for whom we'll be performing the Hawaiian show next month. I'm hoping to make a few more connections with other presenters while I'm here, but most of all I'm looking forward to seeing my dear friend Yossi Maurey (the Israeli musicologist) who just happens to be in Paris this week!

Warm greetings to you all -
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