

'The Warsaw Diaries'

RMVC and the HARFA CHOIR - June 13th to 17th 2019

The following is designed to be a light-hearted account of the trip we have recently enjoyed. It provides a relatively accurate order of events, names of places and details of at least some of our shared experiences. I hope you enjoy it and that it brings back many happy memories! I am saving the detailed musical comments for the AGM!

Clive

Thursday 13th June

There is a momentary halt in the seemingly everlasting drizzle as Anita and I, plus Roland and the associated equipment arrive at the Loddon Bridge bus stop. Most of 'our gang' are already there, bright eyed and bushy tailed, ready to embark on this latest European adventure. The coach arrives and there is much lively chatter as we join the rest of the choir. On arrival at Terminal 5 we are herded towards check-in where the complex procedure of bidding farewell to Roland and the rest of our luggage begins. This achieved, we make our way to the plane where we find out if we are to sit with our wives, friends, or neither! After a smooth, uneventful journey we arrive at Chopin Airport where we soon feel the difference in temperature – Reading 12 degrees / Poland 30 degrees!

Two 'school coaches' take us to the Ibis Hotel – a large establishment that has all we need, with the exception of tea /coffee in our rooms! Lovely beds and big showers though! Choir members soon test out the hotel bar and raise the takings by some margin!

Our buffet-style meal is consumed with great relish, and we then record The Rose for Ryland and Elspeth's daughter and son-in-law, to celebrate their marriage in New York – we hear that it is much appreciated by the happy couple. The evening ends with the expected afterglow singsong, enjoyed by all, including a little boy who clapped along with great gusto to Steve's rendition of Rattlin' Bog!!

Friday 14th June

Morning comes swiftly – breakfast time already! The hotel buffet is extensive and it takes a while to circumnavigate all the options. Breakfast done, Harfa treats us to a coach tour of Warsaw. We see the sights, get a sense of Poland's troubled history and see the regeneration that has taken place over the years. There is much to take in. The people are generous, kind and keen for us to understand their country's past which still affects attitudes today -particularly the older generation.

Artur takes on guiding duties around lunchtime and finds us a typical Polish restaurant which welcomes the group. Meals are delicious and vast; my schnitzel is the size of a pizza! All is helped down by excellent cold beer, followed by complimentary vodka – lemon, then cherry. It all slips down wonderfully well and leaves us questioning whether its consumption was a wise decision!

After walking back to the hotel for a short rest, we are off once again; a meeting is scheduled with the Harfa Choir at the National Philharmonic Hall. We know we will be

*rehearsing our joint items, but anything else is guesswork! We start with a rather long communal warm-up which is pretty exhausting in the heat. Later though, there is a light-hearted moment. I am rehearsing both choirs as they sing *Pozegnanie* (Farewell), and during the second verse (sung by the Harfa Choir) I make gestures suggesting a smile and a loving embrace, only to discover that the original Polish lyrics mean something quite different! No wonder they looked so puzzled!*

We do get the chance to rehearse on our own, but the Sanctus (for the Sunday Mass) is not successful as the whole situation is weighted against us; the venue is small, difficult and hot! We agree to try it again when conditions are more suitable. The day ends with us all relaxing and 'doing our own thing'.

Saturday 15th June

Today we have time to venture into the City to soak up the sights, sounds, culture and further food offerings. Artur's sister is in the market selling her 'snails' and a number of photos are taken as this delicacy is experienced first-hand.

In the afternoon we head back to the hotel to freshen up with yet another shower, ready for our first big musical event. It is in the substantial Evangelical Polish Church two tram stops down the line. Artur kindly takes me and all the instruments down to the Church in his father's car, and with my first glimpse of the building I feel confident we are in for a great experience, as we have the right programme for this acoustically wonderful venue. A wedding in the church prevents us from setting up until 5 o'clock, but as soon as all the guests have left we wade through the flower petals to get ourselves organised. To my great relief Daniel appears soon after 5pm having been brought from the Airport by Artur's father. All is now in place for our first concert. The Schubert Sanctus also gets its critical test rehearsal ready for the following day. As expected, in this ideal venue RMVC raises its game significantly - a lovely rendition renews everyone's confidence.

*We open the concert and our first group goes well. Walking in singing *Dona Nobis Pacem* is watched with great interest as this is obviously unusual – certainly here in Warsaw! Our music is different in many ways and is well received, especially African Trilogy which is given particularly enthusiastic applause. Harfa Choir is next, giving a powerful performance of their folk/patriotic style of music. There is no interval and we soon begin our second set of pieces which includes *You Raise Me Up*, specially requested by Artur for his brother-in-law. This clearly means a lot to his family. We end with *The Rhythm of Life* - also very popular with the audience. The joint items then follow. *Soon Ah will be Done* is conducted with speed and vigour by Harfa's Pawel Choina. As well as being a choir conductor he also sings opera and he displays his talent by singing the short solo in the middle of this song. (Don't worry, I have no yearnings to try and emulate this!) I then conduct *Pozegnanie*, remembering not to make any unexpected gestures in the Polish verse! I attempt a gentler style than Harfa is used to and they respond well. I am told it was quite moving. We sang the first verse in English, Harfa sang the second in Polish, and the final verse was sung in BOTH languages – at the same time! Finally, at the last-minute request of Pawel Choina we perform *I'm Gonna Sing* (swing low / when the saints) which we sang together in Reading two years ago. Having had no real rehearsal this is entertaining if not terribly accurate!!*

The afterglow takes place back at the hotel where the poor catering staff have trouble coping with our numbers and our appetites! Artur comes to the rescue on several

occasions in order to sort out the confusion. (Where would we be without him!) Once the pangs of hunger are quelled singing breaks out with much enthusiasm. This continues until we are asked to stop – we don't want to upset the guests with excessive noise (singing)!

Sunday 16th June

Morning arrives, assisted by the buzzing of the alarm clock! After breakfast we return to the Evangelical Church for the morning Mass. We are to sing three pieces during the service – the Schubert Sanctus, Morte Criste, and Goin' Up A Yonder. We are asked to arrive early to rehearse Morte Criste with the organist, but sadly, the music which had been carefully prepared and sent a month earlier had not been passed on to him, so we end up with our usual accompaniment – no problem really thanks to Daniel and Roland. The service turns out to be lengthy – an hour and a half long! There is a baptism, and a presentation from the Church's children to mark the end of term. They perform confidently, and one of the young girls sings beautifully. It is just a shame the language barrier prevents us from properly enjoying their contributions. RMVC sings well and adds an extra dimension to the Mass.

Then it's back to the hotel to prepare for the afternoon concert.

In no time the buses arrive to take us to our final concert venue – a catholic church this time, quite small, but spectacular in both decoration and acoustic. We soon discover this is a 'high church'. We are not allowed past the altar rail and NO clapping is allowed – this should be interesting! The joint items also pose the challenge of fitting two choirs into the rather limited space. We are determined to achieve this though – somehow!

At their request the Harfa Choir opens the concert and sings the same group of songs as yesterday. The 'no applause' ruling produces a strange atmosphere and the Harfa compere suggests the audience should wave their hands instead! As the concert continues the audience becomes more confident about this strange expression of appreciation! (I have the feeling that Ryland may well latch on to this situation as he comperes our future events?!)

Once again the audience seems to enjoy our varied programme. Our first group attracts a very positive response judging by the waving of hands for lengthy periods! The Choir responds well to the building and I am able to shape the songs and manage the dynamics in a sensitive way. It has been my aim when programming this trip to ensure that no item would be repeated and I have hopefully selected appropriate items for each specific event and building.

As before there is no interval so Harfa is soon into their second group of songs which they sing with great enthusiasm. Although there is little room for manoeuvre we still start our second group by walking in to Come All Who Thirst. It works well and there is much waving! The Choir is on form, ending the group with Let It Shine which brings about even more frantic waving and some naughty shouts of 'More!' I am not sure the two priests at the back approved though! We finish with both choirs singing Pozegnanie together one final time.

The concert over, we all troop outside into the sunshine and the doors of the Church are swiftly closed and locked behind us! We are greeted by many people who are keen to chat and shake our hands. I was particularly pleased to meet and thank Artur's parents and sister. Their kindness and support have done much to ensure the success of our trip.

Trousers changed, and soggy shirts replaced, we set off for the afterglow party. During the coach journey into the countryside we chat with our Polish friends and discover that we are heading for a National Park, complete with wolves and wild boar. On arrival, deep in the forest, we find that it is a centre for disabled children, with an emphasis on horse riding. We step out into the cooler, very welcome forest air. Soon though we realise there are mosquitos flying all around us, and large ants underfoot which hasten our steps into the large dining lodge. All are soon seated at long wooden tables and we are welcomed by our hosts. Piles of sausages appear, along with several plates of assorted goodies. There is no sign of beer, but we are provided with home-made wine and vodka which fills the gap – for now!

A good number of people brave the mosquitos by taking a ride into the forest, pulled by two beautiful horses. I am told it was worth the risk, good fun, and also raised money for the children at the centre.

We notice that not all members of the Harfa Choir have been invited to join us for the evening which is sad, but the atmosphere, singing, dancing and frivolity continues to grow as the hours pass. Beer appears – courtesy of some special arrangements made by those with knowledge and influence. This adds to the atmosphere still further. As time goes on the sport of mosquito-swatting develops from fun to necessity. Some of our group get carried away with seeing how many can actually be splatted, and Seb, getting fed up with a mosquito which is determined to bite his forehead, swats his glasses from his face, breaking one of the arms in the process! Do they have Specsavers in Warsaw comes the cry? A DIY job has to suffice!

Some while into the party the chef produces more food, including a wild boar he had hunted and captured that morning. We all have a taste! A jug (or two) of homemade lemon vodka also appears – a nightcap with a punch! Who can resist! Presentations follow, there is further massed singing, and finally lengthy goodbyes. Then it's time to get back on the coaches, tired, itchy, but glowing and happy – more than ready for the journey back to the hotel, and bed – late!!

Monday 17th June

A slower paced gathering can be found at breakfast today. Little groups are reminiscing about recent events and experiences. Seb appears with his DIY glasses, now tied on one side with string seemingly raided from a luggage tag! Is there no end to this choir's skills!

The morning drifts on towards lunchtime and it is obvious that appetites are not what they were. Roland gets rewrapped with speed and thoroughness, with help from Steve, Sav & Paul, while I run round and round with cling film and sticky parcel tape. What took me the good part of a morning at home was achieved within half an hour!

Soon there is the gathering of luggage in the hotel entrance and it is time for the final goodbyes and waving, as the coaches slip gently out into the traffic. We arrive at the airport, and eventually the plane brings us home to the same miserable weather we left five days earlier! At least we now have all our memories of the experiences and music we have shared and enjoyed together while on our trip to Warsaw. Thank you Artur.

And finally- I couldn't resist just a little bit of verse:

*Our trip to Poland is at an end,
We've performed and travelled together, the Choir and its friends.
Experiences and memories are engraved on the mind,
To recall in the future, when rekindled or primed.
But before I bring these thoughts to an end,
I'd like to make mention of those stalwart friends
Who have shifted Roland to and fro,
And been ever present to show us where, and when to go.
I shall not add the names of all who have helped,
I'd be sure to miss someone, then deserve to be scalped!
Suffice to say, you're great mates, always there and on call,
Roland and I are indebted to you all.
Finally, a special mention to all the wives and friends
Who've supported RMVC and boosted audiences no end!
Our choir is greatly strengthened by tours such as this,
The friendships, the concerts, and fun, are not to be missed.
So to those who have shared these special days in the sun -
My thanks to each and every one!*

Clive