

ULUCC Northern Italy Tour: July 2012

Tuesday 3rd July

The majority of the choir met early at Victoria station to catch the train to Gatwick airport where we then flew to Milan Linate. After a couple of hours wait at the airport to allow independent travellers to catch up with us (time enough for a cold beer and a first glance at the Italian sun), we headed, by coach, to Lodi to check into our accommodation at the Collegio S. Francesco.

Following a quick change, our host (Giampiero) took us into the town centre for pizza and ice cream. This gave the tour committee the chance to get to know Giampiero a little better and begin to plan for the rest of the week.

Wednesday 4th July

Wednesday offered us our first glimpse of central Milan. We got up reasonably early and caught the train into the city centre where we met Giampiero who took us to the University Catholica, our performance venue for the evening.

The day started with a rehearsal, which was surprisingly successful considering that we had not sung together for about three weeks, especially not in such hot conditions.

After lunch, we took part in an open rehearsal, led by our conductor, Colin Durrant and attended by staff and students of the university. The rehearsal was something of an experiment, designed to offer attendees the opportunity to improve their knowledge and understanding of the English language through music. In practice, this involved Colin giving a short explanation of some major themes in our repertoire which were then demonstrated by the choir. The feedback from all who attended was very positive, with many expressing how much they had enjoyed the session and how useful it had been for their linguistic development.

With the open rehearsal complete, the choir had a couple of hours free. Most went for a walk into Milan, visiting the magnificent Duomo and the ever impressive Galleria Vittorio Emanuele.

At 21h was time to begin our first concert. After a very shaky start, we got into our groove and by the end were singing very close to our best. The highlight of the concert was undoubtedly our performance of *When David Heard* (by Eric Whitacre) which was met with rapturous applause after the final chord and can be seen on You Tube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3TW1sIHD5Q>.

Individual pieces aside, the most important thing to take from this concert was the composure and maturity demonstrated by the choir in turning such a disappointing start into a performance of which we can all be very proud.

Thursday 5th July: A day off!

Thursday was our only designated 'rest day' which allowed members to spend the day as they wished. A large group got an early train to Lake Como for some much needed sunbathing while others went into Milan for some excellent food and site-seeing. One member even made it as far as Venice!

This day was highly important in setting the dynamic for the rest of trip. As much as singing is central to the ULUCC, of equal importance is the social interaction and friendships established among our members. Spending the day in groups, and then coming back together as a choir to share our experiences was massively rewarding and helped to establish a strong feeling of community and trust among the entire choir which we believe helps to improve the quality of our singing.

Friday 6th July

We spent all of Friday in our new home from home, Lodi. The day began with a rehearsal in the church in preparation for that evening's concert.

After the rehearsal, we were free to enjoy the day as we wanted. This provided an opportunity for some much needed discussion among the committee about plans for the next academic year. In the afternoon, most of the choir headed to the local swimming pool to relax in the sun ahead of the evening's concert.

Come concert time, we received a warm reception from a large audience (350) in the church of S. Francesco. Right from the first notes it was clear that this concert was going to be special. The choir demonstrated excellent concentration in very hot conditions and performed at our very best, an effort that was clearly appreciated by all present.

With the concert finished, and the choir in high spirits, we enjoyed a drink and a delicious spread of food with a number of the local people who had come to listen. It was wonderful to share our experiences in music, academia and life in general. A number of choir members commented on how lucky we are to live in a country with such a vibrant culture for choral music. We learnt that choral music in Italy is somewhat stagnant at the moment and thus it was humbling to see the pleasure that the arrival of an English chamber choir could bring to the people of Lodi.

Saturday 7th July

With 29 tired singers (and one or two sore heads!), we decided to take things easy for much of Saturday so we might be fresh for the concert in Crema that evening. A number of us picked up some bikes in Lodi and had a steady cycle to a riverside beach a few kilometres outside of the town, while others shopped, swam or slept!

In the late afternoon, we got a coach to Crema, a city half an hour from Lodi, and began preparations for our final concert. A number of members expressed concern that the concert would be rather anti-climatic following the successes of the previous night. Fortunately, this was far from the case in reality. Once again, the church was completely filled with approximately 350 audience members, with some standing at the back, and the choir treated them to an excellent concert; equalling (and some say surpassing) the performance of the previous night. At the end, we were greeted to a standing ovation. This concluding concert really was a musical and emotional high-point of the tour. The fabulous venue and audience left many of us feeling very moved.

Immediately after the concert, we enjoyed a homemade buffet reception with members of Giampiero's choir who had come, en masse, to hear us sing. Once again, we were knocked back by the generosity of our hosts and their clear appreciation of our singing. It was wonderful to hear about the repertoire and activities of our Italian counterparts. The reception itself was somewhat bittersweet: it was quite clearly a celebration of music making and the transnational friendships which have been established but also a distinct reminder that our Italian adventure was rapidly coming to its conclusion.

Sunday 8th July

Early on Sunday morning, we packed up our belongings, said goodbye to our hosts in Lodi, and departed in the direction of the Basilica Saint Marco in Milan where we were to sing the mass. Upon arrival, we learnt (with great interest and excitement) that Verdi conducted the first performance of his famous requiem in the very same church.

In each of the three concerts, we had sung movements from Byrd's Mass for Four Voices and now it was time to perform it in the way that Byrd had intended – as a form of contrition, supplication and glorification to God. Irrespective of each member's beliefs, performing Byrd's work as part of a mass was a wonderful experience and added a new dimension to our understanding of the music.

After the mass, we all headed to a local restaurant to enjoy a last meal together with Giampiero. This rounded off what had been the most fantastic few days together; sharing music, food, wine but most importantly, friendship.

Concluding remarks

All in all, this has been a thoroughly successful tour. The choir has produced music of a consistently high standard which has reached a wide variety of individuals and has very much enjoyed doing so.

The recordings of each of the concerts provided by Giampiero serve as a lasting memory of all we achieved over the week. The Crema concert

especially will remain a very proud moment for many members and our conductor.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who made us so welcome in Italy but especially Giampiero whose hard work has been invaluable. Our thanks also go to Colin and, of course, to ULU for supporting us throughout the year and for offering us such a generous convocation grant.

The tour committee of the ULU Chamber Choir, July 2012