

Italian Tour - The St Andrews Renaissance Singers

Directed by Claire Luxford

Tuesday 2nd to Monday 8th July 2013

We were all excited to be going on our first tour under Claire's direction. This was the culmination of more than a year's planning, following the kind invitation of Giampiero Innocente way back in early 2012, and for many in the choir it was their first trip to Italy. The tour was our part of an exchange, which started with us hosting Giampiero's group, the Collegium Vocale de Crema, in St Andrews in June.

Tuesday 2nd July

We arrived in Lodi by various means: most flew from St Andrews' nearest airport, Edinburgh, while others came from London by plane or train. A smiling Giampiero met the majority at Milan Malpensa airport and accompanied us to our home for the next week, the beautiful Collegio San Francesco in Lodi. The Collegio is a primary and secondary school, but this being Italy, it boasts not just one but two beautiful arcaded courtyards, a chapel and a Romanesque church. We claimed rooms and compared balcony views before heading 'next door' to the coolness, beauty and stillness of the Church of San Francesco for our first rehearsal. We were looking forward, with some nervousness, to our musical week. But most of all we were looking forward to pizza. It had been a long time since breakfast. Giampiero had kindly booked us a table at a local pizzeria and we had an enjoyable meal before falling into bed.

Wednesday 3rd July

We held another rehearsal in San Francesco in the morning before heading into Milan. Giampiero escorted us to the imposing campus of the huge Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. Our open rehearsal in the Aula Magna was very favourably received, with many people approaching Claire afterwards to give their 'complimenti'; the subsequent concert went well, though there were a couple of minor hiccups involving notes and choreography. Tom Wilkinson, the university organist, gave a convincing performance of Purcell's Fantasia in D minor for double organ, during which his image (and that of his page-turner) was projected onto an enormous screen at the front of the hall. Upon returning, various members explored the bars in Lodi's glorious piazza and were persuaded by locals into giving an impromptu performance of Vaughan Williams' arrangement of Loch Lomond.

Thursday 4th July

Day three was a much welcomed leisure day, during which the choir had the opportunity to get to know each other properly. We were a tour choir composed of both regular singers, who chatted among our various voice parts in rehearsals, and new members who joined primarily for the tour so it was wonderful to break the SATB ranks and forge new friendships. Plans for the day were made at breakfast: some people went to visit places on their personal sightseeing list while the energetic took a trip to Lake Como. Everything that could have gone wrong... went wrong. Despite all subsequent hiccups being dubbed the 'Como curse', by all accounts it was a thoroughly enjoyable day that provided anecdotes for the rest of the trip. Another group chose to spend the day dipping in and out of Lodi's churches, cafés and restaurants as well as spending a companionable hour or two reading in the park by the river. Most of the choir reconvened early evening and we had a very agreeable evening meal after a spritz or two, enjoying the warm company of new friends.

Friday 5th July

The day of the Lodi concert. We had a slow morning; some people took the opportunity to have a lie-in, which was quite challenging in the heat, while others again gravitated to the cafés. The afternoon rehearsal went well, but the concert went even better. We all agreed that we felt like a cohesive unit, were responsive to the nuances of Claire's conducting and gave the best performances of some of our pieces. Highlights included the Gloria from Robert Carver's Mass L'Homme Arme, in which the soloists gave a wonderfully sensitive performance in the technically difficult passage, and God so loved the world written by Claire's great-great-grandfather, Sir John Stainer. We were highly appreciative of both the large audience attracted by Giampiero's enthusiastic advertising and the warm reception from Lodi's Associazione 'Mons. L. Quartieri', who gave biscotti to each chorister and laid out a delicious buffet and prosecco for us.

Saturday 6th July

After a morning in Lodi we travelled by coach to Crema, home of Giampiero's Collegium Vocale. We were impressed by our venue, the high baroque church of San Bernadino, with its wonderful acoustic and entertaining trompe-l'oeil organ. During the afternoon we met the deputy mayor, who gave us a tour of the convent of Sant' Agostino, which had remarkable 13th century frescoes on its refectory walls, and Giampiero kindly treated us to the famous Crema gelato. We felt the concert went even better than the previous night, and were all moved by the dedication of Shepherd's In Manus Tuas to the daughter of a Collegium Vocale soprano who had died tragically a few weeks previously. We were given a wonderful reception afterwards hosted by Collegium Vocale, where we enjoyed meeting the friends we made in Scotland.

Sunday 7th July

Our final day. We travelled back into Milan and sang for Mass at the Basilica San Marco, Milan. It was moving to perform finally the Ockeghem Mass and various anthems in their rightful place as part of the liturgy. After Mass we had lunch in a smart seafood restaurant and Giampiero took us on a tour through the centre of Milan. It was extraordinarily hot, but we enjoyed seeing La Scala, the smart shopping arcade of the Galleria Vittorio Emmanuele, the Duomo and the imposing castle of the Sforzas. Most of the Milanese looked as if they'd stepped out of a style magazine. Some of the choir peeled off from the group to continue holidays in Italy while the rest said a final fond goodbye to Lodi before heading our separate ways the following day.

We all agreed this had been an excellent tour which we'd remember with warmth and fondness. Claire was particularly impressed by the way everyone bonded and looked out for each other and the choir were grateful to her and Giampiero for their careful planning and direction. We all felt it was good for us musically to rehearse and perform together so much, which will hopefully be sustained through our next semester of singing. Overall we were touched by the overwhelmingly generous hospitality we received, making this into a truly unforgettable trip.