

Brighton Secondary School

Chamber Choir Central European Tour

*27th November
-17th December
2005*

Performance Report

PERFORMANCES

Wednesday, 30th November	Afternoon Concert English College, Prague
Thursday, 1 st December	Afternoon Concert St Nicholas Church, Old Town Square, Prague
Friday, 2 nd December	Jazz performance Akord Jazz Club, Republic Square
Sunday, 4 th December	Busking, Charles Bridge
Monday, 5 th December	Evening Concert Australian Embassy, Vienna
Thursday, 8th December	Afternoon Concert Rathaus Wien, Vienna
Thursday, 8th December	Jazz performance Porgy and Bess, Vienna
Saturday, 10th December	Evening Concert Landhaus, Linz
Sunday, 11 th December	Morning Concert Monastery Minoriten, Wels

ENGLISH COLLEGE, PRAGUE: 30th November

Our first concert was held at the English College in Prague. Established after the heady days of the Velvet Revolution, this new school age 11 years boasts as its patrons Prince Charles and Vaclav Havel.

A well-behaved audience of 160 students and teachers witnessed our 45-minute performance in the school gymnasium. This was an excellent beginning for our concert tour. We performed an evenly divided program of traditional and popular music, with particular highlights including Steal Away, It Might as Well be Spring, and Lift Thine Eyes.

The Headmaster Peter de Voil, who as a child was a Kings College Cambridge choir member, was vocal in his praise of the choir, and in a thank you speech in front of the audience said:

The Bambini of Prague is possibly the finest young person's choir in Prague if not the whole of the Czech Republic. I can assure you I've heard both, and these are just as good. We've been extremely honoured and privileged to have you with us today; it was most enjoyable and, highly professional. Very well done.

Rightly so, the choir departed with great expectation for the important St Nicholas concert tomorrow.

ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, PRAGUE: 1st December

The Church of St Nicholas is one of the oldest churches in the Old Town area of Prague, mentioned in sources as early as 1273. The present day church was completed in 1735 and is one of the dominant features of the Old Town Square.

A special touch occurred five minutes prior to the concert when the girls sang out to the Old Town Square from the steps, and invited one and all to join us. The concert program lasted 55 minutes and included Britten's Ceremony of Carols and most of our sacred and traditional repertoire. Immediately apparent was the astonishing acoustic! A reverberation which lasted a number of seconds added a new dimension, particularly to the ends of phrases. As exciting as this was, it needed to be handled with care, and we adjusted tempi and phrasing accordingly. Although many pieces benefited from this acoustic, ensemble was at times difficult.

The resultant concert was a very special musical experience. Once again the girls produced a consistently high standard of work and enjoyed presenting their art in such a beautiful church. The crowd was small –about 50 but this didn't seem out of place because despite the exterior size of St. Nicholas, seating capacity is unusually small. After our final song 'Danny Boy', the choir received prolonged applause and a standing ovation. Some members of the audience had even been moved to tears! We were made to feel very special and enjoyed the good wishes of patrons who spoke to the girls afterward. One couple was from Ireland, and Danny Boy made their day. Another woman who spoke to me said that she had been a choral conductor all her life in England, and that this choir was as good as she's heard (context probably meaning young choirs).

So once again the girls proudly and jubilantly showcased South Australian music achievement to a very appreciative audience.

AKORD JAZZ CLUB, PRAGUE: 2ND December

Akord jazz club is a new arrival in Prague, opening in September this year. This performance was organized via the internet and email with Petr, owner and enthusiast, and consequently we were not sure what to expect. The Petra Vlkova quartet was the house ensemble for the evening, and Petr had posters displaying the Brighton Jazz Choir from Australia as special guests for the night. What confidence he displayed and could we come up to expectations in front of a discerning jazz audience?

The answer was an emphatic yes! In our 30-minute time allocation the choir sang six pieces and Lauren Henderson performed her poignant rendition of 'Nature Boy'. Yet again, and in a completely new context, the girls had the audience captivated. Final applause continued with a slow hand-clap and calls for an encore. The owner Petr invited us to do another set later (we declined) and issued invitations for the following 2 nights. Jazz phrasing, articulation and a sense of time is markedly different to traditional western musical reading, and it is a tribute to this group that they have demonstrated their versatility to such a high degree.

BUSKING ON CHARLES BRIDGE, PRAGUE: 4th December

Charles Bridge is the primary link between the Old Town and Prague Castle and for most of its 600 years has been a pedestrian promenade. The bridge features 30 statues of Saints and crosses the Vltava (Moldau) river. One of Prague's busiest attractions, it has become an ideal place for artists and crafts-people to busk and sell their wares. Hence the Brighton choir set up in an appropriate position and sang mainly popular repertoire. Before long a crowd emerged and within 30 minutes the girls made about 1000ck, or a little over A\$50 which covered a good portion of dinner that evening. We paused on occasion to announce who we were and where we came from and enjoyed interactions with folk from many countries including the occasional Aussie. This impromptu performance was terrific fun, and much enjoyed by the public.

AUSTRALIAN EMBASSY, VIENNA: 5th December

Our performance at the residence of Ambassador Deborah Stokes and husband Peter was a Christmas party for various diplomats from Austria and Australia as well as some ex-pat Australian musicians working in Vienna's esteemed orchestras. On hearing us, one such musician Hector MacDonald invited the choir to attend a rehearsal of the Vienna Symphonica Orchestra at the Konzerthaus the next morning. About 80 guests enjoyed our 30-minute performance which included carols, Australian and some international music. In typical European 'drawing room' fashion, well dressed waiters served quality refreshments and all together it was an elegant affair. The immaculate dwelling was equipped with period furniture and the piano was an old Bosendorfer. Once again the choir received accolades from an appreciative audience and enjoyed the social discourse which followed.

RATHAUS, VIENNA: 8th December, 4.30PM

The Rathaus is one of Vienna's most impressive buildings. Towering at 325 feet at its tallest point, it serves as both the city hall and the seat of the Viennese Provincial Assembly. Our performance here was as part of the annual International Advent Singing Festival where each weekday during advent eight international choirs sing a 30-minute program. Despite the excitement of being in such a grand building and performing for a large audience, for most of us this was our least satisfying performance. The acoustic was poor in comparison to other venues, the compere was not informed of our procession and small children were noisily playing in front of the stage (entry is free to the public). Nevertheless, once again the girls doggedly made the most of the working conditions and presented a quality performance in front of several hundred patrons. Despite the difficulty we had in hearing each other, audience members –including Jessie Swan who left the stage with a coughing problem, informed us that it sounded first-rate from the back. A generous applause and some shouts of 'bravo' sustained our spirits.

PORGY AND BESS JAZZ CLUB, VIENNA: 8th December, 10.00PM

This performance was totally unexpected and very exciting. We are reliably informed that this jazz club is the best in Austria, and one of the great jazz clubs of Europe. So what were we doing there?

Two days earlier we attended a rehearsal of the Vienna Symphonica at the invitation of Principal French Horn Hector MacDonald, an Australian who was impressed by the choir at the embassy concert. Hector introduced us to the other Aussie in this orchestra – double bass player Andrew Rootes. It so happens that Andrew's wife Fiona Coad who

plays oboe in a Viennese chamber ensemble is a Brighton old scholar and phoned me in order to hear us perform and meet the girls. After the Rathaus concert we went out for dinner with Andrew and Fiona, and they took us to Porgy and Bess. The ensemble playing there was a modern jazz trio of 30-years experience together from Germany. The music was full blooded free jazz. It was a unique listening experience, unlike anything the girls has heard before. This is a serious jazz club. Not background music, the patrons were there to listen. So whatever I said to Christoph, the ultra-cool manager and owner – something about a unique award-winning jazz choir of 14-girls from Australia – worked. Christoph said we could perform after a 15-minute break following the German trio. What an opportunity! Annie had 40-minutes to get back to the hotel and grab her music whilst the rest of us felt daunted at this performing prospect. The girls were nervous and I wasn't sure how our repertoire would go down (didn't tell *them* that).

On stage we went, and after a minute or so with nerves, Route 66 started to swing and once again the girls started to work their magic. I had offered Christoph two or three songs, but whilst Lauren Henderson was wooing the crowd with her beautiful and a cappella 'Nature boy', Christoph spoke to me giving approval to perform as long as we wished. After a 30-minute set there were shouts of encore and a few wolf whistles, but the girls were very happy to leave it at that. Patrons came up to congratulate us, and tell us that it is unusual for Christoph to accept impromptu performance. I asked Christoph why he gave us this opportunity and his response was yes, "ordinarily I don't do this but sometimes I like to improvise and this prospect sounded interesting to me". Many world famous jazz musicians have performed here and next March James Morrison will be on the bill.

LANDHAUS, LINZ: 10th December

This concert, organized by Jeffrey Kong through his good friend Dr. Ng of Wels, turned out to be a joyful celebration. The good doctor, along with his friends Martina and Gunther treated us with a kindness and hospitality during our two nights here which will be long remembered. We shared the stage with the Jugendstreicherchester LMS of Wels, alternating musical items. The musicality and attention to detail of this young orchestra conducted by Martina was highly commendable. The Landhaus is an important concert venue in Linz, and we know that Dr. Ng went to a good deal of trouble to secure it. It turned out to be the most appropriate acoustic we have worked with. Whilst the reverberation was not the length of St Nicholas in Prague, it was supportive, rich and allowed for choral space. Indeed, once again we executed musical nuances which were daring, delightful and (mostly) successful.

Our core item, the 22-minute Ceremony of Carols by Britten was our best yet, and wouldn't you know that our recording device played up on this occasion! Such things happen, but we all felt very proud of our musical offering. Our concert program was formal, but an encore of 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy' preceded another genuine and enthusiastic ovation.

MONASTERY MINORITEN, WELS: 11th December

Another concert organized by Dr. Ng, friend of Jeffrey Kong and respected heart surgeon from Wels, again had its challenges but was a triumphant success for our final official concert. Dr. Ng is an enthusiastic music patron. A meeting with him convinces one that he is a driven man, one who does nothing by halves, and we thank him for the beautiful and appropriate venues we found ourselves enjoying in Linz and Wels. Of course what we

didn't realize was that the good doctor was in a previous life a conductor and accomplished pianist. Yes, he even studied with heavyweights Herbert von Karajan and Karl Bohm. Need I say more?

The monastery is an excellent performance venue. Not quite as generous with acoustic as the Linz Landhaus, it delivers a true and clear representation of good singing. Indeed the local orchestra sounded wonderful, and I am informed that such world famous musicians such as violinist Gidon Kremer have performed at Minoriten.

The challenges for this concert included the grand piano being placed too far from the choir and a difficult staging for choir and conductor. Some voices were also beginning to tire from travel, excitement and singing. But the performance of Britten's Ceremony of Carols was still at a level which captured the appreciation of the audience. In fact, we were not intending on performing this, but for the knowledge that many people familiar with this masterpiece had traveled to hear it. I think the ovation was as long as I have experienced in my career. The Austrians may not be as boisterous as other cultures, but there was a genuine appreciation and sincerity in their response. Another highlight was the recorder playing of Simone Linley-Slattery and the flute duet from Lydia Sharrad and Jade Cooper. How wonderful for Simone that she has returned to Vienna to study recorder with a world renowned exponent of recorder and Baroque style!

After this final concert we were treated to a lunch and badge/cap presentation by the chief Arts Administrator for Upper Austria, Herr Walter Rescheneder who not only sang our praises but offered future hosting in his country.

Impromptu performances

Whist the Charles Bridge busking and the Porgy and Bess jazz performance were certainly impromptu, reports have been written due to their substance and value to the students. However, much singing of a less significant but musical and enjoyable nature took place. We sang *My Foolish Heart* for our Terezin guide Hannah and sang Happy Birthday in jazz and traditional arrangements to Günter. In the grand Marble Room on the Melk's Benedictine Monastery, the Mondsee cathedral of Sound of Music fame and the Salzburg cathedral the choir spontaneously and joyfully sang our sacred repertoire for appreciative tourists and locals. Some of the most fun was had sight-singing arrangements of Sound of Music pieces around Salzburg on the tour bus and at various locations. This music was a surprise for the girls and being made available only at the time of the tour, captivated their sense of fun. The only concern they seemed to have was whether or not I had the credentials to play Captain von Trapp!

In the uncertain and dangerous times in which we live what a tonic for human nature to see a group of teenagers joyfully and unashamedly sharing their music.

Sight-seeing and extra-educational activity

A broad range of non-performance activities were organized for the students including:

- *The Barber of Seville*, Prague State Opera House
- *The Best of Image*, a show of artistic fusion in Prague
- *The Nutcracker*, Vienna opera House with the Vienna Philharmonic
- Attending a rehearsal of the Vienna Symphonica playing Bruckner's 7th at the Vienna Konzerthaus

- Listening to world-class free-jazz, Porgy and Bess Jazz club, Vienna
- Terezin concentration camp
- Danube valley day trip
- Sound of Music tour, Salzburg
- Various walking tours in Prague, Vienna, Wels and Salzburg including guided talks on architectural style

Conclusion

This concert tour show-cased the achievements of an outstanding group of students who have worked together through their secondary years to continually improve their musical acuity and performance ability. In every respect they have represented themselves musically and personally to the highest degree.

As recorded above there were 9 significant performances and some enjoyable impromptu and spontaneous moments. The repertoire included 32 songs, all performed without music. The scope of styles was vast including a major song cycle Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, contemporary Australian art music, jazz and popular music from the British Isles and United States. Of the 14 choristers, 11 had vocal solos or were featured in small ensemble. Jade Cooper, Lydia Sharrad and Simone Linley-Slatery performed with consistent excellence on their respective flutes and recorder.

All performances were successful and greeted with prolonged applause and shouts of 'encore' and 'bravo'. Some audience members were even moved to tears. Locals and tourists from all parts of the world were curious to meet the ensemble and discuss our origin and education system. Australia, the South Australian Public Education system and Brighton Secondary School are entitled to feel satisfied that we have represented them to the best of our ability. Recordings of several concerts were made, and as has been past procedure, it would be a fitting remembrance to produce a compact disc from this tour. The teachers and students of this tour are grateful to the Brighton administration for this wonderful opportunity. The dynamics and demands of travel provide a hyperbolic learning experience for students. I believe these benefits warrant tours as often as is possible, perhaps every two years. But caution; the international community will be quick to judge Australian education on what they witness. Our standards must continue to be uncompromisingly excellent.

Michael Griffin

Music Co-ordinator
 Chamber Choir Director
 17 December, 2005