

Reflections on the St. James's Choir Trip to Italy



St. Peter's Basilica, Rome

Joy Pelham

My experience in Italy was one that will be most memorable. I have been fortunate enough to travel extensively and see and experience some very wonderful things, but none more touching than my time in Italy. The most transcendent experience for me was singing at St. Peter's Basilica. I remember how I felt when I first walked through the doors of the cathedral. It was absolutely breathtaking! Leading up to our participation in the mass, I had a chance to be still and internalize the experience as I prayed silently in the chapel before it was time to sing, which put me in a place of gratefulness and humility. I remember thinking just before preparing to sing the first note, "this is really happening...God, thank you!".... It was truly an unforgettable experience!

Antonia FD Vassar

Before having my baby Casimir, the idea of taking a 5 month old on the choir trip to Italy seemed like a great idea. Even though my husband couldn't go on this trip, I'd traveled all over the world by myself. Surely having a baby along would be perhaps not the most relaxing trip ever, but certainly manageable. By the time I realized how bad an idea this could be, it was too late to back out. It turns out that in worrying about traveling alone with my baby, there was one big thing I was forgetting -- we were traveling with 70 choir aunts, uncles, grandmothers, and grandfathers. People helped out from very beginning of the trip (literally the very beginning -- on the steps of St. James's, a bunch of folks divvied up an extra pack of diapers that wouldn't fit in my luggage) to the very end. Casimir's choir family held him when he was happy, held him when he was fussy, held him when he was sleepy. They carried our luggage, kept track of my stuff so I could keep track of the baby, and kept track of the baby so I could keep track of my stuff. They pushed the stroller (and carried the stroller over all those bridges in Venice). They let Casimir drool on their shirts, gnaw on their hands, sit on their laps, and sleep in their arms. This generosity in helping with my baby extended beyond the choir. A small sampling of new friends who held Casimir so I could dash up to our hotel room/visit the restroom/juggle belongings: flight attendants, seatmates on the flight (they were probably even more relieved than I that he slept for most of the trip), the helpful front desk clerk in Venice, the hotel maid, our bus driver (Andrea made it his mission to take care of the stroller, the bus would barely have come to a stop before he had that stroller out and ready to go), Italian grandmothers in cafes, and waiters in restaurants. We were surrounded by a loving community of friends both old and new who took care of us. So I guess I can't really say that I traveled alone to Italy with my baby. I traveled to Italy with my baby and 70 members of our extended family.



Kay Tyler



The choir trip to Italy is almost too wonderful to describe but here it goes! For me, the experience will live in my memory and heart for the rest of my life. I have shared this amazing opportunity and tried to express the gratitude, deeper connection with the choir members, my faith and commitment to music to share God's love for the world with others. Music is a universal language, no matter what nation or church or piazza. It was an honor and privilege to participate in this one-in-a-lifetime opportunity with these talented musicians. The memorable moments were seeing the tears of emotion from a woman at the inspiring ending of Hogan's simple yet moving version of This Little Light of Mine (sung so perfectly by Antonia and Chris) in Chiesa Santa Maria dei Miracoli to the smiles of joy in the faces of the people during the Flash Mob at St. Mark's Square. Stephen has so many new fans! There were many highlights in between...the

unexpected performance of Sicut Cervus at Ravenna, the awe-inspiring mass at THE St. Paul's Basilica. Amazing is an understatement. And how appropriate our first flash mobs were at St. Mark's....Mark, you ARE a saint to have orchestrated this trip with all the special sites and thought you put into this trip. I know we all had a marvelous time and would sing for you and Virginia anywhere in the world! Hope this gets some of my experience across!

Becky DeCamps

Commitment, perseverance, gratification - all words to describe an experience that is rarely afforded one in a lifetime. I had not participated in the previous choir trips abroad, because I knew I would be challenged. This trip was also one that I felt was too hard for me; after all, I don't know Latin, nor do I sing 15th century, double-choir music. However, there was some arm-twisting by some folks who had gone on previous trips that made me think I could do this. After 5 months of twice-weekly practices and enduring special practice sessions (endured by both me and the people working with me!) and a total lack of confidence that I would ever learn these pieces, it began to come together. The focus changed from notes and rhythms, to refinement and voice quality, to memorization and singing with the head-voice, to excitement that I might add a good voice (allergies permitting) to beautiful pieces of music that would be sung in the venues that grace our eyes by their beauty. And the people - the relationships that were formed, both during the practices and then on the road, are lasting. Whether we were the paid singers, the committed volunteers, or the voices that for 30 years have signed up each fall and spring semester to join Mark's Choir class at NVCC, we were the community of Christ on a mission to sing the best music in our very best way. No, we didn't sing every song exactly right all the time, but the blended voices, working as a team, made it perfect. Commitment, perseverance, gratification. Thanks be to God.





Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna

Fran McDermott

The entire trip was spiritually and emotionally enlightening for me, but here are a few of my unexpected highlights. I look forward to hearing from other choir members about their God moments. My "Oh, now I understand" moment - Why are we stopping in Ravenna? What is of interest to see in Ravenna? I loved our visit to the *Basilica di San Vitale*, which was completed in the year 547 and had a stunning series of Byzantine mosaics depicting stories from the Bible. The sunlight reflected off of the glass and metallic mosaic tiles bounced and shimmered throughout the church, and I thought, was reflective of God's holy presence. We proceeded on to the *Mausoleum of Galla Placidia*, which had a mosaic inspired by Psalm 42, depicting deer yearning for water, and our eternal thirst and yearning for God. I saw tourists moved to tears when we gathered in a large circle in the church and sang Palestrina's *Sicut Cervus*. At that moment, I had the certain knowing from God that I was exactly where I needed to be, and doing exactly what He wanted me to do. I don't have that spiritual conviction as often as I would like, but then, it was undeniable. My "I can't believe I'm here" moments - watching Casimir's tiny little foot peeking out under his blanket & tapping rhythmically to a flashmob performance of Hogan's *I'm Gonna Sing 'Til the Spirit Moves in my Heart in Florence*; witnessing Italians vigorously and joyously celebrating lottery selections for *Il Palio de Siena* at the *Piazza del Campo* in Siena; my first steps into the *Basilica di San Pietro* and simply being present in the moment and knowing that we were only one of many throughout the past and future, to leave their vocal imprint; being directed (rather commandingly) in an unexpected choral "Alleluia" response by the director of music at St. Peter's, listening to the church caretaker's dog, barking (while sitting at the front of the church) during mass at *Chiesa di Santa Maria dei Ricci* in Florence; and, strolling with friends in the evening outside the *Basilica di San Marco* in Venice and watching the sunset. My "I am blessed to know these people" moments - choir members carrying my bags, choir robe, and music folder; waiting for me to reposition my knee immobilizer; giving me an arm or hand while walking; pushing me around in a wheelchair (allowing me to have an unobstructed ceiling view of the Sistine Chapel); hailing cabs for me; letting me prop my leg on their lap at dinner; walking with me at my pace all over Italy; and seeing happy, smiling, tearful faces in the audience (yours too!) after our performances.



St. James's Choir at
Chiesa di Santa Maria dei Miracoli, Venice



DrW conducting at San Marco, Venice



Psalm 42 Mosaic at San Vitale

Bernie Niemeier

On Tuesday night, we sang for the mass at St. Mark's in Venice. Our last piece was *Sicut Cervus* --as the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after thee. Afterward, tears came to my eyes, almost sobbing, I felt close to God, relieved after months of working toward this moment. The next day we travelled by bus to Florence, stopping in Ravenna to tour the Basilica of San Vitale, a Byzantine church built in the 6th century. We did an impromptu performance of *Sicut Cervus* while circled under the church's dome. Afterward, I noticed young woman sitting on one of the benches inside our circle, tears were streaming down her face.

Betsy Blair

The honor and privilege of walking behind the ropes towards the altar of St. Peter's in order to sing mass as a choir was a holy experience for me. All time and space was distilled into those monumental moments as we approached the choir loft. I felt very much in the now and ever present in the present which of course is where the divine spirit resides within.



ST. JAMES'S CHOIR

Dr. Mark Whitmire, Director

Virginia Ewing Whitmire, Organist

THE CHOIR OF ST. JAMES'S CHURCH

Dr. Mark Whitmire, Director | Richmond, Virginia, USA

martedì 25 giugno
Chiesa di Santa Maria dei Miracoli, Venezia
Concerto alle 18:30

mercoledì 26 giugno
Basilica di San Marco, Venezia
Messa alle 18:45

venerdì 28 giugno
Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore (Duomo), Firenze
Motetto alle 14:00

venerdì 28 giugno
Chiesa di Santa Maria dei Ricci, Firenze
Concerto alle 19:00

domenica 30 giugno
Basilica di San Pietro, Roma
Messa alle 17:30

lunedì 1 luglio
Il Panteon, Roma
Concerto di mezzogiorno 12:00

Repertorio da selezionare tra i seguenti:

Missa Aeterna Christi Munera	G. P. da Palestrina
Sicut Cervus	Palestrina
Christi, Adoramus te	Claudio Monteverdi
Lauda Jerusalem, Dominum	Monteverdi
Diligam te, Domine	Giovanni Gabrieli
Jubilate Deo	Gabrieli
Hymn to the Virgin	Benjamin Britten
Da Pacem Domine	Arvo Pärt
I'm gonna sing 'till the Spirit moves in my heart	arr. Moses Hogan
This little light of mine	arr. Hogan
The Battle of Jericho	arr. Hogan

SOPRANO
Vienna C. Anderson
Lisa Edwards Burrs
Pat Connors
Nancy Goodall
Christine Hagan
Karen Harper
Peggy Harrison
Mary Horton
Sabrina LaFleur
Terri Lagoe
Jeanne Lapierre
Ceci Lawson
Robin Price
Kay Tyler
Antonia FD Vassar
Ruth Wood
Diane Wright

ALTO
Betsy Blair
Ellie Briscoe
Ellen Buoyer
Naima Burrs
Anne Daniel
Becky DeCamps
Ruth Herndon
Heather Jones
Joyce Lombardi
Fran McDermott
Susan Mellott
Becky Merrick
Betsy Mitchell
Elizabeth Nance
Debbie Peetz
Carol Pelenberg
Joy Pelham
Annette Reilly
Jane Roningen
Mollie Watts

TENOR
John Connors
Estee Herndon
Larry Goldschmidt
Drew McFayden
Rick Mellott
Bernie Niemeier
Daniel Pepio
Bill Reilly
Chris Rock
Scott Triplett

BASS
Steven Buoni
Will Conn
Scott Corwin
Dave Johnson
Alan Krause
Ray Lombardi
Matt Presson
Vernon Priddy
Steven Ralph
Matthew Stanley
Alan Stone

Read about the trip in Richmond magazine

<http://richmondmagazine.com/blogs.php?blogID=b289d8652b68821dc87f84cf6d806b4a>

Richmond magazine

This Just In

Saturday, July 13, 2013



A 360-degree view of the choir in St. Mark square. In the center of the plaza is one of the many old wells that dot Venice. (Photo by Amie Oliver).

[St. James's in Venice](#)

BY HARRY KOLLATZ JR.

Date posted: 7/3/13 3:11 PM



Greetings, Richmond, the Hat is back from Over There. On June 28, I was in Venice, Italy, with my partner-in-art Amie Oliver, and together we attended a concert by the [St. James's Episcopal Church Parish Choir](#) at the Basilica of St. Mark. The Richmond group performed during the evening Mass and then took their voices and made a joyful noise unto the hosts of tourists and passersby in the square.

The music, directed by Mark Whitmire, included Palestrina's Missa Aeterna Christi Munera, pieces by Claudio Monteverdi, Arvo Pär

Choir member Antonia F.D. Vassar with son Casimir (photo by Harry Kollatz Jr.)

t, Benjamin Britten, Giovanni Gabrieli, and three spirituals arranged by Moses Hogan. I'm acquainted with a few of the choir members including singer/musician [Antonia F.D Vassar](#), [Mary McMillan Horton](#) and architect [Scott Corwin](#).

"This will be something I'll remember the rest of my life," Whitmire says, "because we were able to sing pieces by my most favorite composers of all

time, [Gabrieli](#) and [Monteverdi](#), in the place where they composed. The music minister we've coordinated this with told me, 'Ah, yes, when you sing Gabrieli and Monteverdi,' " Whitmire lifts his shoulders and raises his hands, closing his eyes as though tasting something delicious, " 'the cathedral sings, too.' "



The Parish Choir of St. James's Episcopal Church at the Basilica of St. Mark
(photo by Amie Oliver)

The choir sang its way through Italy this past month, ending its tour today. The trip included two dates in Venice, June 25 in "The Marble Church" of Santa Maria dei Miracoli and St. Mark's Basilica on the 26th, then performances in Florence and at St. Peter's in Rome.

We'd received an email mention of this series of music from Antonia, and it just so happened that we were around to hear it, and we're mighty glad we did.

Outside in the plaza, the choir sang "Jubilate Deo" by Gabrieli and two robust arrangements by Hogan of "I'm Gonna Sing 'Til The Spirit Moves In My Heart" and "The Battle of Jericho." All were well received, but the spirituals really got the crowd enthused. Here are some clips of their music: [GO TO LINK](#)

Liz Nance

This was a "Trip of the Ages" for me....looking back over four marvelous choir trips and the people I have known through them was a real treat. I remember Dr. Trice coming along, and Nancy Phillips, who so graciously supported our future trips upon her death. I was reminded of all of our supporters at the choir fundraiser while I walked the stony paths of Italy to our concert venues, and their gifts made me so truly thankful. This was music...through the ages...from Palestrina and Monteverdi's sheer genius all the way to our modern choir performing that music in sacred spaces...looking ahead to the future of St. James's Church after our 100th year celebration...one realizes that music binds together generations of people in God's love. Whether you compose the music, conduct it, sing it or listen to it...we are all touched by God's music through the ages. This was reflected to me in the faces of the people we met and talking with them. Coming from all different faiths, we found a common bond through the music. So I was left with Blessed Assurance...that God is with us...that it will all continue into the future...just as that amazing architecture has throughout Italy...and the mosaics...and the paintings...and the yearning we Americans have to discover the past and be part of it. Meeting the choir from Santa Cruz, California that sang the day after we did in St. Peters was so much fun--sharing their excitement, discussing repertoire and travel...it is exhilarating...to know that praising God through music will live on...through the ages.

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God, Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.



San Marco, Venice

Ellen Buoyer



When the St. James's choir returned from singing in France a few summers ago, I *knew* I wanted to go on the next trip. As Mark announced the Italy itinerary and musical repertoire, I had to search my soul before committing, because I wondered if I could devote the time required to learn the music. For this choir is not your average church choir; it's comprised of professional singers, semi-pros and serious amateur voices. At the bottom of the choral hierarchy are folks like me: I can carry a tune and read music, but in Latin? Double choir? What if I try, will I embarrass myself or my fellow choristers? After months of rigorous practice, 60 singers and 20 companions departed June 23 for a singing tour of Venice, Florence and Rome. I have enjoyed reading others' reflections

of the trip. For me the highlights were singing breathtaking music in the special venues, and traveling with the finest of people. Mark's combined selection of sacred works and spirituals made for an engaging experience for the listeners and a rewarding musical stretch for me. The combination gave us flexibility to sing in a variety of venues, including our flash mobs in St. Mark's Square, the bridge behind the Miracole in Venice, in front of the Duomo in Florence, St. Peter's Square and the Pantheon in Rome. The first time Mark said, "It's time for a flash mob" we had our doubts (except Stephen and Chris), but the spectators rewarded us with applause and cheers, putting to rest the nagging question, "Can we really pull this off?" Recalling our singing in mass at St. Peter's Basilica, it was quite a journey to get there. I don't mean the trip or its rehearsals this year, but all the preparation and performances from previous trips: the St. James's choral resume had paved the path to this opportunity. At last our moment had come, and we filed into the choir loft behind the organist. We exchanged looks with each other, acknowledging the gravitas of the situation. It was a surreal moment to cherish for a lifetime. The only other time I felt like that was waiting on my father's arm to walk down the church aisle on my wedding day. The mass was conducted entirely in Italian and without a printed program, making it difficult for us to know what was to happen next. At one point near the end (according to the organist who interpreted for Mark), the priest thanked our choir and told us we had "shortened the distance between God and Man." I couldn't imagine higher praise.