

Pacific Spirit Choir tour of the Netherlands

For 10 days in May 2005, the Pacific Spirit Choir of West Vancouver toured the Netherlands to commemorate the 60th anniversary of World War II and the liberation of the country by Canadian troops. I joined the choir in September, 2004 and was quickly swept up in the excitement of a trip to Holland.

Thirty-five choir members and several accompanying spouses made the journey. Each day we climbed on our bus, complete with Canadian flag in the back, and travelled to our destination from our base at the Kontakt der Kontinenten (KdK). The KdK is an international conference centre in Soesterberg, a village about an hour east of Amsterdam near Amersfoort (an 11th-century walled city that was strategic during the war – and many wars before).

During the tour, we sang in eight venues across the Netherlands, from 12th-century churches to an outdoor fair and an impromptu appearance at an anniversary party, going as far north as Friesland. We were warmly welcomed wherever we went. We heard stories from veterans and survivors of the war, recounting their gratitude to Canada for its part in liberating a country that had been under occupation for five years and whose citizens had endured much hardship.

The theme for our tour was peace and reconciliation, and the musical repertoire reflected this, including a haunting version of *In Flanders Fields*, arranged by Vancouver composer Stephen Chatman, *In Remembrance* by Toronto composer Eleanor Daley, and *The Greatest Gift of All*, an upbeat version of 1 Corinthians 13 by Vancouver's Rupert Lang.

Led by our soloists Andi (soprano) and Evelyn (alto), we began each concert by processing up the centre aisle, singing *Down in the River to Pray*, an Alison Krauss piece made famous in the movie, *O Brother Where Art Thou*. At the end, we walked back down the aisles and sang an *Old Irish Blessing* to the audience. Every time it was a very emotional experience, both for us as singers and for our appreciative audience. All those standing ovations were so wonderful!

Between concerts we were also fortunate to be able to visit some beautiful places, including the lush and lovely Keukenhof Gardens not far from Amsterdam, and a cheese factory and windmill tour at Zaanse Schans, where a local shopkeeper showed us his 400-year old home decorated with Delft tiles.

On our way to our first concert, in a 12th-century church in Rolde, we stopped at Giethoorn, also known as Netherlands' Venice of the North. On another journey, we spent several hours at a huge wild park called Hoge Veluwe, home to wildlife, a castle, an underground museum—and an impressive collection of Van Gogh paintings. It was big enough to get lost, and some of us did. But we left in time to perform that evening with a men's choir in the Walburg Church in Zutphen. It was freezing cold, but the 10-second reverberation was incredible.

We were very fortunate to have an afternoon in Delft, home of the painter Vermeer, most famous for the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. None of Vermeer's paintings are in Delft, but it is a town steeped in history. We climbed the 300 steps to the top of the "new" church (dating from the 15th century) and had a panoramic view of the region, with Rotterdam and The Hague in the distance, and then toured the Royal Delft tile factory, a great place to shop for gifts!

On another day off from singing, we boarded the bus for a day in Amsterdam. Many tour members enjoyed the Rijksmuseum, canal tours and checking out the red light district. A few of us opted for a 45-minute train trip to Den Haag (The Hague) for a whirlwind tour of the Mauritshuis museum, a beautiful building which houses four Vermeers (including the luminous *View of Delft* and the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*) and an impressive collection of Rembrandts.

A few personal highlights from our performances:

- Walking from the KdK to the church in Soesterberg and performing with a local ensemble, *Chorus Line*, followed by a fabulous reception back at the KdK
- Travelling to Oldeberkoop, where we were treated to lunch and a tour of the town before singing at the local fair, then a delicious supper before our full evening performance in the beautiful church – and a reception afterward. I even got to shop for china at a garage sale!
- Having Wybe Kooijmans, one of the Netherlands' foremost organists, accompany us on Ralph Vaughan Williams' *O How Amiable are thy Dwellings* at Laren.
- Singing at a service on Pentecost in the Protestant Church in Terwolde. The hymns were familiar, but in Dutch.

Our final concert was in Wijk bij Duurstede on the Rhine, where we toured the windmill and 13th-century fortress before performing at the church with the vocal ensemble Face to Face, and then headed back for a wonderful wrap-up party at the KdK, complete with hilarious skits—and music!

Everywhere we went, we were presented with gifts to remember our visit. But the greatest gift for me was the experience itself of singing in magnificent settings to warm audiences while commemorating such a significant historical event for Canadians and Dutch people alike.

Written by Rosemary Gretton