

The New Amsterdam Singers Swept Away by Spain

Ed Schultz's Journal for Tour Report

Thursday, 7/3/03

Let's see... 8 Sopranos, 7 Altos, 6 Tenors, and 6 Basses = 27 Singers. So the rest of the 37 waiting to get on the British Air jet must be Groupies (non-singing tagalongs sometimes related to a singer), all setting out for NAS' 10th international concert tour. Buckle up and farewell rain-soaked New York!

Friday, 7/4/03

Hola, Madrid! And a complete weather overhaul. "Sunny Spain" -- obviously a cliché well-earned by the truth of it.

After-note: From that moment on, the sun would never leave us for long, except for a well-deserved rest between 10pm and 6am. Also noted: the rain proclaimed to stay in Spain mainly on the plain was not to be seen, not on plain, mountain, or shore from the first to the last day of our stay. The heat, however, would remain with us, consistently hovering between the high 80s and higher 90s, (no fun when you're sitting in Madrid's giant 25,000 seat Plaza del Toros waiting for the bulls, but more on that later).

Madrid Airport. Group met at airport by tour escort, **Josu Camacho**, a tall, lean, handsome Basque with the intense eyes of a young Jeremy Irons and, as we would soon discover, a sense of humor as dry as the climate.

Footnote on greetings: don't forget to explain 'Olabuenosdias!' A flowing, unified sound that when pried apart in English becomes 'Hello, good morning!' (Even the language is so polite its words don't bump, but slide gracefully into each other.) Very musical, and that's what this is all about, no? So, onward!

Saturday, 7/5/03

Morning rehearsal to be sure voices arrived with singers.

Note: don't forget to define terms. Morning is anytime after sunrise and ends at noon; indicated in 'buenos dias.' Afternoon -- 'buenos tardes' -- picks up at noon (though only mad dogs and Americans would be seen again before three pm) and runs well into evening. Evening doesn't end.

Afternoon: On our own; Prado and Botanical Gardens target for many.

Note: Getting the hang of the Euro makes an expensive pre-Prado lunch on Paseo del Prado a luxury. Muchas Gracias, Credit card!

Evening: tour of Madrid for all; free-time dinner in 'old town' section, guided to the best tapas bars and restaurants by Josu with appropriate Spanish enthusiasm for both. Cuisine leans to hearty portions from the meat group. One friendly group of three couples grappled with a quarter haunch of lamb -- each!

Sunday, 7/6/03

Tour of Toledo, south of Madrid and east of the 21st Century. Spectacular medieval town built on and into a hillside in tiers for defense (which didn't seem to deter the Romans and Visigoths). Home of El Greco. Once famed for steel, especially swords; Excalibur rumored to be Toledo-made. Lesser swords still available in tourist shops. (Check-through luggage only.) Tour of Gothic Cathedral and San Juan de Los Reyes monastery.

Note: having hosted three of the world's major religions -- Christian, Muslim, and Jewish -- Spanish architecture often reflects a blend of each. Mucho photos taken to prove same.

Back to Madrid for rehearsal for first concert tomorrow night. Groupies free agents, and Sunday is bullfight day in Madrid. So, with intrepid host and bullfighting fan Josu in the lead, four of the Groupie Ten, this reporter included, take the modern Metro to the huge Plaza del Toros for a medieval-born event, the *Corrida de Toros!*

Without any Hemingway and hawing, the event begins with a moment of silence for a deceased *matador*. Would there be any for the bulls?

The first bull enters, greeted with much cheering from the crowd. Two or three of the *toreros* step into the ring, a challenge to the animal to determine its 'bravery,' running to hide behind a protective wall when the bull displays too much of same.

Enter the *matador*. On his signal, two *picadores* carrying lances enter on horses that are well-padded and blindfolded. One or the other challenges the bull to attack and spears the animal's neck muscle.

Note: Padding and blindfolding the horse prevents it from panicking when the bull responds by attacking it. No horses will be harmed during the making of this corrida. Nice.

Three *banderilleros*, men on foot, each plunge two decorated and barbed sticks into the bull's neck muscle. The *matador* then confronts the animal, challenging it to charge his cape, getting it to pass as close to him as possible (the *veronica*) in a display of bravery and skill (the crowd cheers or whistles depending upon its opinion of the *matador's* artistry), finally plunging a sword into the bull's neck for the kill, which is not necessarily instant.

Note: The third deceased bull is proof enough the Groupies haven't the cultural perspective necessary to appreciate this form of sport and we leave, wondering if seeing two men pummel one another senseless in a boxing ring was better or worse. Or, as Josu suggested, is the bullfight more cruel than leading the same creature into a slaughterhouse? Footnote: the formerly brave bulls are ultimately someone's dinner. Final score: Matadors 3, Toros 0. Olé.

Monday, 7/7/03

Off to the North and Haro today; check into the former cloister, Hotel Los Agustinos, to dress for the first concert in the *Cathedral Santa Domingo Calzada*, one of the stops on the Pilgrimage Route of St. James, patron saint of Spain.

Note: In the High Middle Ages some half-million people each year walked to and then across the 500 miles of northern Spain that lead to Santiago and the Saint's

shrine, and continue to do so today, with twenty or thirty thousand expected to take part in the walk in 2003 alone.

It's a warm and bright evening in the small village surrounding the Cathedral. Are the locals surprised or delighted to see men in tuxedos and women in jewel-colored blouses and long skirts marching toward the Cathedral where a mass was being celebrated?

Note: Probably no more than the marchers were to note that wild storks had taken up residence on steeples and rooftops.

Two hundred plus worshipers welcome the Singers after mass and settle in to hear an hour of NAS' unique a cappella voice.

Note: On the program, Sacred music by Heinrich Schütz, Tomás Luis de Victoria, William Byrd, Antonio de Salazar; Music from the Americas by Ernani Aguiar, William Billings, Halsey Stevens, Kirke Mechem, and Matthew Harris; Sephardic songs by Paul Ben-Haim, and spirituals from Moses Hogan, Alice Parker, and Hall Johnson.

Enthusiastic applause greet each and all, with the finalé, *Ain't Got Time To Die* bringing the very pleased crowd to its feet. One very happy Chorus and their Groupies take over a plaza in Haro, celebrating with tapas and wine till hours that grew quite wee for some.

Tuesday, 7/8/03

This morning, our target is the Rioja district and a 10am tour of a *bodega* or winery.

Note: Many NASers find the answer to the old wag's query: "What is it the vintner buys that is half as precious as what he sells?"

Very educational (and tasty).

An abbey visit then lunch in Lagroño and back to the hotel to change for tonight's concert in Haro at the *Iglesia de Santo Tomas Apostol*.

The church is grander and so is the audience. Three hundred people attend, applaud and rise in lively appreciation of the concert, to the great delight of the performers and their conductor.

Note: Dinner may be late in some parts of Spain, but in the smaller towns and cities, it wasn't easy to find restaurants open after 10:30pm. But we managed to swamp available bars and restaurants with jewel-colored blouses and tuxedos hungry for food, drink, and celebration.

Wednesday, 7/9/03

Goodbye Haro, here we come Bilbao!

*Note: Our air-conditioned bus, is driven with impressive skill by **Danny**, a young and burly, good-looking and good-natured Spaniard who miraculously manages to get this relative mammoth of a tour bus into, through, and out of medieval streets, and maneuver it through freeway traffic as though it were a Tonka toy.*

A stop in coastal resort San Sebastian for a sniff of sea air, lunch, sightseeing, and a *café solo*; then on to Bilbao's old town for a Basque dinner with Basque-style cider. Apres dinner, half the company returned with Danny on the bus while the more adventurous half strolled back to the hotel under that old Bilbao moon.

Thursday, 7/10/03

First stop -- what else? A guided tour of Bilbao's famous Gehry Guggenheim, itself a work of art and, so say some, more interesting than the art inside.

Note: Whatever one takes away from the architecture or the art it contains, Jeff Koons' 'Puppy' -- a twelve meter tall flower sculpture of a Scotty pup outside the museum steals all hearts. Originally intended as a temporary installation, locals swept up 'Puppy' and made it their mascot. 'Sit, Puppy. Stay.'

Another snifter of sea air at the beaches of El Sardinero in the resort of Santander, 'the Miami of Spain,' lunch, and a dip in the Bay of Biscay for the wet-deprived; then onto the quaint medieval town of Santillana del Mar and a quiet dinner.

Friday, 7/11/03

Promptly at 9am, the tourists arrive to roam the cobblestone streets of this low-rise medieval village, peer into stone houses, a simple church of Roman ancestry, and not-so-medieval tchotchkie shops.

A quiet, non-medieval lunch, and we are off to the new *Altamira Museum*, a faithful reproduction of the caves and pre-historic paintings discovered deep in the mountains of Northern Spain in 1924.

Note: The original paintings, mostly of horses and bison, were painted 11,000-19,000 years ago by our cave dwelling ancestors. If you want to know more about this fascinating museum which includes exhibits on the archeology of the site and how it was reproduced so the valuable original paintings would not be destroyed by changes in the microclimate brought by human visitation, visit <http://museodealtamira.mcu.es/ingles/indexprova2.html>

Final concert tonight! One Alto is out with laryngitis and one Soprano bravely struggles with canes due to a misstep early in the tour. But the show must, will go on because we are sharing the stage at the *Iglesia Santa Maria* in Castro Urdiales, another bustling seaside resort, with the *Coral Santa Maria de Castro Urdiales*.

The *Coral* opens the evening with several beautifully sung traditional Spanish songs, including an unusual rendition of *Granada*, and stay to be among the three hundred-plus who enjoy NAS' contribution, greeted again with a standing ovation at the close. Who says repetition is boring?

After the concert, both choruses celebrate together in a local restaurant by the sea, and of course when wine flows music soon follows. Each group takes turns singing favorites, including rousing solos by the *Coral* director, **Javier Carrasco**, and a member of the *Coral* singing the *Habeñera*. Our finalé: a reprise of *Ain't Got Time to Die* with **André Guthman** giving his dramatic best to the delight of all.

Note: differences in language may have been a barrier to conversation between choruses, but no fences can hold back music, and the camaraderie shared tonight proved art creates more than beauty. Thrilling!

But an unexpected pleasure arrives when new NAS President Tim DeWerff rises to spin an eloquent and heartfelt toast to friendship through music, and give our thanks to the *Coral* for

their warm welcome, translated into Spanish by Josu and given robust approval by both choruses.

Saturday, 7/12/03

Sad, but stimulated, we return to Madrid for our farewell dinner in Casa Pedro where a splendid *paella* was served and countless photographs, traditional and digital, taken. Absent were Clara and Bevis who had slipped away earlier that day for a hiking trip through the Pyrenees, never an adventure escapes this dauntless pair.

Tomorrow homeward bound, packing as many pleasant memories as our carry-ons would allow. So, no more notes, just -- *muchos gracias* to John Duncan for his executive generalship in making the tour possible and an exciting one, and to one and all for the companionship, artistry, and pleasure so generously shared.

Ole!

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