

University of London Chamber Choir's 2016 Tour to Italy
Conductor: Colin Durrant
President: Kaat De Courte

From Crema to Como, from standing ovations to crystallising silences, from the rivers of prosecco to the many-flavoured mountains of gelato; everyone in ULCC will be remembering something special about our 2016 tour to Italy.

Our first musical outing upon landing in Italy was, surprisingly, not in concert or even rehearsal, but in thanks. Sitting in the warm blanket of night, nestled amongst the beautiful architecture enclosing the main square of Lodi, we sang a sombre song, *Drop, drop slow tears* for our hosts and benefactors. Having had a first taste of both pizza and the extraordinary generosity of our new Italian friends and seeing leaflets for our upcoming concert on the tables in front of us, the impromptu performance was heartfelt and filled with appreciation. As the week went by, we saw more and more how much work they had put forth into making the tour run smoothly, particularly from our main point of contact: Giampiero Innocente, whom we cannot thank enough for his tireless chaperoning of the choir, translating, organising and introducing us and our pieces before performances.



Every day in Italy was a new adventure for us all, but each morning we shared in the relative luxury of our accommodation: the Collegio San Francesco, where we had en suite rooms and small balconies, complete with a modest breakfast to start the day. Lodi itself is a lovely little town, perfect for strolls along the riverbank, lunch in the shade and gelato available at almost all times.

Our first concert was in the exquisite Basilica di Saint Barbara, Mantua: a building that was once used as a church and now stands as a testament to skill in architecture as well as a superb concert venue. Hidden from view of the audience by the alter, we began our first real show, nervous energy and excitement lending a noticeable edge to the focus of every one of us. We stood in a semi circle, smiling to each other as the sound of our song reach up to the domed ceiling, flowed out and suffused the vast space. The programme whizzed by and suddenly we were finished, our stand-out performances of Verdi's *Pater Noster* and Bach's *Der Geist Hilft Unsrer Schwachheit Auf* having been met with a standing ovation.

That same night we experienced for the first time what would come to be the norm while on tour: the late coach journeys back to Lodi. Perhaps the most noticeable culture-shock experience was the custom of having concerts begin at 9pm, a time that would be considered quite late in the UK! Depending on the distance between our concerts and Lodi, we would occasionally end up back at the Collegio at 2am: tired, but happy from a good performance and at the sight of our beds.

The following three days were nothing short of delightful as we settled into things. An open rehearsal with the Catholic University of Milan's choir, complete with enviably good student grub and unforgettably warm and welcoming people. We made friends and shared stories as well as briefly meeting the British Ambassador; all culminating in a wonderfully friendly and supportive day. Before the concert began, we even had time to enjoy the sights of Milan – some of us made our way to the Duomo, some moseyed around the university and most of us had a peek at La Scala. The concert itself was actually a joint one for a number of pieces: *O magnum mysterium*, *Ave verum* and the highlight of the whole evening was perhaps Allegri's *Miserere*, with Claudia Fuller's pure and

effortless top C's sending chills down every spine. We ended our Wednesday concert with an emotional rendition of Billy Joel's *And so it goes*.

Thursday found us fighting off tiredness with excitement as we were fortunate enough to have a day off and no one wanted to waste the opportunity. The three stories to come of this day were: the majority of us embarking upon a grand adventure on several trains and a boat in order to make our way to a swimming spot and tiny beach along the western edge of Lake Como, a gorgeous lake surrounded by forest-covered hills and sprawling towns. A second group decided to return to Milan in order to better sample the many cultural icons that can be found there – the many museums and galleries providing a pleasant and enjoyable change of scenery. The remainder of our choir wisely used the free time to rest and explore more of our host town, Lodi. As we re-grouped that evening and shared the events of our day, the atmosphere was buzzing with good cheer.

In what was the exception that proved the rule, the following day was the only one that had a both concert and no return coach journey, as the concert took place in the same building as our accommodation! This meant that we had our morning rehearsal and from there most of the day was freely spent in Lodi again, alternating between basking in the Italian summer heat and cooling off with yet more gelato.

There were numerous comments about how much more spacious and sedate this town was when compared to London, making it a pleasant change of pace.

Our treat for the evening concert was to spread our choir out amongst the pillars of the church while we sang Rachmaninof's *Bogoroditse devo*, making full use of the impressive space and acoustic. The night ended in particularly high spirits.

Our final two days were a blur as we collectively felt the impending end of our tour. Another open rehearsal in Crema where we were flattered upon being asked to talk a bit about ourselves and choral traditions in England. The workshop was an enjoyable success as Colin showed off the details and nuances in a few of our pieces, the show-stopper being *Ah, see the fair chivalry come!* Our concert audience that evening was very appreciative and evidently enthusiastic as they had chosen our choir over the Euro 2016 football match between Italy and Germany! Afterwards we were treated to an amazing buffet featuring everything from pizza to pandoro and thanks were traded back and forth between everyone present.

Finally, we found ourselves back in Milan for the final time, in the San Marco church. In short order, we sang for the midday mass in this impressive Catholic church, golden glints from many angles framing our performance of Byrd's *Mass for four voices*. Afterwards, we made our way to the final lunch that would be had in Italy with our hosts and new friends. During this time, we basked in the pride of completing such an exciting and varied tour, as well as doling out mini-awards for each choir member. I think the more memorable activity that day was the reveal of our choir bingo facts game, where we learned who corresponded to which “sketchy fact” (a game that I would highly recommend other choirs try!).



We reached the airport much the same way as we had all our other destinations that week: without any fuss or problems. Surprisingly exhausted, we plodded through the airport and made our way home. Upon reflection, as we waited to board the plane, there was an easy consensus among us of what had made the tour great: the passion. The enthusiasm and delight with which we were greeted by Giampiero and each of our audiences encouraged us to strive to produce our best singing and made so much of our free time a joy to share. For this and the impeccable organisation, we are indeed very grateful.

As is often the case with a choir tour, by the end we were a far closer-knit group than we had been all year. With that closeness came a small sorrow as we bade farewell to those members who are leaving the choir this year, though we all agree that such an enjoyable tour is probably the best way to end their tenure. We also have endless gratitude to our own president, Kaat, for her comprehensive organisation and relentless attention to our fun, and of course to our conductor, Colin. The man's enthusiasm and patience seem almost endless and are a big part of why ULCC enjoys the success it does today.

