

## "A Life Changing Experience"

This experience was a dream come true for me. I began working on this itinerary almost two years ago. Every single thing about it exceeded my utmost expectations. We had the perfect balance of performances and sight seeing as well as free time.

The sheer beauty of the venues that we were invited to sing in humbled me to the core. We had 8 performances in 9 days. These are truly some of the most beautiful venues in all of Europe. The Salzburg Dome literally takes your breath away just approaching the front doors let alone its vast beauty on the inside. We sang in the mass on a brisk Saturday morning at the Wieskirchen. This was a magnificent cathedral in a small village between Munich and Salzburg that was nestled right in the center of miles and miles of rolling meadows, with the backdrop of the Swiss Alps surrounding its structure. The magnificence of the landscape alone crippled our senses to just be still and take it all on for a moment. The caretaker of the church met us for a detailed tour of the ancient frescoes that told the story of the entire New Testament in vibrant colors spanned across the ceiling that towered 200 feet above our heads. It was strikingly similar to the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

On Sunday we sang in the Mass at the Cathedral of St. Gilgen. This was a beautiful village North of Salzburg. St. Gilgen Cathedral was a small ancient chapel that sat right on a lake with the Swiss Alps draping all four sides of its acreage. I had never been here before. The history and ancient charm of this 600 year old village had been perfectly preserved and manicured. It was simply divine. We sang in the balcony. Because the Chapel was smaller its acoustics were perfect. Their voices moved in a continuous motion of surround sound with every chord. The congregation was so touched that they asked the choir to stay and sing more pieces. I held up Elijah Rock which is a twelve part impressive spiritual that the kids just love performing. They quietly revolted and said, "No, we want to sing Sicut Cervus," I stood for about a minute speechless holding back the tears. Not many people will understand why that alone is a miracle. It is a very difficult task to get high school students to love Renaissance music. I knew then and there that the beauty of this music had made its mark on their souls and in their hearts. They not only sang this ancient holy piece of music, but truly worshipped. I did not even need to conduct it. Many of them were singing with their eyes closed, their heads tilted upward with tears streaming down their faces. These are priceless moments that I will never forget.

Sunday evening we had another concert at the University Church in Salzburg. This is one of the most impressive venues in all of Europe. Its ceilings stretch the course of a football fields in length and its height was about 300 feet. It's clearly evident that majesty and honor was the theme of this sacred hall. Many of the patrons that we had met along the way were blown away that we had been invited to sing in these prestigious places. As a result, this alone brought our audiences each time. These cathedrals are not heated in order to preserve the art and their original colors. As a result they are very cold and people cannot stay for long periods of time without proper clothing on. We lost a few people in the middle of the concert. Afterwards, we headed to the steps just outside the main entrance and sang in the city square. In only moments another 150 people gathered around to hear the kids sing. This is simply not the culture here on the states.

Monday, we toured the Benedictine Monastery in Melk. This palace had been the summer get away of the Hapsburg family in the 1600's. They gave the property to the Benedictine Monks for their Monastery. The Melk Abbey was definitely a highlight. We toured the property for about an hour working our way to the abbey, or the "house of God", the chapel. The chapel portion was 800 years old. There was no talking aloud in the chapel and we were scheduled to perform a half hour a cappella recital there. I knew upon arriving to the Monastery something profound was about to happen. The choir began to sing and the Spirit of the Lord fell abundantly on each one of them, randomly capturing their hearts one at a time. Before I knew it, I had standing before me 53 kids sobbing at the sheer beauty of the music they were creating. I whispered, "This is the epitome of the ensemble, and you are in the holiest of holies in your hearts. Take the head of the person on your right and your left gently in your hands and give them a holy kiss. My singers were overwhelmed with love for one another for the first time in their lives. They continued to sing from the depth of their being. One at a time God touched these precious kids so deeply they could only weep. 6'3" tall boys weeping just because of the tenderness of this indescribable moment absolutely crippled me. I looked up at my senior leader and said, "Ryan, you will have to conduct Ave Verum, I am going down. I can no longer stand."

I proceeded to fall to the ground on my face weeping profusely at the beauty of God's presence capturing these students and myself.

Tuesday, we had the incredible honor of being welcomed and received by the Mayor of Salzburg. This reception was in the exceptional town hall of Salzburg. This is perhaps the most beautiful room in all of Salzburg. We were presented with a certificate of gratitude and honor. They proceeded to shower me with a multitude of gifts. They asked the kids to sing for them. As the students sang in a circle in this magnificent room, I had to stop conducting again. I was so overwhelmed with this whole dream coming true and the indescribable honor they had bestowed on us when I felt the honor was really ours. After this, we quickly walked back to the town square and approached the famous Salzburg Dome for a twenty minute a cappella recital. Wow! We could not even speak as we drew nearer and

nearer to this absolutely magnificent structure. Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord god Almighty....ran through my head as I entered this place. As you can imagine we had yet another encounter singing in this extraordinary room. Tourists flooded into the room at the very moment their voices filled the air.

It is simply amazing to me that this trip just got better and better everywhere we went.

Tuesday evening, we went to a Mozart dinner. This was a true taste of the culture of this town at its best. A 3-course meal was flanked by vignettes of three Mozart Operas with a string quartet and two fabulous singers dressed in the attire of 1750.

Wednesday, we moved into Vienna, the Imperial city. Vienna is impossible to absorb in just 3 days. We did most of the touring by bus and a lot of walking. We sang in St. Peter's Cathedral in Vienna on Thursday morning. This venue is very similar to Notre Dame in Paris. Beauty beyond description adorned the walls and ceiling of this outstanding structure. Vienna is the architectural capitol of the world in my opinion. This imperial city is marked with royalty and majesty and brilliance literally everywhere you look. It is quite overwhelming.

We ended our tour with an extraordinary concert at St. Charles Cathedral in Vienna on Thursday night. We had an audience of about 400 patrons. They had to put out more chairs to accommodate the growing crowd. What a blessing for us. There is so much more to tell of this miraculous journey. This trip was simply perfect in every way. The choir came together and fell in love with one another very quickly. Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom and love and unity, and that was the gift for us to drink at every corner.

I want to thank our administrators and parents who supported this effort. It was clearly life changing.

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