



## Choir Tour to Charlotte, North Carolina: December 2012

*By Luke Navin (Year 12)*

The Choir tour to Charlotte, North Carolina at the end of 2012 was a fabulously exciting time for each of the 23 students and five staff members on the trip, as well as a time for some, who had travelled to Charlotte on the Choir tour three years' prior, to rekindle old memories and catch up with old friends.

We came prepared with a substantial repertoire, comprising a diverse selection of choral music spanning five centuries from Gregorian plainchant to rich English choral music to traditional German and French Christmas carols. I played the organ for the trip which meant accompanying the choir as well as performing solo items and discovering some unusual and quintessentially American instruments!

Throughout the trip we stayed in groups of twos and threes with extraordinarily generous host families who gave up a week of their busy lives and warmly welcomed us into their homes. Their great kindness and hospitality not only made the trip possible but also made it really enjoyable, as they took us on outings to sports fixtures, bowling alleys and to the cinema in the evenings.

The tour began early on a crisp December morning. We assembled at 7.30 am in the Performing Arts Centre lobby with very little idea of what lay ahead of us for the next week. It was the first time that we were all together as a group - a group in which we would form many deep and lasting friendships over the coming week. We arrived, on two minibuses, at Gatwick Airport and departed West Sussex on a 10.00 am flight bound to the States. We arrived in the afternoon only a few hours after we had left England, owing to a 5 hour time difference, and in moderately dampened spirits after a somewhat wearisome 9 hour flight.

But before long, the excitement of the trip returned as we travelled to St Gabriel's church - a location that would become something of a beacon to us over the next week - to meet our host families for the first time. The families were all members of the congregation of St Gabriel's Catholic Church. They



waited in eager anticipation, as excited to meet us as we were to meet them.



We were then individually introduced to the families with whom we would be staying. Myself, Francesc and Hugh stayed with the Gaffey family; Renea and Anthony and their two children Amanda and Clay. They were wonderfully kind and we hope to keep in touch with them long into the future.

Having spent the evening settling in, we awoke the next morning to prepare for our first big concert; at St Gabriel's Church to an appreciative audience of around 300. We performed a varied programme of music which was enthusiastically received - a fabulous way to start the trip.

After this first, wildly successful concert, we were all in the best of spirits going in to Sunday. On Sunday morning we sang Mass - a regular practice for most of us - and so nothing to be overly excited over, however this Mass was different. It was at a Gospel Church and promised to be a new experience for us all. Upon our arrival at the Church, we were somewhat surprised as we were presented with a rather unprepossessing 1950s building unlike any Church we'd seen before. As we stepped inside we were in for quite a surprise! It was a Gospel Church in the true sense of the word - the Choir swaying in time with the hymns and members of the congregation exclaiming impromptu heavenly praises at various points throughout the two hour Mass.

For all of us the experience was totally new, outside of our ordinary comfort zones and truly one of the most exotic, entertaining, and memorable moments of the trip! Having sung the Mass and partaken of refreshments, so kindly laid on by the Church, we dashed off to our next concert at Belmont Abbey. To the west of Charlotte, Belmont is a Benedictine Monastery with a welcoming community of Monks who were eager to show us around. We performed a similar programme to that of the last night's concert at St Gabriel's. The concert was equally well, if not even better received! With the splendid acoustic offered at Belmont, a recording of our concert there was made.

After the busy weekend of singing, Monday offered a welcome and much needed break. We headed into downtown Charlotte where we were given a delightfully illuminating walking tour of the city, revealing to us a deep



history dating back to the American revolution, before heading off to “South Park” - one of the largest shopping destinations of North America - that afternoon for an opportunity to do some last minute Christmas shopping!

The following day, we packed cassocks and a change of clothes and embarked on a two-hour long journey to Biltmore where we were to sing four half hour recitals before spending the night. With Dr Doggett at the wheel, the journey was sublimely comfortable and passed in no time at all!



Biltmore House itself was quite striking, not least of all because of its sheer vastness - a total of two hundred and fifty rooms spanning five floors and no less than one hundred and eighty thousand square feet. Privately owned by the Vanderbilt family - Cornelius Vanderbilt made his fortune at the birth of the railroad industry in America in the nineteenth century -

Biltmore was built by Cornelius’s grandson George Vanderbilt after he was inspired, on a visit to North Carolina with his mother, by the breathtaking, expansive scenery. The house was built over a period of six years at the end of the nineteenth century, and embraces all the Châteauesque grandeur of French Louis XIV architecture.



We sang a mix of carols at Biltmore to swathes of onlookers touring the house in what was known as “the winter garden” - a grand, central atrium with a stunning acoustic making for a magnificent, radiant sound. This evening was, without a doubt, one of the outstanding moments of the trip.



After spending the night at a hotel near Biltmore, we headed back to Charlotte, stopping off in the town of Asheville - an 'artsy' village full to the brim with artisanal shops. Conceived in the 1920s and encompassing a wide range of art deco and traditional American architecture, it was an entertaining and unique experience.

Upon arriving back in Charlotte, we were all of us thoroughly exhausted and finally able to relax as we knew the majority of our singing commitments were now behind us. The following day we spent 'carolling' through the corridors of the local primary school and to unsuspecting restaurant goers... we even sang in the local bagel shop!

Finally, it came time to pack, say our farewells, and to offer our sincerest gratitude to our host families and the community of St Gabriel's church where we had been made to feel so warmly welcome. Upon arriving back in England on the most dismal of mornings, we were left to prepare for Christmas and to share and relive our fondest memories of a truly memorable and enjoyable trip.





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