

Coro Stellante on tour

Atri, Italy. 1<sup>st</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012

**Friday June 1<sup>st</sup>** and in a quiet corner of the Abruzzo area of Italy a rumble of anticipated excitement was building, today the Coro Stellante girls were arriving in Atri. But even before they'd touched down, after enjoying a delayed flight from Stansted courtesy of Ryanair, the Italian organisational skills came into force when the coach sent to collect them from Pescara airport had three seats too few. This problem never left us during our stay but a fleet of willing Italian men provided the necessary extra seats in private cars when required. However it did put the dampeners on the prosecco greeting which was planned for the coach journey back to Atri and this had to be postponed. After a late supper at the Hotel Du Parc and the distribution of straw hats! many of the weary travellers retired to bed, others weren't quite so sensible and this was the trend which continued throughout the tour!

**Saturday** saw everyone bright eyed and bushy tailed and down at breakfast in good time for the mornings rehearsal. However the hotel seemed to have miss-calculated the amount of food women of a certain age consume and had catered for a party of stick thin super models who survive on lettuce leaves and fresh air (maybe Michaels build up of us as top tottie was a little exaggerated or maybe something was lost in translation). This they rectified as best they could and from then on we were force fed an excessive amount of calories at the cost of our svelte black and red silhouettes!

The afternoon rehearsal in the Auditorium S. Agostion and Coro Pacini were finally introduced to the fuchsia clad beauties of Coro Stellante. However, once the singing started it was the ladies who received a scolding from the Maestro ..... for drooling..... For the concert that evening Michaels two (by then mutually appreciative) choirs were joined by Coro Samnium Concentus, a group of ladies (also clad in red and black - someone hadn't done their homework here!) from Campobasso, Southern Italy. They performed 9 pieces of surprisingly similar repertoire and were appreciated by all for their technical excellence. CS & CP blew each other away with their *insieme* opening numbers of Al Shlosha d'Varim and the Biebl Ave Maria. Everything that came after that was, I'm sure, sublime but I fear a little lost in the heights reached by the introductory pieces. A party for all three choirs was hosted by Hotel du Parc and whilst seated on large round tables copious amounts of pasta was consumed dwarfed only by the copious amounts of red wine the Pacini boys produced and proceeded to drink. The vast number of cigarettes the boys managed to inhale should also not go unmentioned here..... A jolly night of singing followed until the management shut up shop and the girls went to bed.....well, most of the girls went to bed. It was reported that Nightingales were indeed heard in Atri Square that night.

**Sunday** morning and the small town square was full of English maidens, some of whom partook in the offered tour of *La Basilica Cattedrale* and others opted to while away their free time outside the *Teatro Comunale* drinking Cappuccino or *spremutto* and watching the elegantly clad Italians go about their weekend business. A quick rehearsal in the open aired Palazzo Ducale had the ladies in a quandary as to where to place their bags so as to avoid them being covered in pigeon poop. Lunch (at which three gallant members of Coro Pacini presented all with a white CP t-shirt) a short siesta and then time to get glammed up ready for our second concert.

The effect of 25 ladies dressed up to the nines in long black or red dresses sporting bling to die for and walking elegantly (well, as elegant as the combination of heels and cobbles would allow) from the hotel and through Atri town centre shouldn't be underestimated. Tonight's concert had more of a secular feel and was kicked off by the lovely ladies of Coro Samnium Concentus. Michael, being the true professional that he is held up proceedings to allow the clock to strike the hour and not break the spell he intended - and succeeded - to create with *Sure On This Shining Night*. However it was, once again, the pieces CS and CP performed together which were show stopping. Every ounce of concentration was required from us girls as the men stood between us and crooned *Shenandoah*, I suspect Tena Lady was put to the test during that piece! With *Beat Me Daddy* the shoe was on the other foot and the girls led the way with the boys stumbling over the words and over their feet! The capacity audience was ecstatic and a giving and receiving of gifts between the three choirs preceded a banquet of food laid on by Coro Pacini, accompanied of course by gallons of red wine. The tantalising sounds of disco music lured some of our ladies to dance to the beat of tasteful English classics such as YMCA, Macarena and The Conga whilst others sauntered down to the town square where numerous prosecco corks were released and impromptu tours of Atri were offered on the back of a motor-bike. Bed-time for most but the hard-core headed in the opposite direction to the Schola Cantorum where they probably did their reputation as decent singers a great deal of harm but as the red wine was once again flowing freely nobody seemed to care. At 3a.m. the ladies in red took their leave and after initial reservations about walking through the streets alone at that time of night (and a short discussion about the lack of Italian chivalry) it was decided that we looked like a formidable force and that no-one was going to mess with us - and of course no one did.

**Monday** and a shopping extravaganza as the streets were full of market stalls. Such excitement from ladies who normally shop at Boden or the like and wouldn't dream of wearing mass produced items at home, but these were Italian mass produced items and that made all the difference. Back at the hotel purchases and bargains were compared and the female need to shop was satisfied.

At midday it was time to say goodbye to three of our sisters who were leaving early to return home. The rest of the group and a couple of CP (self invited) guests climbed aboard the coach (note: with *enough* seats) for a tour of the Mountains. The weather was not at its best so some of the stunning scenery escaped us. At the last stop and 20 minutes after the

agreed departure time the 3 Pacini boys had to be hunted down, dragged out of a bar and escorted back to the coach with their tails between their legs. Their apologies in broken English and enquires as to 'you angry?' could, of course, only be met with a smile and all was forgiven.

The trip was interspersed with frantic phone calls from the aforementioned 3 sisters who had firstly been unsuccessful in hailing a cab and had then failed to find a local bus to catch. After intervention from the Maestro himself a knight in shining armour was despatched and they were whisked away to their destination.

Later in the evening the previously cancelled prosecco reception was held on the balcony of room 102 where cake and liquorice were served in the rain. Therefore announcements took place inside the room with 31 people perched on two very small single beds. After dinner the said beds were once again frequented by a number of ladies (and one man) and a female counselling session took place complete with lots of hugging and tears - exit one man.

**Tuesday** morning and the sun was shining again. Room 102 was cleared of at least 13 empty bottles which were discreetly distributed amongst the dustbins of Atri.

What was a slow start for some followed and large amounts of Cappuccino was taken on the square.

The venue for the afternoon's concert was suddenly found to be full of scaffolding so an alternative had to be found at extremely short notice. This would of course have caused mass panic in the UK but in laid back Italy it was *nessun problema* and it wasn't! The *Gala Concerto Con 4 Cori* was moved at the last minute to the town of Bisenti where Michael proudly (if a little stressed at times) showcased his four choirs singing both individually and together. The packed church showed their appreciation with a standing ovation not only after every piece but also during. It was a truly memorable concert with CP and CS once again joining forces and almost raising the roof with the Biebl Ave Maria. Va Pensiero was sung with gusto by both choirs and audience alike.

Wonderful doesn't even begin to describe it.

Back onto the coach (with not enough seats) and off to Michael's home town of Appignano for a feast provided by the locals and served on a magical moonlit terrace. However the coach driver wanted to go to bed and headed back in the direction of Atri. Several frantic phone calls later and the rest of the Stellante ladies arrived and the party got underway. Wine, food and song was in abundance, speeches made and gifts presented and gratefully received. All too soon it was time to leave and it was here that we had to say goodbye to our adored MD as we handed him back to his wife and family. The coach (with too few seats) chugged off back to the Hotel du Parc. But it was our last evening and many people weren't ready to retire, instead they decided to perambulate the park for the last time and seek out those elusive Nightingales.....

**Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> June** and without our leader. However having been assured by him before he left that he had sorted four 'holding rooms' for the whole day for us what could go wrong?! What he'd failed to discover was that there were no other guest booked into the hotel so all the staff were going home and they were going to lock the whole place up 1 ½ hours before we were due to leave (they also didn't seem to know about the four rooms). Much gesticulating and words spoken slowly and loudly soon ensured that we all understood each other and everything was sorted.

A relaxed day of pleasing ourselves followed with a large group of girlies simply moving from hotel to town square for cappuccino and/or spremuto and then moving on to aperitifs at an appropriate time. A slow amble to a nearby restaurant where a riotous luncheon took place was followed by a roll down the hill to the ice cream parlour and finally settling in the park with three bottles of Prosecco.

But the bubble had to burst at some time and the coach (with not enough seats) turned up for our transfer back to the airport. I say OUR transfer, left behind feeling abandoned and rejected mummy duck (passenger #27) sat on the hotel steps trying to look brave and, whilst pleased that all her ducklings were safely on their way to Pescara, she was secretly wondering how the hell she was going to get to the airport herself. Rescue came quickly in the form of a good looking and extremely chivalrous Italian man who not only made a huge attempt at conversation in his broken English but also managed to fit a bit of sightseeing into the journey as well.

Pescara airport, man sized pizza and cattle herding on to waiting Ryanair jets.

Our surreal 5 day existence was over. But this was only the first tour.....

AC 8/6/12