

Daily Diary of GCS Tour de France:

We're off to France! We will be traveling in support of the newly-formed Sister Cities relationship between Greenwich, CT and Vienne, a similarly sized community in Burgundy, just outside Lyon.

About 60 members of the Greenwich Choral Society and some choristers and friends from the New Haven Chorale will present a program of American sacred and secular music at 8:30 pm on Tuesday, July 8 at the Eglise Saint-André-le-Bas in Vienne. The annual Jazz Festival will be on in Vienne at the same time.

Before traveling south to Lyon, we will stop for a couple of days in Paris. On Friday, July 4 we will present the same program at the American Cathedral in Paris. And as a prelude to all this concertizing, we have been invited by United States Ambassador to France, Craig Stapleton and his wife, both Greenwich residents, to sing both the U.S. and French national anthems at the Ambassador's Residence during the annual Independence Day party. More than 2,000 guests are expected!

July 2, 2008

The waiting area at Terminal 1, Gate 7 slowly begins to resemble a Greenwich Choral Society rehearsal. Familiar faces appear with their non-singing companions, spouses, partners and some children, ready to make music. It's a full flight, but we have lots to look forward to!

July 3, 2008

Paris! City of light! Also the occasional burst of sunshine and sprinkle of rain. We drive straight from Roissy Charles de Gaulle airport to a refreshing hour's riverboat cruise on the Seine. At midday, we gather at the official residence of the U.S. Ambassador to France, Craig Stapleton, and his lovely wife, Debbie, both Greenwich residents. We test our vocal cords in the spacious back garden of this 1832 "hotel particulier" fronting on the Faubourg St. Honoré in advance of our appearance tomorrow. It should work well. A brief break before a dinner highlighted by welcoming remarks from the Friendship Ambassador Foundation. Off to conquer jet lag!

July 4, 2008

Ambassador and Mrs. Stapleton have made U.S./France sister city pairs the theme of this year's annual 4th of July celebration. The Ambassador's Residence is buzzing as extra staff prepare to welcome this year's 2,200 (!) guests on a perfect Paris day, blue skies and comfortable temperatures. Military attachés in dress uniform mingle with dignitaries in business suits and summer dresses. The chorus warms up before filing out onto the steps leading out to the rear garden.

After the U.S. Marine honor guard posts the colors, we sing both the French and U.S. national anthems. Ambassador Stapleton welcomes the guests with remarks that touch on his family's long-time French ties and the links between the two countries. We conclude the official program with some more music.

In the evening, we perform again with a full program at the American Cathedral on Avenue George V. The main sanctuary is nearly full to hear our voices fill this spacious hall, built in 1887 and lined with the flags of France, the United States and all 50 states. The audience tunes in to our sound, and by the time we finish the concert, they are stamping and applauding rhythmically. Conductor Paul Mueller has to apologize after we sing our encore since we don't have a second encore prepared. So we repeat Copland's arrangement of "I bought me a cat". More applause. It's been a good trip to Paris.

July 5, 2008

Paris on our own today. A group takes a walking tour. Others find their own Paris.

July 6, 2008

A long travel day from Paris to Lyon today, with an early start and arrival in the pouring rain. But the weather looks better for tomorrow when we go to sister city Vienne for a reception with city officials.

July 7, 2008

Vienne is a charming town about 30 minutes by bus south of Lyon. Chief among its attractions are remnants of the Roman Empire, including a massive amphitheater and a standing temple. Most buildings are four and five stories tall rising up the slopes from the river in the center of town. A French flag flies atop a Roman ruin on the top of a hill. At the Chamber of Commerce, the mayor and a town delegation greets us warmly. We sing a short program inside the hall, where a perimeter balcony allows an audience to look down the chorus, which stands in front of a huge mural. The Chamber of Commerce has kindly arranged a buffet luncheon reception for us, and we feast on the region's delicacies: charcuterie, cheeses, fruit tarts and local Rhone wines.

Our group divides in three, each accompanied by a local English-speaking guide for a short tour of some of the town's attractions. Vienne is hosting its annual jazz festival, an event that attracts world-class talent, and we see and hear evidence of the festival everywhere: posters, visitors, student ensembles performing daytime recitals. The Chamber of Commerce tops off our visit to Vienne with tickets to hear the evening's performance in the amphitheater, with the Maria

Schneider orchestra filling the night air before our return to our Lyon hotel for the night.

July 8, 2008

Some of the group use the morning for a walking tour of Old Lyon, the narrow streets connected by “traboules” or covered passageways, all under the watchful protection of the basilica on top of Fouvriere hill, which looks down on the “vieille ville” and is reached by funicular.

By mid-afternoon, we are on our way back to Vienne for a rehearsal with our orchestra, a chamber ensemble of local musicians. We are singing in Saint-André-le-Bas, a church which dates in parts to the 14th century, and our voices blend and echo in the space.

The audience starts to gather early, filling in the pews from the front. Our jazz festival competition is Sonny Rollins. We draw a respectable crowd anyway, with word of yesterday’s mini-performance spreading by word of mouth among the locals, proud of their town’s association with Greenwich.

The performance goes very well. The orchestra rises to the occasion. All of us in the chorus look knowingly at one another and smile. Maestro Paul Mueller looks very pleased as he accepts a bouquet after his bows. The City of Vienne sponsors a post-concert reception for us the church’s cloister. It’s a chance to savor more of the area’s fine food and wine along with the satisfaction of representing Greenwich to our sister city.

July 9, 2008

A free day after our musical labors. One large group takes an excursion to Lake Annecy, near the French Alps. The boat ride on the glacial lake gives choristers and their companions an unparalleled view of dozens of colorful hang gliders against the blue sky.

Others who stayed in Lyon for the day visit the Textile Museum to review Lyon’s role in the silk trade and discover new restaurants in France’s capital of gastronomy.

July 10, 2008

A travel day from Lyon to the Paris airport gives us all a chance to visit Beaune, a charming capital of wine in the middle of Burgundy. The spectacular Hotel-Dieu, built in the 15th century as a refuge for the sick and poor, continued as a working hospital until the 1970’s. Oh, and we taste some of the local wines, too.

July 11, 2008

It's time to fly back to the States with plenty of memories and the satisfaction of a job well done. We look forward to seeing our friends for our traditional Christmas concert in December. Check the home page for dates and times.