

An Estonian Odyssey

July 2012

The trip from Tallinn airport to the city centre is the easiest imaginable, a short bus ride for just €2. But arriving at the Viru Gates for my latest RunBySingers venture was just the start. Our director, Jeremy Jackman, had a world tour in store for us. Beginning and ending in England, our virtual musical journey would feature ports of call in Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Hungary, Estonia, Russia, Japan, America and Ireland, with an encore of global relevance, extolling music as the greatest gift. This would be no new concept for our hosts. In a nutshell, Estonia sings; it's how it defines itself. Their annual Song Festival is attended by 25% of the country's population. No pressure!

Given our itinerary, we didn't have merely the small matter of notes and other musical niceties to conquer, but no fewer than nine different languages to get our vocal muscles around. But as with the music it was a case of getting so used to the patterns – the facial shapes, the correct stresses – that in the end the words should become second nature. We had some invaluable help with our Estonian pronunciation: when Marju, working at the Music School where we held our rehearsals, overheard us tackling Tormis' lullaby *Lase Kiik Käia*, she went into an ecstasy of 'Oh, I used to sing that to all my babies!' and diplomatically advised us on the unfamiliar vowel sounds. A piece by Arvo Pärt, Estonia's most famous musical son, was of course included, requiring lots of practice chanting Russian – *Bogoróditse Dyévo* – and as though to prove that wasn't a fluke we followed it with Tchaikovsky's *Khvaleetye, Gospoda s nyebyes*, complete with the 5-syllable 'Al-lee-lu-i-a' by the million. Marju's delightful 16-year-old daughter Karoline applauded our command of the Russian 'l'!

Our map was a somewhat daunting 66-page book of music, but having navigated our way through the majority of this on day one, the prospects for a successful voyage looked promising. As our expert tour guide was keen to point out, though, getting the notes right simply brought us to our departure point, from where we could begin to make music, attending to dynamics, phrasing, articulation and basically telling the story. The individual bits and pieces were deemed easy enough to learn, the challenge generally came 'in transit' when we had to join them together.

Throughout the intensive daily rehearsals Jeremy steered us towards greater security in achieving accurate chords through actively listening to each other. This was especially put to the test later in the week when he scrambled our usual positions such that we were each surrounded by different voice parts. The benefits of this were many, ranging from the confidence boost that one could cope without the immediate prop of one's usual travelling companions, to the bliss of experiencing a truer overall sound. I doubt I'll ever forget the delicious scrunchy chords of Carissimi's lament *Plorate filii Israel* (this during our Italian pit-stop). The buzz between singers was tangible, and within that particular room it simply felt right.

Would our endeavours translate to the vast space of the Jaani Church? Yes indeed, the building sang back to us, and presumably to our sizeable, enthusiastic audience too. Jeremy had been keeping an ever-increasing, light-hearted tally of the times we had sung over rests, but thankfully nobody jumped the lights in performance. I know that I, for one, certainly took the odd wrong turning here and there, but we reached our destination intact and in fine spirits, the richer for the experience.

I'd gladly have gone round again. But the time had come to make that short journey back to the airport and take off into the clear blue sky.