

Hot and cold in Krakow

June 2011

The sun bounced off the buildings around Europe's largest town square. Oven-ready human statues defied the heat, their patient plea for tourist zlotys competing with the urgent hawking of city tours aboard stretched golf buggies. The clapping of horses pulling open carriages punctuated the general clamour. Equine emissions were offset by a forest of flower stalls, the vendors and their wares protected by sunshine-yellow parasols.

June back home was far from flaming, so the warmth was welcome but wearing. For me and sixty singers, there was refuge in the cloistered coolness of our rehearsal room at the Franciscan Church, a few minutes away from Market Square. But from our base at Hotel Wyspiański the most comfortable route was to meander through the Planty. Once the site of the town's medieval fortifications, this tranquil green belt offered a network of shady paths, with plenty of benches for those who had time to relax rather than rehearse.

I've sung in some strange places, but 100 metres underground would be a first, so a trip to the Wieliczka Salt Mines was unmissable. A young woman who for our benefit called herself Margaret – her real name being full of unpronounceable plosives and fricatives – guided us down 387 wooden steps into the bowels of the UNESCO World Heritage site. Jumpers and jackets were at the ready, but the drop in temperature was refreshing and the exercise brisk down the multi-level warren of galleries and chambers. Margaret insisted mining was prized work, but it must have been a strange existence plunging into this labyrinth each day. The ponies that powered the pumping machinery would be stabled down there and never see the light of day. We stepped aside for a group of maintenance men in miners' helmets trudging in the opposite direction, bidding them the traditional 'God protect you' in hastily-tutored Polish.

Shrines and statues had offered protection for centuries, with St Kinga's Chapel a church-sized, entirely salt-crafted testimony to the miners' faith and skill. The tiled-effect floor shone from the passage of a million pairs of feet a year, reflecting the deceptive chandeliers high above. The frescoes' details were captivating: Mary and Joseph's flight into Egypt with baby Jesus was observed from the side lines by a tiny carved dog. Da Vinci's *Last Supper* in salt bas-relief sounds as though it should have been tacky, but it wasn't. A life-size figure of famous local son Pope John Paul II stood in benediction.

No time for a warm-up. We assembled in a semi-circle and gave our recital, the sacred pieces specially selected for a place of deep devotion. The trappings of tourism continued around us, a conveyor belt of chattering groups posing for the obligatory official photo, interfering with the rich subterranean acoustic. But it was still special. The shivers down my spine were nothing to do with the chill, or the prospect of the high speed journey back to the surface in a salt-cellar-sized cage.

