

Warming up in Avila April 2004

Quality Singing has its Runbies, Madrid has its Madrileños and Avila has its Abulenses. For famous Abulenses, look no further than Santa Teresa and her contemporary, Tomás Luis de Victoria. Widely considered the Spanish Palestrina – although superior, according to our maestro David Allinson – Victoria spent his formative years and early career in this hilltop city above the plains of Castile, but ended his days in Madrid as choirmaster at the Convent of the Barefoot Nuns. For our stay in his hometown, wellies could usefully have been on the kitlist.

Luckily our lovely palacio accommodation was just a two-minute dash/splash from the rehearsal room, or three in a headwind funnelled through the archway piercing the mediaeval city wall. The space was ideal: modern comfort yet with a sense of history, built against the wall itself. After their siesta, stonemasons would return to their nearby restoration work, providing a percussive accompaniment to our evening endeavours.

There would be no singing, though, until we'd had a thorough warm-up, which, given the meteorological conditions, was a bonus in more ways than merely musically. Immersion in these choral weeks has proved to be beneficial in oh so many ways, and right up there with friendship, achievement and, well, a good wallow in glorious music, is the time to devote to the techniques – not to mention fun – of decent preparation. David's skills in this department are not to be missed, and as far removed from a boring scale (or seven) as is a flightless penguin from a soaring stork.

Laughter was never far from the surface, but any actual musical sounds were reserved until after a series of Zumba-esque exercises which questioned the prudence of having that slice of tortilla for breakfast. Anything that was possible to bend, lift, rotate, shrug or stretch was required to do just that ... and then again but in the opposite direction to some other bodily activity, which inevitably set up an uncoordinated cacophony of mirth.

There was of course some practical point to all this, in addition to the vital one of getting us to relax together and lose any inhibitions, and David explained how this particular stretch would help support our breath, or that particular swivel would release tension and prevent over-tiring. Eventually we were let loose on the business end above the shoulders. Fingertips were allowed to tap around the sinuses and massage the neck muscles, the jaw was encouraged to contort into tortured grotesqueness and the tongue to seek out those left over bits of jamón ibérico or manchego cheese. Gradually a hum was permitted, progressing to a range of varying sounds with very precise instructions as to the aperture and shape of our mouths, depending on the desired effect. Well-travelled singers as we were, we soon cottoned on to the 'make it more French/German/Italian!' exhortations. The cue for a nasal drawl – 'make this one American' – was closely followed by David nervously checking the geographical make-up of the group. Sure enough, up went a single hand: 'Yes, I'm American!' but luckily Jennifer took no offence (or should that be offense?) Just as well. Within minutes, we were exploring the multitude of effects of expelling air in different ways. For a powerful burst of energy, David instructed us to 'shush like an angry librarian'. Up went the hand of a certain soprano from Wisconsin: 'Ahem, I'm a librarian too!' In an instant, David morphed from Señor Motivator to Manuel from Fawlty Towers, but regained his composure – and his composer – by moving swiftly into the safer territory of glorious Spanish polyphony.

It would have been rather fitting to run through some of our newly-discovered favourites – sublimely reverent Holy Week pieces – in the very choir stalls where Victoria honed his faith and craft, and the cathedral was conveniently on our doorstep. But not only was it guarded by a pride of stone lions, the authorities were so protective of the silence that they vetoed our request 'for fear of disturbing the tourists'. Thankfully the contrasting welcome at the Auditorium of St Francis couldn't have been warmer for our last night performance, and by now the sun was shining too. Avila glowed, the music of Victoria and his contemporaries glowed, and in challenging but oh so satisfying mixed-up concert formation, our singing glowed. Like the storks, we'll be back.