

'Memories of Royal High School music-making in Europe'.

A speech by Dr John Murray to the Annual Dinner of the Royal High School Club in London at the Cavendish Hotel on Friday 17th March 2006.

Mr President, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Much as I should like to claim to be the first senior member of staff of the RHS to have established links with mainland Europe, honesty compels me to confess that I missed that distinction by well over 600 years since the presence of a certain Adam de Camis, rector of the school, was recorded in the faculty of law at the university of Montpellier as early as 1378.

I thought that I would begin by giving some background to the school's European musical links since, although the more recent F.P.'s are well aware of these peregrinations, those less recent F.P.'s among you may have little or no information concerning them. Following my appointment as principal teacher of music at the school in 1971, I was keen to establish links with one of Edinburgh's twin towns which in the early 1970's were Florence, Munich and Nice. A colleague, Nigel McIsaac (then the principal teacher of Art) put me in touch with a gentleman who rejoiced in the title of Town Twinning Officer and, as a consequence of his arrangements, I lead a party of 80 pupils and 10 staff to Florence at Easter 1975. We gave a series of concerts in the city including two concerts at the celebrated Hall of the 500 in the Palazzo Vecchio. We paid a return visit to Florence in 1978.

In 1979 the school was invited to represent the city of Edinburgh in Munich on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the link between the cities. Unfortunately for me I was serving a European red card! My wife was expecting the birth of our first child and it was made very clear to me that any attempt to leave the country at this emotional time would result in the immediate and permanent loss of all domestic privileges!! However, a Munich secondary school, the Theodolinden-Gymnasium, was sent to Edinburgh to fulfill a similar role and I was able to assist them with various arrangements including concert venues and sight-seeing. The two music staffs decided that it would be good to organise a direct link between the schools and, consequently, since Easter 1980 there has been an annual coming together of the musical forces of the schools alternately in Munich and Edinburgh. Last year witnessed the 25th successive year of what has become an outstanding link both musically and socially.

However, I never forgot Florence, a city which must rank as one of the most visually stunning cities in Europe. In 1983, following our biennial week in Munich, we went on to Florence. We actually joined-up on this occasion with a group from George Heriot's School. If you think that liaising and working with a school on mainland Europe can be problematical, you will readily appreciate that forming a working relationship with "the nails" was an even more amazing achievement given the propensity the these two old Edinburgh schools have had for knocking lumps out of one another on various rugby fields over the centuries! Through various contacts relationships were established with the Apennine hill town of Castiglione dei Pepoli which is situated midway between Florence and Bologna. Through these same contacts a working relationship was established with the Scuola di Musica Giuseppe Verdi in Prato, another very ancient town close to Florence. During the 1980's and 1990's we staged regular concerts in Edinburgh, Germany and Italy involving all three schools and on two occasions we were also joined by groups from the Lycée Saint-Exupéry from Lyons. The culmination of these events saw the school gain a European award for its contribution to musical twinning. The statistically-minded among you may be interested to learn that over the course of these 30 years of European operations, some 1400 RHS pupils and staff have been involved in the away legs while, in return, the school --- or, rather more accurately, its long-suffering parents--- have hosted some 1200 pupils, parents and teachers from

schools in Germany, Italy, France and, on one occasion Denmark.

And so to memories, musical and personal. As you will be aware, the school has a long and distinguished tradition for its music making. Indeed, one of our F.P.'s, John Thomson, became the first professor of music at the University of Edinburgh. Therefore, for me the musical highlights will remain concerts of great European classical music in such prestigious venues as the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, the Salle di Cinquecento in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence and the Herkulesaal in the Residenz in Munich. (Again for the statisticians, these performances have included some 70 works from the European classical repertoire). In addition to the classics, we have always included a distinctively Scottish element in our performances with pipers, fiddlers and dancers to wow the local audiences. Finally, and in spite of my aversion to pop music, the pupils always take a rock band on tour with which to wow the younger element among our audiences. (My aversion to any music post-Beethoven resulted on my achieving the soubriquet Black Jock the evil choirmaster --- a soubriquet bestowed upon me by a colleague incidentally).

The abiding personal memories involve people and events, events upon occasion that have been emotional, sometimes tragic. I have played the organ at the wedding of an Italian colleague in Castiglione; I have spoken at the graveside of a German colleague in Munich; I have conducted a concerto in Munich in which my son played the solo part; and for my final concert in Munich all my family were involved, playing or singing --- a very special moment for me.

To conclude, a few favorite memories of events.

1. **First trip to Florence, 1975.** We were due to have a civic reception at the Palazzo Vecchio to mark the official nature of our visit. However, days before we were due to arrive in Florence, the catholic mayor was sacked and replaced by a communist official from Rome. Given the intense rivalry that exists even today among the Italian cities, this did not go down well. Strikes in support of the previous regime had been organised for the very day that we were due to meet the mayor. Consequently, we had to evade the national Guard's picket line, enter the Palazzo by a rear entrance, shake his worship's hand rapidly, exchange emblems and then exit stage left.
2. **Second trip to Florence, 1978.** We were scheduled to give a series of concerts at various schools in Florence. It was a pretty hectic schedule with little free time. On our last full day we were timetabled to give a concert in the Scuola Isolotto (the isolated school). It took quite some time to get there and when we did arrive it was to find that the place lived up to its name and, apart from a few dodgy-looking characters on scooters, was both isolated and deserted. I made myself temporarily popular by announcing a free afternoon in Florence for the troops and spent a quiet time chilling-out in the Bobboli gardens.
3. **The Danish invasion.** We were asked at very short notice to find accommodation for a party of 187 musicians from the Royal Danish Choir School who were giving some concerts as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe programme. We were able to get most of them accommodated in time apart from 20 or so who had to bed down in Cramond Kirk Hall for a night or so before some of our mums took pity upon them. On the Saturday they were due to leave I had organised a fleet of four coaches to transport them down to Hull from where they were to sail to Rotterdam. Overcome with gratitude for our hospitality and efforts on their behalves, they decided to stage an impromptu concert in the school yard. I did point out to them that this might not be the wisest course of action given the time schedules involved. However, they proceeded with their alfresco performance --- and very fine it was too. Later that afternoon as my wife and I were relaxing with a very large gin and tonic or several, the telephone rang and the leader of the group reported that the ship had sailed without them and could I please do something about this! Having no contacts at the Admiralty, I referred them to the Danish Embassy in London and, to my surprise, they later informed me that the ship

had returned to Hull.

4. **Heavenly intervention.** On one of our early exchanges in Munich we were performing extracts from Haydn's oratorio "The Creation" and had just begun that marvelous chorus "The Heavens are telling" when the mother and father of all thunder storms broke out. Who says that the Almighty is not intimately concerned in the affairs of man?

5. **The Verona experience.** On the Italian leg of the joint tour with Heriots in 1983 we were accommodated overnight in a nunnery in Verona. As the evening meal was being served, a flock of nuns, wimples flying, dashed round the tables with flasks of wine for the troops. Having a very strong attitude towards drink and its likely effects upon the young and unprotected, I ordered these same flasks to be commandeered and put to better use by my colleagues. You could tell the pupils did not like this. However, nothing was said or done by them at the time although some ingenious planning was put into action since when two of my colleagues opened the door of their room to retire for the night they found nothing there except the washhand basin!! Everything that could have been moved had been moved; beds, wardrobes, suitcases, etc. You can only begin to imagine the effect this must have had on two people who were distinctly the worse for wear.

6. **Staff attitude.** It may surprise you to learn that not all of my colleagues were happy about the biennial European odysseys. Certain colleagues felt that the 2/3 weeks could and, indeed, should have been spent by the pupils in mastering the ablative absolute, refuting Einstein's theory of relativity or even learning the second verse of Schola Regia. In this climate it was pretty crucial for me to obtain the support of the rector. In my time at RHS I have served with four rectors. The first, Baillie T. Ruthven, was not affected since the trips only commenced after his time. Indeed, having appointed me in January 1971, he quickly appreciated the enormity of his mistake and retired in September of the same year! I was lucky with his successor Farquhar MacIntosh. Farquhar actually had several other day jobs during the summer term one of which was as Chairman of the Scottish Examination Board --- the SEB was the institution that used to publish the examination results on time and with a high degree of accuracy! He was so busy at this time of the school year that he probably would not have noticed my absence! I was also very lucky with his successor Matt McIver since shortly after his appointment we gained the European Award and he became a fan. I was not sure about George. This was a canny son of Fife who was not likely to be bamboozled easily. So I bit the bullet and invited him to pay a flying visit to Munich to see for himself. I took him on a short tour of the city centre and then we retired to an adjacent hostelry where we indulged in a glass or two of Munich's finest. And I have to say that over the course of those few hours, George began to see the possibilities of twinning in an entirely new light!

So many memories and, in the main, exceptionally happy ones. Because of this, and even since retiring in 2003 and moving to France, I have not had the heart to sever my German and Italian links. My wife and I were back in Edinburgh in June 2004 and took part in the annual concert and last year I achieved the ultimate goal for a musician of my experience and standing --- I got to drive the instrument van across Europe for the trip. This absorbed several weeks and several thousand miles. And so you see before you Mr President, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, the somewhat tired and flushed remains of Europe's oldest roadie.

Vivas Schola Regia.