

# RPYO News of Note

Rochester Philharmonic Youth Orchestra -- Summer 2004

Prepared by Susan Basu

## *Italian Inspirations and Memories*

### *The Rochester Philharmonic Youth Orchestra's 2004 Tour to Italy*

*"The Tour was one of the greatest things I have ever experienced."*

*"Italy was really a magical experience!"*

*"If I make it to heaven, I will ask God to let me relive those ten days (excluding the night I got sick)"*

#### **Shared Efforts, Shared Rewards**

A group musical tour is a small community in dynamic motion. Our 111 student musicians and adults lived together for ten intense days (April 9-18), sharing meals, hotel space, concerts, and sightseeing excursions. Each day was memorable and unique as new sights and experiences quickly followed one another. What gave full meaning to the whole trip, though, was that it was a shared endeavor:

- ∞ The months of planning by RPYO staff, parents, and our tour consultants, ACFEA
- ∞ The students' year-long musical growth under *David Harman's* dedicated, caring leadership
- ∞ The generous efforts by our Italian hosts to prepare an extraordinary welcome for us
- ∞ The maturity, sensitivity, and patience of our exceptional young people

These all helped to make the tour a unqualified success. Our rewards for these efforts of so many people?

- ∞ Sharing splendid musical performances on tour
- ∞ Acquiring a new understanding of and respect for another culture
- ∞ Experiencing Italian hospitality at its finest
- ∞ Building new friendships with colleagues and with new acquaintances

Many thanks to the students and chaperones whose personal experiences and reactions enriched this report and to those delightful daily travel notes and photographs on [www.rpyo.org](http://www.rpyo.org) prepared by our Tour

Chaperones *Helen Tortorici* and *Vince Tutino* that keep refreshing our memories.

#### **Toronto to Milan**

##### **Departure**

Departure was on Friday morning, April 9, but actually started the night before. *Susan Basu's* Brighton driveway was filled with large travel trunks generously lent to us by the RPO (and a couple built by RPYO parent *Randy Kemp*). Throughout the evening our cellists, bassoonists, and brass musicians brought their instruments to be carefully packed and cushioned with protective foam. It was quite late when *Randy Kemp* drove off with a truckload of valuable instruments that he would deliver to Toronto airport the next morning for early loading onto Lufthansa's special flight containers.

Excitement was palpable at the Winton Place parking area the next morning as we gathered in front of the coaches for our ride to Toronto airport. A Channel 13 newsman was there to record pre-tour remarks from *David Harman* and some students for broadcast that very evening. We drove off to laughter, waving, and cheering, followed by three hours of non-stop chatting by some, snoozing by others, and the inauguration of the perpetually mobile tour card games.

Toronto's brand-new international building welcomed us with gleaming windows and check-in counters. *Hugh Davies* of ACFEA personally handed out tickets to each student and adult, along with his good wishes for a great tour. The departure lounge soon buzzed with cheerful young people, glad to have a chance to walk around, stock up

on snacks for the trip, or spread out on the floor to shuffle the decks and pass out new hands.

An eight-hour day had already passed before we got on the plane. But with dinner, movie, and a six-hour time loss, and lights-on for breakfast at 1:00 a.m. Rochester time, there was precious little opportunity for sleep. A few tried to make up their sleep deficit by dozing on chairs or the floor at Frankfurt airport while waiting for our connection to Milan. The stalwart ones picked up their cards where they had earlier left off. The rest of us drooped.

### **Arrival in Milan**

Our arrival in *Milan* went without a glitch. Customs officials smiled and waved the instruments through. The greatest challenge was moving them from one end of the airport to the other, across a couple of roads, and into the capable hands of *Allen Barbour*, our ACFEA instrument-truck driver. Still, compared with our 2001 flight to France, this one was a breeze and thankfully “adventure”-free. Spotting the welcoming and warm faces of our ACFEA couriers, *Gabi Olesch* and *Tassos Strikos*, and our cheerful coach drivers *Carmine* and *Riccardo*, we could now relax and know we were in good care.

Sleepy eyes opened wide when we arrived at the center of Milan. A huge 15<sup>th</sup> century fortress loomed before us (the *Castello Sforzesco*) on one side, and elegant Parisian-like streets on another. The breath-taking filigreed spires of Milan’s medieval *Duomo* (cathedral) made us all stop in our tracks. And the sight of *La Scala* opera house helped to bring alive the world of Rossini, Verdi, and the other Italian composers whose works we were to perform on this tour. The famous *Galleria* arcade drew gasps of delight and delighted hugs with parents from the Companion Tour whom we encountered there. Milan definitely needed more time than we could give, more leisure just to soak in the mood and sights of a great city that students called “*incredible*” and “*exciting*.”

### **Salsomaggiore Terme**

It was late in the evening when we drove into *Salsomaggiore* a 19<sup>th</sup> century-era spa town, for our first night, where the following day we would give first concert in Italy. Our huge coaches seemed like alien intruders into a gentle, gracious community of another time with narrow tree-lined streets, small boutiques and cafes, and very few vehicles.

When the coaches stopped in front of the *Hotel Albergo Centrale*, we felt in fact that we had gone back in time. The hotel was a villa from the 1800s, surrounded by gardens, right in the middle of the town and looking as if gentlemen in top hats and ladies in gowns and parasols were about to step out arm-in-arm into the central plaza.

The hotel interior had clearly seen better days. But the high-ceilinged reception rooms, gilded mirrors, wide corridors and stairs, and elegant dining room with chandeliers, draperies, and formally-dressed waiters wonderfully evoked an Old European flavor. It turned out to be the favorite hotel for many of us: “*very charming in an old world sort of way*,” “*quaint and perfect*”, “*loved it-full of culture*,” “*Italy personified!*”

### **Easter Sunday in Italy**

Easter morning was sunny and lovely in this quiet hillside town. Some of our group attended mass. One student marveled that he followed “*the same routines and rituals that I do at home, only in Italian and on another side of the world*.” The rest of us went by coach to *Cremona* and walked through the narrow streets to the Stradivarius Museum in the center of the ancient town. The old *piazza* was filled with church-goers standing outside the medieval cathedral, greeting each other just as the famed Amati, Stradivari, and Guarneri families of violin makers used to do in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

A wonderful treat awaited us at the hotel—a traditional, elegant Italian Easter Sunday meal. Holiday-dressed Italian families shared the spacious dining room with us, perhaps amused by the young Americans enthusiastically exclaiming at the seemingly endless sequence of courses placed before them. The climax came when the headwaiter broke a gigantic foil-wrapped chocolate egg to the cheers of everyone present and laid out the pieces on the buffet along with scrumptious holiday desserts.

Thus began a week of delightful eating, giving full justice to Italy’s reputation as a gastronomic haven. We knew an extraordinary transformation had occurred when our American teenagers, accustomed to fast foods, take-out and half-hour dinners, patiently sat for meals for up to two hours and a half in length and then were too satiated even for dessert.

(But most certainly not for gelato later on!) As one violinist summed it all up, the food was “*really, really, really good!*”

### **An exciting first concert**

As we strolled up the main street to the *Sala Europa* for our afternoon rehearsal, we felt part of the relaxed holiday mood that filled this small resort town. Families strolled through the streets with arms linked. Coffee drinkers took their time in the sidewalk cafes. Springtime flowers were beautifully displayed. Along the perimeters of the town park market stalls sold unimaginable varieties of cheeses, olives, sausages, breads and cakes. We saw friendly, open faces everywhere.

Everyone helped unload the instrument truck (though the percussionists' and *Mike Kemp's* efforts throughout the tour deserve special recognition). The cellists anxiously checked their instruments and were relieved to discover these had traveled well in their well-padded RPO trunks.

The concert hall turned out to be a comfortable multi-purpose addition to an older building. The orchestra was positioned on the floor with cellos and violins only a few feet away from the first rows of seats, leaving them feeling rather exposed. But the first joyous bars of the Overture to *Candide* revealed how excited our musicians were to perform their first concert in Italy.

We had no idea what the audience would be like. *Dr. Harman* had arranged for a quartet of RPYO string players to give a pre-concert "teaser" in front of our hotel so people would know we were in town. And somehow they did seem to know, because over three hundred people attended the concert. This being Italy at holiday time, though, the 9:00 p.m. concert time had to be delayed, and people kept trickling in after the music started.

When we saw heads nodding at familiar melodies from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and other American works, impromptu conducting from audience members, and voices humming along to our Italian pieces, we knew we were a success that evening. *Mascagni's* beloved "Intermezzo" from *Cavalleria rusticana* inspired sighs and even tears. One elderly man, filled with emotion, rushed forward and embraced some startled (but appreciative) cellists.

After the extended applause died down, our students were surrounded by well-wishers who, if words in English failed them, simply smiled, shook hands, and said "Bravo!" A few peered closely at the young musicians as if to confirm that, indeed, these were teenagers who had made such beautiful music.

A violinist wrote later about this and our subsequent concerts: "*Watching the audiences' enthusiasm and emotion, I'm sure it affected all of us tremendously. There wasn't one single concert where I left without being moved to tears by all the emotion on their faces and the love that just radiated from their smiles, cheers, and applause.*"

## **Imola: Hospitality all' Italiana**

The hands-down centerpiece of our tour was our extraordinary day in *Imola*, a lovely small city southeast of Bologna with a proud Renaissance-era past and prosperous economic and cultural present. Asked about their most memorable experience of the tour, most students responded: "Imola!"

We had shifted to the *Grande Hotel Bologna* the previous day and found ourselves fast-forwarded by a century or so to a modern, shiny suburban hotel. Most applauded the comfortable rooms, up-to-date facilities, and spacious lobby for relaxing together. Some voiced the opinion, however, that, pleasant as it was, it seemed "*too American.*" And all of us lamented the absence here, as elsewhere on our tour, of restrictions on cigarette smoking in public places.

## **Our V.I.P. reception**

*Imola* was the perfect antidote to any regrets about signs of "Americanization." Our couriers had advised us that this would be a special day, but we had no idea how special. The first clue came when a representative of *Imola's* Wind Band, the *Banda Musicale*, joined us to direct our coaches to the famous *Imola* Formula One race track, site of the annual *San Marino Grand Prix* and other major European car and motorcycle races. We experienced first hand on our coaches (though at a comparative snail's crawl) the circuit's notoriously tricky, and sometimes deadly, curves as it winds up and down contoured slopes alongside country homes and vineyards.

The next clue to our V.I.P. treatment were the police cars with blinking lights that stopped traffic and guided our huge coaches the wrong way up one-way, narrow, curving streets into a gorgeous *piazza* colonnaded in the Renaissance style. We descended and entered the magnificent 18<sup>th</sup> century *Palazzo Comunale* (the Town Hall), climbed a grand marble staircase lined with elegant paintings, and were led into the chambers of the town council.

Our students stood respectfully as the *Sindaco* (Mayor) of *Imola*, *Sig. Massimo Marchignoli*;

*Assessore* (Council Member) for Cultural Affairs, *Sig. Valter Galavotti*; and *Comm. Antonio Caranti*, the President of the *Banda Musicale Città di Imola* (our official sponsor) entered. Each of these dignitaries warmly welcomed us with remarks celebrating our musical connections. They told us of the long and rich musical tradition in Imola with its 180-year old Wind Band, its two music schools, its many community ensembles and its internationally renowned Piano Academy,

*David Harman* responded with words of sincere appreciation and gratitude and received from the Mayor official gifts that we will treasure: a plaque with an engraved drawing of the town of Imola, a magnificent ceramic plate representing Imola's position as an important center of Italian ceramics, and copies for everyone of a historic map of the city.

We had invited RPYO string quartet members *Katha Zinn*, *Stephen Kim*, *Noah Fields*, and *Emily Grissing* to represent the entire orchestra in a small performance for our hosts. They had fortuitously chosen a movement of a quartet by Boccherini, a composer who, we now learned, had had a significant association with Imola. The quartet performed expertly and beautifully to the rapt attention of our hosts and all the rest of us.

Following this official welcome, we were offered refreshments with members of the *Banda Musicale* and toured the *Palazzo Comunale*'s exquisitely decorated and frescoed reception rooms. Returning to our coaches, we feel immensely privileged to have been so cordially welcomed by the officials and residents of a city that cares about music, young people, and creating warm bonds between our two communities and countries.

### **A meal to remember**

We had been invited to lunch by a leading industry of Imola, the SACMI group, that manufactures industrial and household ceramics. It turned out to be a lunch unmatched by any we had known.

Ushered into the spacious and airy dining hall of an elegant, modern restaurant, we felt we were at a fine wedding banquet. Each well-appointed place at the flower-decorated tables had several knives, forks, and spoons that, we would learn, would all be put to good use. (We appreciated very much the thoughtful gesture, and expense, of our hosts in supplying each table with several bottles of wine, but risking the impression of seeming ungracious, we requested they be saved for another occasion.)

The courses followed one upon another for over two hours. Specialties of the local Emilia-Romagna region included silky smooth *prosciutto* from Parma and flaky chunks of *parmigiano reggiano*, sausage *tortellini* in a fragrant broth, *tagliatelle bolognese* coated with a light meat sauce, a meat course with fresh spring vegetables, salad dressed with fragrant balsamic vinegar from nearby Modena, a trifle-like dessert, finishing with coffee and *biscotti*. *Bravo!*

Between courses, there were toasts from the Mayor, representatives of SACMI, and the *Banda Musicale*, topped off by a surprise visit from the Mayor of Sarajevo, who expressed pleasure at the sight of so many talented young people gathered here. He invited us to come to his city someday soon.

### **A touching memorial**

Our first stop after lunch was at a park close to one of Imola's music schools. A plaque had been installed there in memory of the victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. We were all deeply moved by the caring words of *Assessore Sig. Galavotti*, the shared moments of silence, and the eloquently played "Taps" by members of Imola's *Banda Musicale*. Knowing that the inhabitants of a small city in a country thousands of miles from New York had been so affected by this distant tragedy that they created their own memorial made a powerful impression on everyone of us. We felt increasingly connected to this compassionate and humane society that had embraced us so warmly.

### **From fortress to opera house**

In the short time left before our scheduled rehearsal, our group was introduced to several centuries of Imola history. *La Rocca*, Imola's massive stone fortress with its collection of arms and armor, is a monument to the perennial wars of medieval and Renaissance Italy. A short walk brought us to the city's early 19<sup>th</sup> century monument to more peaceful pursuits—the *Teatro Comunale* or opera house. Typical of Italy's multi-layered past, this smallish, 500-seat theater had been constructed within the walls of a 14<sup>th</sup> century church and monastery.

It was pure pleasure watching the students' reactions when they entered the theater where they would soon be performing. Each mouth fell open as they looked at the red velvet seats and up at the four concentric rings of private boxes, the painted figures on the ceiling, and the chandelier, and then at the jewel-like glow from over a hundred small lamps.

Truly exquisite. Adding to the sheer delight of performing in such a gem was the discovery when the rehearsal began that the acoustics were worthy of the theater's beauty.

### **On stage in Imola**

Our musicians' own words are eloquent and heartfelt about this wondrous concert:

A clarinetist wrote: *"The concert in Imola was unforgettable. That theater was gorgeous; the music was great; and the audience was unbelievably enthusiastic."*

From a brass player: *"It was an amazing, magical concert. I'm not sure how we did it, and I'm not sure we could ever do it again. But it was one of those concerts that will stay with me forever."*

Another musician shared this with us: *"Everyone seemed so happy and so into the music. It was amazing and the best concert I have ever played in. I have never been more proud."*

From the upper balcony where they sat, our chaperones noted patrons seated in the boxes below conducting along to the Italian works: *"Tears were flowing at the end of the concert. Incredible."*

From both sides of the proscenium the view was spectacular. Behind and above the orchestra the theater's production crew hung our black and gold RPYO banner between colored banners representing Italy and Imola. This created a striking visual impression on the black stage when our musicians in their formal concert dress took their seats. Under the stage lights and in the darkened theater their instruments gleamed and their faces glowed with the intensity of their concentration.

As the musicians looked out into the packed theater during the concert, the dimmed lights shone from floor to ceiling. When the final encore ended, the house lights suddenly illuminated the red and gold theater, revealing the entire audience on their feet from the orchestra level up to the topmost balcony, smiling, applauding, and shouting "Bravo!" What unforgettable sights and sounds for our students to carry home and keep in their memories.

We are immensely grateful to everyone who made this exceptional day possible for us:

*To the people of Imola who came to our concert:*

Your enthusiasm and ardent response inspired the best from our musicians, profoundly moved

us, and created an indelible bond with your lovely city. We all hope to come back some day.

To: the *SACMI Group*:

Your great generosity to the Rochester Philharmonic Youth Orchestra will be long remembered in our city. You introduced our young Americans to one of the finest traditions of Italian culture, the art of dining well. *Grazie mille* for that remarkable *pranzo* we so thoroughly enjoyed as your guests.

To: *Sindaco Marchignole, Assessore Sig. Galavotti, Comm. Caranti and La Banda Musicale*:

We were deeply honored by your cordiality, thoughtfulness, generosity, time, and support for our visit to Imola. Your kind reception was far beyond our expectations and will never be forgotten. We sincerely hope to have an opportunity sometime to welcome you to our city of Rochester, New York.

## **Cento and Modena**

Before heading south to Florence and Rome, we spent one more day in the prosperous and fertile Po River valley region of northern Italy.

### **Middle schoolers, music and pizza in Cento**

Though our next performance was in *Cento*, a neighboring town only a mile or so from our hotel, it turned out to be something of a challenge. Not musically, but in its timing—the morning after our long day and late concert in Imola, and in its audience—400 hundred middle school students filling all the seats in a very modern town auditorium. Few of them had probably ever heard a live symphony orchestra, and many were clearly pleased simply to be out of class for a couple of hours.

Our students were troopers through it all. Perhaps they recalled those music assemblies in school when, even with wriggling, giggly bodies all around, the power of music did make itself felt and had an impact. Some of our group felt that this was a performance that could have been left out. But there were some who said, yes, we were all tired and not very focused, *"and the audience was a bit rough. But I still think it was absolutely worthwhile to do."*

No one, however, had any misgivings about the lunch provided by the Municipality of Cento with their thanks for our visit: our first official Italian pizza in a genuine Italian pizzeria, though one with

an English name—the “Green Park Pub Pizzeria”  
The pizza was good!

### **Modena—at last, time for shopping!**

*Modena* is famous for its balsamic vinegar, its Ferrari sports cars, and its military school. For RPYO students it is now famous as the picturesque old Italian town they could stroll around in the sun and finally spend some of the money that was burning in their pockets. (*Bologna* had unfortunately been gray and rainy when we were there on Easter Monday, and the shops had been closed.)

Our coaches took us back through villages and fields for dinner in a curious but cheerful family-owned restaurant, *La Pergola Renazzo*, down an unpaved road and with a dining hall built around a tree. Their *risotto* proved to be a little too *al dente* for many of our American palates, but their *tiramisu* was a hit.

## **A Taste of Florence**

Our final days of the tour in Florence and Rome should be called “whetting the appetite.” Due to schedule constraints and traffic and weather delays, they turned out to be mini appetizers than a satisfying meal. But we reasoned that a taste of the riches of these two great cities was at least better than nothing. Judging by their reactions, our students saw and tasted enough to definitely want to return.

Driving from Bologna to Florence across the Apennine mountain range should have taken us only a couple of hours. We learned firsthand, however, how vulnerable this major Italian north-south highway artery is to hours-long delays from traffic accidents. When we found ourselves stuck in barely creeping traffic, we had to cancel our plans for morning sightseeing and lunch in Florence. Instead, we bought *panini* sandwiches at a highway stop and loaded up on snacks and postcards.

### **Hosteling in Florence**

We had been relatively luxuriously housed in *Salsomaggiore* and *Pieve di Cento*. But in Florence we came face to face with the reality of student travel life in Italy’s most popular (and expensive) tourist city. Our *Setti Santi Hostel*, a converted religious cloister, successfully evoked the bare simplicity of life for Italy’s monks and nuns of the past. Most likely they also experienced cold showers, sagging beds, buggy rooms, and bread, cheese, and “bologna” for breakfast.

Reactions to this hostel ranged from “sketchy,” “primitive,” and “horrible”, to a sardonic, (one assumes) “awesome” and a broadminded, adventurous “good experience.” As one adaptable and pragmatic student reflected, however: “The city was too beautiful to complain about our sleeping quarters. It also kept the price down.”

### **An afternoon and evening of exploring**

And the city *was* beautiful. It held surprises around each corner, Because our guided sightseeing had to be postponed until the next morning, we were unexpectedly left to explore on our own in small groups. A couple of students who love *Dante* were thrilled to discover his statue, street and house. One group climbed to the top of *Brunelleschi’s* cathedral dome. Others explored the small leather shops and fine shopping streets. One student reported on a conversation he had with an Italian professional soccer player: “It was cool.”

We met for dinner at *Trattoria Baldovino* in the vicinity of the Santa Croce church, filling every nook and cranny of this charming and excellent restaurant with happy eaters. Superb fresh olive oil was there for amply sprinkling on the very good Tuscan bread! And a special cake was prepared for us with candles to surprise our two students who had birthdays that very day, *Paul Cohen* and *Greg Whittemore*.

It was still early when we finished dinner, so we lingered in the city, looking at the lights along the River Arno, crossing the Ponte Vecchio, wandering with crowds of other visitors through well-lit and traffic-free *piazas* and streets of shops and cafes.

### **A memorable encounter under the Uffizi**

Passing through the arcade under the Uffizi Art Gallery, one of our group heard a violin and rushed over to discover its source. There sat a young man of barely twenty relaxing after his violin lesson and enjoying the resonance of the historic space around him. Smiling at the group of awed younger students before him, he offered his violin (and a fine one it was) in turn to those who wanted to play for him. He gave suggestions and encouragement (in Italian), pulled out his amply supply of music to hold up for those who needed some, demonstrated technique and expressiveness. We were thrilled to learn that he studies with some of the finest musicians in Rome and Florence. After sharing addresses, we pulled ourselves away, marveling at yet another example of Italian generosity and kindness.

## **An introduction to Florence's treasures**

The next morning we met knowledgeable local guides who helped to put into a context the sights we had casually seen the day before. There was the essential visit to *Michelangelo's* monumental sculpture of "David" in the *Accademia*. Then a short walk to the city's ancient center where the guides took us into the white, green, and pink marbled *Duomo* (cathedral) with *Brunelleschi's* revolutionary dome and around the *Baptistery* with doors of Biblical scenes sculpted in bronze.

With a short explanation of Florence's historical and artistic importance, the tour ended so we could have a break before departing. "Not enough time!" many lamented, while others were itching to make those last minute purchases or grab one more gelato or slice of pizza before we had to leave for Rome. By the time we climbed onto our coaches our collective possession of leather jackets, purses, shoes and sundry items had increased exponentially.

## **Rome, Our Journey's End**

We knew that our brief time in Rome would not allow for much sightseeing. But we had not counted on an unusually heavy rainy spell to tie up Rome's already frightful traffic and to keep up from visiting Rome's opera house and exploring the Roman Forum as originally planned. Most seemed to feel, however, that what we were able to see and do was memorable.

### **A attractive hotel and great restaurant**

We stayed two nights in Rome at another former religious institute, this one definitely of a higher status than the one in Florence. The *Hotel Domus Pacis* was situated in the hills above the Vatican City on park-like grounds with gardens, trees and birds well suited to contemplation and religious discussions. Very modern, it still had a few quirks that made organizing ourselves somewhat tricky, such as separate buildings, an odd room numbering system, locks that failed to open rooms, and various housekeeping issues.

One advantage of our location was that we drove several times by the *Vatican* and *St. Peter's Basilica* to and from the hotel. Our route into the city also took us along the *Tiber River*, past ruins of Roman structures and in front of other significant buildings. Even our limited view from the coaches left an impression of a city built upon layers and layers of history that would need many visits to fully appreciate.

Since our concert in Rome was planned for the next day, the final day of our tour, we celebrated our "farewell" dinner that first night in Rome. Arriving at the *Ristorante La Capricciosa* was by itself an adventure as we had to cross heavy traffic and wind our way through narrow lanes. In truth, we got lost at first, all 115 of us, but just walking around (and around) a Roman neighborhood in the evening was a treat after sitting for over four hours on the drive from Florence.

We all loved the elegant restaurant and the festive dinner. Before leaving we expressed our thanks in ringing cheers to the *padrone* and staff who served our lively large group with good humor and apparent pleasure.

Though we were not able to visit many of Rome's historic places, we came across after dinner an eye-stopping, only in Italy spectacle: a display of Ferraris! About 30 of them, mostly red, were parked in a plaza under bright lights. Our brisk pace slowed to a crawl as covetous eyes devoured the sight.

### **The Colosseum in the rain**

The ruins of an open amphitheater are not the most promising place to visit in a drenching downpour. But this was *the Roman Colosseum*. And it is, indeed, a magnificent colossus. Many of us gasped at the first looming sight of it as we rounded a curve. So old but so real! We braved the rain.

It was something of an ordeal to get into it, though--bad enough on a Saturday morning, but made worse by the relentless rain. We had to walk blocks huddled under umbrellas (many purchased at scalpers' prices from hovering Bangladeshi vendors). Even with tickets there was a long wait inside the outer arches. That gave time to hear some stories from our guides and to conjure up the sight of 80,000 spectators, wild beast fights, and combats to the death--imaginings helped by recent viewings of "The Gladiator." Our students were truly awe-struck by this compelling structure that has survived close to 2000 years and has experienced such history and drama. No wonder many later wrote about our brief visit to Rome saying, "Wanted more!"

### **Our final concert at the University of Rome**

After our substantial lunch at our hotel, the sun finally appeared. The hotel's gardens made attractive backdrops for group photographs of our students in their handsome concert clothes, looking as elegant and accomplished as they sounded in performance.

There was true excitement about this final concert. First of all, we were performing in Rome! But also, we were performing music from Verdi operas with Italian singers. This was a chorus sponsored by the University of Rome, the *Associazione Musicale Coro Franco Maria Saraceni*, directed by *Giuseppe Agostini*. Their specialty is Renaissance music. But they had enjoyed so much singing with an American group a few years earlier that they were eager to join us, even though many of them had never before sung these Verdi choruses! *We* were giving *them* an opportunity to explore their own traditions!

The Aula Magna (or Great Hall) is the University of Rome's main auditorium for concerts, lectures, and conferences. It is in the center of the large university campus that Mussolini had built to enhance Rome's academic standing. Built almost totally of Italian marble, the hall resonated to such a degree that the brasses had to severely restrain themselves (not so easy to do). Behind the stage was a massive allegorical mural of ancient figures representing knowledge and the arts. It was an impressive room of elegant simplicity, and a total contrast with the gold and red velvet of Imola's opera house.

The chorus of about thirty adults entered as the orchestra was rehearsing. They were as curious about us as we were about them. They watched and listened and exchanged smiles of approval, as if to say, "They're good! This will work out."

Our musicians had been playing for months the music by Verdi, but without a chorus. What a difference it made for them to hear Italian voices sing passionate words from *Nabucco*, *Il Trovatore*, and *Aida!* One student commented that this music now means much more to her. Another called this his most memorable musical experience in Italy. He got chills from the impassioned singing rising above the orchestra: "*They were wonderful people. It was a privilege that I may never experience again.*"

The *University of Rome Chorus* made us feel very welcome, with the refreshments they offered us before the concert, the lovely programs with photographs of *David Harman* and our musicians, and their obvious pleasure in performing with us. The pleasure was very much ours as well. Many, many thanks, *Direttore Agostini* and members of the *Coro Franco Maria Saraceni!*

This could not have been a better way to conclude our tour. The audience that filled the hall was enthusiastic and clearly affected by our playing

Seeing their faces and hearing their applause, our musicians knew they had been able through their music to touch the lives of people who had once seemed like strangers but who now felt like friends.

## Thank You, Gabi and Tassos!

We wanted to bring home with us *Gabi* and *Tassos* our dear ACFEA travel companions, cheerleaders, guides, troubleshooters, and multi-talented and multi-lingual entertainers. But, alas, they had their other lives to return to.

*Gabi*, an old friend who had worked with us during our Tour to Germany in 1998, is an artist living and painting in her family's village outside of Nuremberg. She inherited the family's stall in the famous Nuremberg Christmas Market that runs for a month before Christmas. Throughout the year she visits craftsmen in forest villages to order handmade wooden figures for her stall. These become valued holiday decorations that for generations have been passed down to younger family members.

*Tassos* is a pianist, singer, and conductor from Greece now living near Vienna. Hoping to start an orchestral program in their town, he claimed he learned a lot from us on this trip. We were all delighted when Dr. Harman handed over the baton to him for *La Forza del Destino* in Cento, and even more so when he regaled us with Puccini arias as we sat on the steps of Florence's Santa Croce church. Next time, it must be Greece, he insisted

For Gabi and Tassos from our students:

"I appreciated their wealth of knowledge."

"I am still trying to program 'wakie,wakie' into my alarm clock. I loved it."

"They were great!" "They made our trip special."

"A big grin to them! Always a source of fun!"

"Come back, Tassos, to conduct us!" "I love you!"

## Arrivederci e Grazie!

We left the hotel at 5:00 a.m. for the airport, sleep deprived, exhausted, but happy. Was there anyone who didn't make a quiet promise to return to Italy? Twenty-three hours later we were back in Rochester, full of stories to tell and pictures to share of this wonderful week.

Thank you, ACFEA, Insung Kim, the Tour Committee, and our caring Chaperones. Thank you, parents, for entrusting us with your children so we could share together this unforgettable experience.