

A Singer's report from RunBySingers visit to Krakow 2011

By Katherine Dixon

'Look out, here comes trouble!' Luckily this dubious welcome from head honcho, Nick, was accompanied by a grin and a hug, so I immediately felt at home in Krakow for my second RunBySingers holiday.

'Anything we say may be taken down and used in evidence!' And why not, since singers (and their musical directors) have plenty of noteworthy things to utter? Maybe one day some of my friends old and new will recognise themselves in a novel, but meanwhile this little souvenir more or less writes itself out of the mouths of seasoned singers. The observations and quotes in my trusty notebook were supplemented by a peppering of furtively-scribbled extra squiggles in my musical score, not just performance hieroglyphics from our maestro, Jeremy Jackman, warning against early entries and pitch pitfalls, but also a selection from his collected wit and wisdom.

On the face of it, some of it wasn't what you might expect. Given the 100-page length of said score, there was clearly lots and lots and lots of music-making to be done and we needed to spend about five hours a day at it. And yet one of Jeremy's favourite admonishments was 'there's far too much singing going on!' This in essence demanded attention not only to dynamics but also to the useful advice that eighty per cent of good singing is listening: 'listen more, sing less; remember what it's meant to sound like.' Singers are apparently the luckiest musicians in the world, too, as we get the whole picture to read from, including the other voices, rather than just a single instrumental line, and he urged us to use it, be in charge of it, know what's coming. That said, the practice keyboard sometimes threatened to be in charge of Jeremy, startled by the volume vagaries of the E flat, which was perhaps compensation for the silent E, and there was the occasional rude interruption from a wailing siren beyond the confines of our rehearsal room in the Franciscan Church, sparking indignation: 'please, at least be in the right key!'

Everyone will have their own favourites from the rich pickings we were given to sing, but I was smitten with the Rheinberger Mass. Our first run-through of the Kyrie provoked both verbal and body language from Jeremy: first he luxuriated in giving himself a cuddle, then proclaimed 'It's like Brahms without the wrist-slashing.' From an unfamiliar old composer, to an unfamiliar new one, it was a remarkable privilege to work on a specially-commissioned piece from local man Piotr Sleczeck. *Unica Mea Est Salomea* marks 800 years since the birth of St Salomea, whose bones lie in the Franciscan Church where we would premiere the piece. This atmospheric work starts with overtone chanting on the part of the tenors and basses, marked in the score as a 'smooth change of nasal vowels u-a-u', which somewhere along the line was translated into 'it needs to get up your nose'. The sopranos and altos, meanwhile, were tasked with carefully graded and repeated whispering in homage to Salomea. The trick with this, contrary to all our instincts to keep together, was for each individual to go at her own pace to create an overall susurrating effect. By way of direction, Jeremy offered: 'Just like a normal rehearsal, really.'

The women – and the gents, for that matter – were allowed unlimited verbiage in our all-important socialising time. Much food and drink was involved, of course. The little gang who looked after me tended to go to a bohemian-type salad bar for lunch, where the food was brilliant and wonderful value but the real talking point was the range of fancy juices. The celery one would stalk your digestive system for hours afterwards, but Will pronounced the nettle juice 'the taste of a summer's day from your childhood in a glass'. Most evenings found us dining out as a whole 60-strong group, where noise levels offered something of a challenge to our beleaguered vocal cords. The prize for the most original restaurant departure line goes to Charlotte: 'I have to go and place a bid on eBay for an ear trumpet for my father.' Pardon?

On our penultimate evening, as we all relaxed over a pre-dinner drink on the balcony of Castle Ziyada, overlooking the Vistula with the city of Krakow in the distance, I asked Nick how he felt the week had gone. He looked thoughtful for a few moments, but a straight answer wasn't forthcoming, since we hadn't yet given our concert and 'that's what it's all about, isn't it?' Well, yes and no, I thought. Yes, because Nick and Jane had worked miracles of organisation in setting up this new RBS venue, and Jeremy had somehow steered us through a staggering repertoire that was ours 'for one week only'. Giving a performance with polish would certainly be a bonus and it was what everyone was striving towards. But these weeks are about so much more: the journey through the music, learning and reinforcing valuable navigational skills, in beautiful uncharted territory, with a crew of increasingly trusted travellers, is for me an end in itself. I'm ready for my next destination, and so's my notebook. You can quote me on that.

Katherine Dixon June 2011

Katherine's memoir '*A Year of Living Musically*' can be found at <http://www.completelynovel.com/katherine-dixon>