

The Canadian University College choir tour group sings with The North American Festival Chorus in the Oriental Arts Center in Shanghai

A Trip to China . . .

This summer members from the Canadian University College Choral Union were invited participants in a series of concerts that provided a cultural countdown and prelude to the XXIX Summer Olympic Games, held in Beijing, China. The CaUC group, conducted by Wendolin Pazitka Munroe, was one of two choirs from Canada chosen to participate in a mass choir that performed for enthusiastic audiences in both Beijing and Shanghai.

It was an electrifying moment when the enthusiastic yet proper audience suddenly joined in the music, spontaneously clapping, waving their arms, and dancing in time to the Chinese folk song embedded in the music coming from the stage and balcony. The words from *Defend the Yellow River*, sung in Chinese by the festival choir, that had elicited the audience response, were from a

patriotic poem set to music in this movement from the *Yellow River Cantata* by Chinese composer Xian Xinghai. The audience reaction, which took the choir by surprise in its first public performance in Beijing, also happened again in its second concert three days later in Shanghai.

While this work, conducted by dynamic Chinese conductor Yang

Li, was a high point in the concert, the transcendent work in the program was the concluding number, the final movement from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, performed by the Tianjin Symphony Orchestra, the 400-plus member festival chorus, and the Tianjin Conservatory Youth Choir. The concert also included three works associated with the Olympics, a movement from Orf's *Carmina Burana*, and, in the Shanghai concert, all of Beethoven's

Ninth Symphony along with a number that showcased that auditorium's organ.

The large chorus for this event, named the North American Festival Chorus, included members from a dozen school and choral groups in North America. Participation was by invitation, based on audition tapes or reputation.

For the CaUC choir, conducted by Wendolin Pazitka Munroe for over thirty years, this was actually the second tour for the school year, yet another adventure in an ongoing series of annual tours that has taken the school's acclaimed choral groups around the world.

In this instance, a total of 67 persons from CaUC made the journey to China. This included 58 students from the 128 member Choral Union, who had been able to raise the needed \$4150, and nine staff and faculty, some of whom were also choir members.

Planning for this trip had been a two-year project. Fundraising events,

including a black-tie dinner, were undertaken to keep the costs down for the students and to supplement the school's total contribution of \$3000 for all travel expenses, including



The Great Wall of China

lodging, for the trip. The personal cost covered meals, sightseeing, and tips.

The CaUC group left the college on Thursday, June 26, riding by bus to Edmonton.

They then flew to Vancouver, British Columbia, that afternoon and on the following day flew into Beijing, arriving there on Friday, having lost a day in transit.

Sightseeing began immediately as they arrived in China, with a flight Friday afternoon to Xi'an where the famous terra cotta warriors can be seen. Other typical tourist activities followed in the next two weeks, including tours to Tianamen Square, the Forbidden City, and a portion of the Great Wall of China.

Each day was tightly scheduled with rehearsals and sightseeing. Lunch and suppers were taken in restaurants where one peculiarity soon became apparent: they were always located on the second floor. This became a source of amusement to the group whenever the guide would announce, "Yes, my friends, you go in the store and then upstairs to the second floor where the restaurant is."

Preparations for the first concert included two three-hour rehearsals and a dress



The Canadian University College choral tour group pauses for a photograph in Beijing



rehearsal with the orchestra by American conductor Eric Dale Knapp. The first concert was given in the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing, an acclaimed 1400 seat facility with excellent acoustics, on Thursday evening of the first week.

Because of limited stage size, the festival choir sang from the balcony while the orchestra and Tianjin choir were seated on the stage. This arrangement allowed the choirs to do an antiphonal number, which was performed only at this concert.

They flew to Shanghai the next day where they again followed a closely planned schedule for the remainder of their time in China. A partial listing of pre- and post- concert activities included attendance at a Chinese Opera and an acrobat show; a shopping spree in a "factory," a place which included numerous small stalls where vendors expected buyers to challenge prices; and a visit to a factory outlet for pearls and jade.

They also visited an architecturally striking museum containing an extensive display of oriental art and artifacts from before the time of Christ and took a journey to the outskirts of Shanghai, an older part of the city where citizens lived in the most primitive of circumstances.

The Shanghai concert, prepared with one rehearsal, was given in the Oriental Arts Center, a highly acclaimed three-year-old facility shaped like a lotus blossom. The cluster of five buildings was designed by its architect to convey the delicacy of that flower and create a luminous and appealing effect, especially in the evenings, when crowds attend performances in drama and music.

This complex includes a 1979-seat auditorium with a large stage and a choir loft that could accommodate the festival choir, which was not joined for this concert by the Tianjin choir, and the orchestra which had traveled from Beijing to accompany the group.

Debra Bakland, in her first year as head of the piano area at CaUC, was impressed by Chinese architecture and their attention to detail:

They are very concerned about how their buildings look, and they were impressive. I was struck with the number of new buildings and the beautiful, simple, and modern architecture.

When I walked into the huge foyer of the concert hall in Shanghai, I was impressed by the use of tiles, which created a warm effect. It was very modern, yet not cold. The concert hall with its cushioned wooden seats, huge organ, and feeling of openness was gorgeous.

The concert in the center differed from that given three nights earlier, with an organ number substituting for the antiphonal choral number. Both concerts ended with a standing ovation from a capacity audience.

A feeling of camaraderie had prevailed in the festival choir, and numerous friendships were formed. As in any deeply moving, shared musical experience, post-concert emotions were euphoric, particularly after the final concert and its end to what had been a vivid, once-in-a-lifetime musical experience.

Dan Shultz

Sources: Interviews, Debra Bakland and Wendolin Patzitka Munroe; Oriental Arts Center website; Tour materials

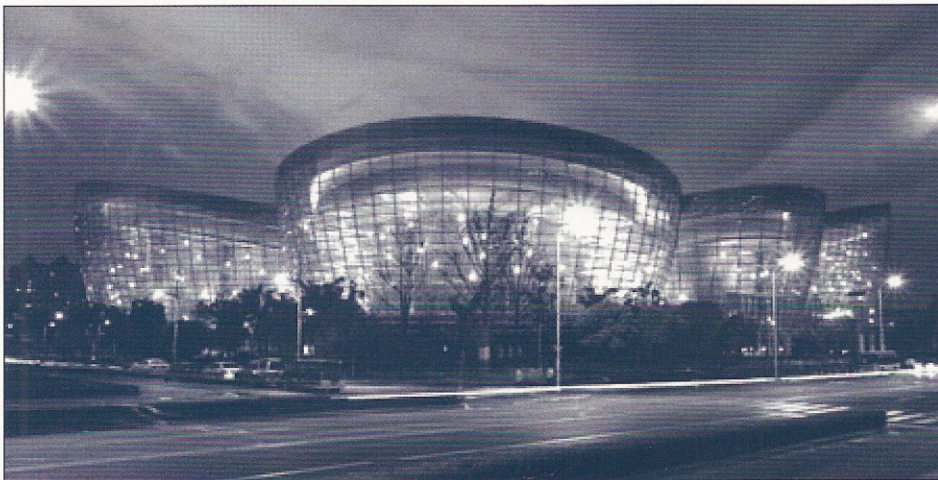
CaUC Choir Tours

In more than three decades of touring, the students in Munroe's choirs have traveled to Europe three times, Mexico, Bermuda, China, every state in the United States except New Mexico, Arizona, and Alaska, and Canada coast to coast in a cycle repeated every three years. They have sung in Carnegie Hall on two occasions and will, by the end of this school year, have sung with the Vancouver Sinfonia on three occasions.

While the China tour was a unique and memorable experience for some of the 128 member Choral Union, all of the members had taken a ten-day tour to Western Canada, Washington state, and Hawaii two months earlier. For that trip each choir member had raised \$1000.

They left for that tour at the end of final examinations in late April. After performing four concerts in Canada and one in Washington, they flew to Hawaii, where they gave three concerts.

This coming year they will tour in Saskatchewan and Manitoba and then fly from Winnipeg to Europe, where they will sing at Newbold College in England and three places in Germany and also tour in Italy.



The Shanghai Oriental Arts Center