

Eurythmy at the Goetheanum: The San Francisco Youth Eurythmy Troupe in Switzerland, Spring 2022

First a short flashback to the year 2021, which passed without a full public performance or tour for the SF Youth Eurythmy Troupe because of pandemic restrictions. Astrid Thiersch created a eurythmy festival with the Troupe in the new SFWS David Bushnell Center for Community and Athletics in February; a few fans were able to see a small performance, and a video was made about the festival, which became part of an on-line eurythmy conference sponsored by the Goetheanum. This international conference was repeated in person in 2022, and Astrid was invited to bring her Troupe. Thus, our goal for this year became meeting eurythmy from all over the world at the center in Dornach, and making our own contribution to the best of our ability.

The program for 2022 was titled “Changes”, after two excerpts on that theme from *The Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, done in eurythmy. The program also featured *Knighthood* by Karl König and a Native American prayer, a Beethoven sonata and music by Shostakovich, Grieg, and Mendelssohn, humoresques, and the tale *Godfather Death* from the Brothers Grimm. Astrid created new choreography for all of the pieces, with a Troupe of 28 students.

Our customary venue was not available, so the February performances took place at our SFWS grade school in Dakin Hall. The Troupe performed the complete program four times: once for the public, twice for preschool through eighth grade, and once for the high school. The program began with the students entering from behind the audience, encircling them and doing a silent Hallelujah. We began wearing masks because we were so close. As the program unfolded with greater space we removed the masks and the audience quietly gasped. People were deeply touched by the closeness; they could see the students’ faces and their intention in moving. We had not seen each others’ faces for so long, and the human countenance is our most expressive feature. The students performed with striking strength, and the program was a festive and joyful event. The audience saw beauty, truth, and striving in an intimate way. People left with a sense of hope and wonder, grateful for the remarkable students we have in our school. Once again everyone experienced Eurythmy, and was uplifted, knowing that we need it and love it.

Travel in 2022 was uncertain, and the requirements kept changing. By April things were more settled, and the omens were good: donors came forward to help; housing, meals, and tours got confirmed in Zürich and Dornach. So off we went, comfortable and well-served on Swissair to Zürich. A train ride from the airport brought us to our clean and friendly hostel. We made it to the Zürich Opera House, a famous jewel box, early the first morning for a special tour. We saw the public spaces as well as backstage, costumes and scenery, and heard about the Swiss technical school and apprentice system that can lead to careers in the arts, like design, music, dance, technology, building, costuming and more – we felt there was something to learn here about programs in higher education.

Other impressive sights included the Grossmünster, with its history of headless saints, kneeling horses, and sausage sermons connected to Charlemagne and the Reformation, and the Frauenmünster with its feminist foundation and astonishing stained glass windows by Chagall. We heard more about Swiss history, including Wilhelm Tell and the other famous apple. The students roamed the Altstadt, crossing bridges, exploring shops, cafes, museums, gardens, squares, and the lakeside, and enjoying coffee and Zopf. As Astrid noted, we all had a beautiful feeling of freedom and expanding into the world after so much confinement.

Easter Sunday arrived with perfect weather, and we joined the native Zürchers out celebrating the coming of spring. Our tour bus ride was easy, and the vistas were grand. We traversed the west lakeshore to the cable car lift at Felsenegg, which took us up about 800 meters to a breathtaking view, with the city and suburbs spread out around the lake and the snow-covered Alps rising majestically just to the south. We spent a long time just gazing and feeling the exhilaration of the mountain air and the awakening spring. After playing tourist in Zürich it was time to turn our energy to eurythmy and serious preparation for performances, so we bade a *fond uf Widerluege* to Zürich and *grüezi* to Dornach. The countryside on our bus journey looked just as Swiss as we imagined, with villages, pastures, hills, farms, and mountains in the distance.

Our Dornach hostel accommodation, the Pfadiheim, was on a hill above the Goetheanum overlooking the valley with Basel in the distance. This rustic but beautifully renovated chalet had a full kitchen and dorm rooms, and suited us perfectly. Walking down the gravel path to the Goetheanum, we could see how truly amazing and unique this monumental structure is. We were able to rehearse briefly in the Grundsteinsaal, and got the ironing set up (always a significant task with 110 costumes), then climbed the stairs, which were decorated with quotes from *Faust*, to the top where the great red window faces west. Out on the terrace we could take in the beauty of the building and the surroundings of meadows, forests, trees in bloom, and the unusual architecture of the neighboring buildings.

The next day brought a rhythm of rehearsal and ironing, leavened with breaks and meals. The energy was flowing in the group, and the students moved together with strong presence. We were able to work through each program piece, and felt we would have something fine to show. The students were invited to the Youth Section to meet a group of young people who are working out of Steiner's ideas in the world. They help create social connections and organize international conferences, and bring various initiatives around environmental causes, biodynamic farming, social democracy, education, and much more. Their idealism was inspiring. It was also delightful for us teachers to meet many old friends around the Goetheanum, and there was a buzz about the SF student group. People were warmly welcoming and delighted that we made the trip, as were we! The students turned out in their finery for the evening performance by the Goetheanum Eurythmy Ensemble. We were treated to a highly professional program by ten masterful eurythmists, and we bathed in the profound movement, sound, and color on the great stage in the Grosse Saal, a truly inspiring space.

On our first performance day we needed to pace ourselves: rehearsal was at 8:50 am, a run-through at 6:30 pm, and finally a performance, with our pieces last, at 10:40 pm. The morning rehearsal allowed us a closer view of the Grosse Saal which is impressively unique in design, sculpture, painting, and colored glass, with a performer's ideal stage. The students' energy and focus on stage were strong, then we had to sustain it. The morning lecture included an entertaining demonstration of the angels doing opposite-sound eurythmy when the devil speaks in *Faust*, something which Astrid had incorporated into this year's tale. The afternoon brought a very special visit to the Gruppenraum at the top of the Goetheanum which houses Steiner's astonishing wood sculpture of several larger than life figures, where we were given a master class in observation by Thorwald Thiersch.

The evening run-through was secure, then we had to wait through a long program of very diverse pieces by groups from Russia, Ukraine, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland. In the process, we learned a lot about different approaches to eurythmy. Finally our performance came,

and it certainly was a hit. The group entered from the top of the hall through the audience, then performed a silent Hallelujah and sang a choral piece, followed by Knighthood, Change, and a new Shostakovich piece Astrid created for Ukraine. The audience reaction was enthusiastic, including an international group of senior teachers who were invited to see us by the conference organizers. Possibly we were put last to provide a strong finish; in any case people were full of compliments and very much appreciated the students' energy and beautiful movement.

We presented the rest of our program the next afternoon in the Grundsteinsaal, our final performance of the year. The audience were people specially interested in our Troupe and its work, and though the stage was small, the students were amazingly good. The music pieces flowed effortlessly, the humoresques were hilarious, and Astrid commented that the tale had developed into something greater than ever before, through the work of every student. It seemed that all the hours and months of rehearsal reached a high point in these two shows: the eurythmy was alive with energy; the students were completely focused and at the same time full of joy.

The format was a performance and conversation, and the students left the stage (to much applause) and stood before the audience for questions. People expressed amazement and gratitude, and the students spoke beautifully about their own experience of eurythmy, their stagecraft, and their feelings of community and friendship. There were tears on both sides – spectators were profoundly moved, and students realized this was the last show, a specially poignant moment for the seniors, who had their own closing circle together. At dinner at the Speisehaus, the students presented Astrid with flowers and spoke eloquently about their gratitude for her work that enabled all of this magic to happen.

The performances in Dornach showed a tremendous transformation in each program piece. Was this because of the special place where eurythmy has lived strongly for more than hundred years? Or was it the students, taking a step in their growth and understanding? Maybe it was both, and much grace that met their effort. In the evening, we were treated to yet more styles of eurythmy, including a South African ensemble with indigenous poetry and music, a fiery Chinese solo, hilarious humoresques, and some skillful solo performances, among many others.

Our last day included sightseeing in Basel, with monuments, pastries, and shopping for chocolate. We had to be tested for Covid for travel the next day, and a common theme was “I don't want to be positive, but I would be happy to stay in Switzerland!” A cheer went up when it was announced that all results were negative, and we could travel home.

The last performance we attended was a very original piece by the Eurythmeum Stuttgart developed from the writings, drawings, and music of a cancer patient. It was quite somber, yet beautiful and moving. We took a long last look at the Goetheanum before wending our way up the hill, reflecting on all that we experienced, all that we did, and the mood of welcome and appreciation in which we were met. We all felt that we had stepped out of the restrictions of the past two years into a larger, freer, and expansive world that is our future.

– *David Weber*
May 2022