

Castles, Music, and Eurythmy:
The San Francisco Youth Eurythmy Troupe in Austria, February 2023
by David Weber

The San Francisco Youth Eurythmy Troupe returned to the JCC/SF for its annual performances in 2023. In 2022 we had performed in Dakin Hall at our own grade school, and 2021 featured a Eurythmy Festival in the high school's new David Bushnell Center, without a public performance due to the pandemic. So we were surprised to discover that the 'return' to the JCC was actually the first time in that venue for all the members of this year's Troupe. When it came to performance they owned the stage, becoming more assured and adept with each show. For the evening performance, the hall was filled with friends and fans of eurythmy, and the audiences for the two daytime performances included three sister schools and our own students ages three to eighteen, together with their teachers. Nearly a thousand souls were present for this year's San Francisco performances, and the gratitude and appreciation they expressed was profound.

People commented that this year's program was especially satisfying. Astrid chooses and creates pieces each year to reflect themes of our time and also the talents of the Troupe. The program expressed a wide range of what is possible in eurythmy: the fairy tale, shining with cosmic beauty, urged the awakening of the soul in our time; two forms by Rudolf Steiner illuminated the human being in relation to the world; an original piano piece by Griffin expressed fire and longing; a solo by Ella presented the individual facing life; a contemporary poem addressed our collective pain from violence and loss of life; two humoresques sparkled with wit and delight; a conversation with a computer gave a glimpse into artificial intelligence; and a beautiful, complex music piece evolved through creative forms for solo, duo, trio, small groups, and the entire ensemble. It was as usual a *tour de force*, and the performers brought great intensity and commitment.

We planned our tour to begin in Ljubljana, Slovenia and end in Salzburg, Austria. Two days before departure Lufthansa cancelled thousands of flights, including ours, due to an IT disaster. On top of that a one-day strike was called at airports in Germany, including Frankfurt, for the day we would have landed there. It was not possible to re-route our group of twenty-six into Slovenia in the time remaining, but we were able to manage a shortened trip by flying into and out of Salzburg. We were all very sad to miss the chance to perform in Ljubljana, and hope we will be able to add that visit to a future itinerary. Adriana, alumna and future teacher who had arranged our Ljubljana visit, joined us in Salzburg, and a Slovenian welcoming committee of Natalia (eurythmy teacher), Igor (music teacher), and nine high school students made the drive from Ljubljana to Salzburg to see our evening performance there, welcome us, and renew their invitation.

We settled into our hostel in Salzburg after the long flight, and found an Indian restaurant nearby, Lakhi's, that could host us for an early dinner, which was superb. On the way the students discovered Schloss Frohnburg, a location used in *The Sound of Music*, which inspired some joyful singing and dancing as scenes were spontaneously re-enacted. A restorative night in good beds worked wonders, especially for the young and resilient, and a full breakfast buffet with a push-button espresso machine completed the cure.

A buoyant atmosphere carried us through the day, as we explored a dramatically beautiful new city. The Alps are visible to the south, and the town is embraced by two great hills, one crowned by the magnificent and imposing Fortress Hohensalzburg, reached by nearly vertical tram which some were eager to try. Within the Old City there are Baroque buildings and churches at every turn, as

one square opens into another and narrow streets and passages filled with tiny shops and cafés wind their way in between.

Salzburg rivals any place for the number of churches per square kilometer, as befits an “Ecclesiastical City” where Church and State were one and the Archbishops princes for centuries. Some of the great wealth from mining (salt, gold, and copper) went to express the glory of the faith in the great mother Dom cathedral and her many daughters – of the 43 churches in Salzburg, 40 are Catholic. Music is always in the air here as well; in addition to the famed Salzburg Festival and renowned music schools, native son Mozart is revered here – though he left at 25 for wider musical horizons, he lives on in museums, statues, pictures, and of course the ubiquitous confection *Mozartkugel*, many of which were happily sampled. We were fortunate to hear his music performed at the Landestheater in a production of a comic opera he composed at age 18. The students dressed in style to mingle with the elegant Salzburg theater crowd, and the opera and vision of this beautiful city by night were windows into a new and different world.

Our sightseeing concluded with a tour which included an informative commentary about the geography and history of the city and the region, as well as significant buildings and features. We felt like insiders – who knew that the Mirabell Palace was built for the Archbishop’s mistress and their children, or that Schloss Leopoldskron (more scenes from *The Sound of Music*) was owned by Max Reinhardt who started the Salzburg Festival and gathered writers, musicians, and designers there before he fled the Nazis for Hollywood? Fortified by history, we traversed the town, assaulting the Fortress, visiting Maria’s abbey, peering into the private lives of the Mozart family (including his tiny childhood violin, harpsichords, and other artifacts), hearing church organs and bells, snacking on sausages, and crossing the bridges over the Salzach between the Old and New Towns.

The Rudolf Steiner School in Salzburg is a large and beautiful purpose-built school, incorporating Steiner’s architectural aesthetic. We were warmly welcomed by a group of teachers, including Andrea Riedl and Michael Walter; it was clear that teachers and parents had prepared thoughtfully for our visit, and we felt like honored guests. The performance space, the Dorothea Porsche Hall in the Odeion complex, is designed for public events and available for rental – one orchestra creates all its recordings here because of the excellent acoustics. Our students were astonished at the beauty of the hall and its facilities, and it was a lift to our spirits to have such an outstanding space for our performances. We managed a solid run-through of the whole program, and school families, mostly with young children, arrived on cue during the last piece to take our students home for two nights. The few ripples of trepidation were quickly smoothed by warm welcomes, and we all felt very fortunate to have landed here.

The students arrived at school by 8:15 the next morning, excited to share their home stay experiences: “They were all so welcoming!” “They spoke perfect English!” “The cat woke us up like a siren!” “Their toddler woke *us* up!” “They are toy makers!” “They live in a winter wonderland ski village!” “They had a *Fasching* bonfire party with the neighbors!” “Their little boy wrote our names on his chalkboard!” “They milked a cow before breakfast!” “We had Bulgarian food!” “No one spoke English!” Everyone was full of delighted discovery, and they all had been truly embraced by the wonderful school families. Much of the day was spent in the performing hall and backstage, setting lighting cues and ironing a hundred costumes. Andrea and the English teacher matched pairs of 11th and 12th grade students with pairs from our group for guided tours of the school, which has about 300 children in grades 1-13 plus a kindergarten. The pairings created

instant friendship groups, as intended. We managed a run-through in the afternoon, and after an early supper it was time for costumes, make-up, and some pre-performance butterflies.

By 7:00 there was a good sized audience, ranging in age from four to eighty, including the group from Ljubljana as well as old friends from Stuttgart and Chengdu. From the opening “Hallelujah” it was clear that the student performers were poised and concentrated with a beautiful intensity. We did the entire program with no intermission, and everyone was riveted. The hall creates intimacy between performers and audience, and Astrid involved them in insights about eurythmy and got them up and doing it as well. It seemed that the performance had reached a new peak, with great joy and energy from first piece to last. The audience rhythmically voiced their approval, our hosts were delighted, and we felt the glow of a fine artistic accomplishment in a new place. The audience was invited to ask questions of the students after the show, and much gratitude and appreciation for eurythmy was shared. We were so happy for the troupe to have this experience of performing well and being so warmly received.

After an early arrival the next morning and some quick preparation, we were ready to go onstage for the last two performances. First came a shortened program for grades 1- 4. It is always fun to perform for children, and they were enthralled and delighted. We could even see a few future eurythmists putting their whole being into the gestures when Astrid did audience-participation eurythmy. Then came the final performance of the whole program for grades 5-12. The concentration was intense both for audience and performers, and every piece seemed to reach its potential for artistry and message. We felt the familiar turning point with a high school audience when eurythmy skepticism gave way to open admiration. The whoops of appreciation were loud and sustained, especially from the older students. An exchange of gifts after the performance included a nautilus shell from us to them, and a lovely Austrian doll called Wolfie in return.

It is simply astonishing how our students were able to maintain and even increase their level of engagement and inner commitment to eurythmy over the course of the performances. The local high school students requested group photos, and friendships were confirmed over lunch. Students said they had never seen or experienced eurythmy like this before, and marveled at the variety of pieces, the breadth of expression, and the depth of meaning. They asked how one can bring this art to such a high level, which led to a fine conversation about what the arts can become for high school students – in eurythmy as well as music, drama, or fine art (the Salzburg school has an outstanding music program). Teachers commented that our approach to eurythmy presents an experience of spirit for the students, and that it shows the way toward the future in that respect, and also because the group is diverse and inclusive. We left with the feeling of having made a fine connection that may transform in unknown ways in the future.

At our final festive dinner in Salzburg, everyone shared highlights that were touching and poignant, ranging from performing eurythmy, to social life together, to cultural discoveries, to newfound friends and Austrian life. We are all deeply grateful for this opportunity to perform eurythmy together, and to bring this beautiful gift into the world.