

Over the Alps and a Final Bow:

The San Francisco Eurythmy Troupe on tour to Italy and Germany
February 15-24, 2024

The San Francisco Youth Eurythmy Troupe returned to the JCC in San Francisco for its 29th year of annual performances in February of 2024. Thirteen seniors had graduated so the Troupe was younger, with a strong contingent of 10th grade students joining the returning 11th and 12th grade performers. Rehearsals over winter break as usual helped shape the pieces and the program. When performance time came, the students showed their mastery on stage, becoming stronger with each show. Long-time friends and eurythmy enthusiasts filled the hall for the evening performance, and the audiences for the two matinees included our own students from age three to eighteen, and those from three sister schools, together with their teachers. Nearly a thousand people attended our final San Francisco performances, and they expressed their appreciation with cheers and applause.

Each year Astrid has created pieces to reflect themes of our time and the talents of the troupe, so each program was unique. This year's show featured a broad range of eurythmy: the fairy tale brought a host of elemental beings on stage, yearning with wonder toward the human being and offering their help; poetry showed the human soul in relation to the world in Steiner's morning verse, and seeking to rise above conflict in a poem by Arvia Ege; music by Mendelssohn and Schumann painted the beauties of Venice with gondola and Carnival; humoresques and riddles evoked laughter and delight; a Chopin prelude stretched the boundaries of tonality; and Beethoven's *Archduke Trio*, for piano, violin, and cello featured the entire ensemble in three-part splendor.

The students brought great intensity and commitment to their performances. There was naturally some sadness that this would be the last year of performance and tour, but the students overcame this by vowing that this year's would be the best ever. Colleagues and alumni—Margo, Jeremy, Liz, and Elsa—created a celebratory atmosphere, speaking of the history of the Troupe and their experiences of Astrid's work, and presenting gifts and bouquets.

Our last tour was to Italy and Germany. We traveled with 22 students, our accomplished pianist Lilia, and also Yi-Hsing, a favorite high school colleague, Lilia's son Misha with his cello, and Dorisiya with her violin. A week after our San Francisco performances we arrived in Venice. We reached our hostel by auto-bus and water bus, asking for help in musical phrases of Italian and feeling our way. The hostel was welcoming, and a lasagne dinner helped us feel at home after hours of travel. The beautiful city of Venice had shrouded herself in veils of fog, and walking the quay on Giudecca Island by our hotel made the cobblestone streets and ancient buildings seem quaint and mysterious. As a famous columnist remarked about San Francisco, it was like living inside a pearl. Our first day was beautiful and full of discovery. The fog was with us, so we missed the blue sky and bright vistas one can have in Venice, but we experienced her close-up in surprising ways.

We reached Piazza San Marco with a short *vaporetto* ride. We explored the piazza, then met our guides Corine and Francesca for a wonderful 2-hour tour of the Basilica San Marco and the Doge's Palace. The piazza contains buildings from the 11th through the 18th centuries, and we got an erudite history lesson on architecture, followed by art history through the same periods as we toured the buildings. Reminding us that art and architecture both reflect the consciousness and

world view of their times (the same approach we try to take in Waldorf high school lessons) our guides showed us wonders and interpreted them to reveal the special mindset of Venice and its people: their relationship to water, facing both East and West, creating (and losing) an empire of trade, independent for centuries, and finally being absorbed into greater Italy. We received vivid detail and descriptions of the life and character of Venice through a millennium, bringing us to the present day. We walked the Bridge of Sighs (of prisoners, not lovers), saw the dungeons, the magnificent council chambers designed to overawe foreign dignitaries, and much more. It was a *tour de force!*

In the afternoon we explored the city in small groups, from *trattorias* to the Rialto bridge, finding gelato and pastries, touring museums of Venetian treasure and modern art, and learning to navigate the waterbus system. We returned to our hostel at dusk, and some intrepid souls ventured back to the main island to get as much Italian culture as possible by attending a concert of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* in a local church (this was his city). Next morning the fog had miraculously cleared, and the sun shone on the elegant pastel-colored buildings as we boarded the *vaporetto* for the next stage of our journey. As we sailed away we saw the city receding in sunlit glory—as though it was casting a sly glance our way, like a beauty winking over her shoulder to show us what we almost missed and to insure a return visit.

We journeyed onward by bus, making the trip north in an easy hour to *Scuola Novalis*, in Conegliano. It is a beautiful, purpose-built Waldorf school with bold architecture, colorful walls, and light-filled, airy rooms. After a warm greeting by our host, Andrea Simon, we turned to the serious business of ironing costumes, adjusting to a theater space in a gym, and doing a complete run-through of the program. In the evening the students met their host families and went off with them for a two-night home stay.

The students returned to school with their new friends, happy and well rested, having enjoyed their family time. The gym was transformed into a stage with draped background and lighting, and we were ready for the all-school performance with an audience of nearly 300 comprising grades 1 to 13. From the beginning we could sense their interest and appreciation of our work, and our students brought confident mastery to each piece in the program. Andrea gave most helpful support with translation in the performance, and the audience was rapt and enthusiastic. Eurythmy has not always been a regular feature at the school, but their eurythmy teacher contributed several pieces with the tenth grade class, which will travel with a eurythmy program. We had a tour of the school including the history of its special founding, growing out of an intentional Anthroposophical community and bio-dynamic farm. Consistent with principles of the threefold social organism, the food products business provides financial support for the school—idealism in practice!

The evening show brought one of our biggest audiences ever, as it seemed the whole community turned out. These were eurythmy *cognoscenti*; the energy cycled and grew as the students played to a deeply understanding and receptive audience. Many tears were shed, and people expressed that the performance gave them hope for the future, both of eurythmy and of young people. We met a wonderful community here, and left with a tug of the heartstrings.

We had to alter our travel plans unexpectedly, as another airport strike canceled our flight from Venice to Frankfurt (shades of last year!) So we procured the next-best thing—a charter bus journey across the Alps and into Germany all the way from Venice to Frankfurt. The students decided to view this as an epic road trip, and indeed it was.

We left our friends at Scuola Novalis mid-morning for the 900+ kilometer journey in a comfortable bus of our own. The day could not have been more beautiful, as sun and clouds played on high, a rainbow appeared, and we climbed the road through the Alps from Italy into Austria over the Brenner Pass. The towering peaks were well covered in snow, and we gazed up at masses of majestic mountains as we followed the road along the river valleys. The descent on the northern side was more gentle, and we turned west into Germany where the autobahn promised a speedy ride. We pushed steadily along northward as the sun set. Traffic flowed until we were stopped by an accident, and then later by another one, tantalizingly close to our destination. In the event we reached our hostel in Frankfurt, right on the river Main, close to the stroke of midnight. In some ways the ride was restorative, if long. There was no hurrying through airports with baggage, no security lines, just our own little world of napping, snacking, chatting, laughing, and singing, crossing the Alps.

We spent the following day at the *Freie Waldorfschule Frankfurt*, a big and beautiful school, marveling at the architecture and the facilities. We walked in past the “magic garden” where the little ones played, and caught glimpses of older students pursuing their activities in classrooms, handwork rooms, science labs, music rooms, art rooms, a cafeteria, and more, feeling an urge to tell them not to take their splendor for granted. The performing hall was magnificent, with a large and inviting stage and seating for about 800, with excellent sight lines and a state-of-the-art lighting system right down to the new footlights. Our host, eurythmy teacher Heiko Feiler, gave us one of the four eurythmy rooms to use as a dressing and prep room, and we had the hall to ourselves to rehearse.

We were tired after a late night, and the rehearsal took some effort, but the magic was there for showtime. The evening brought our last performance of the full program, and it truly sparkled. The audience, which included friends, relatives, grandparents, and alumni, as well as local fans of eurythmy, was wowed, and many remained after the show to meet and chat with the performers. This school has a vibrant eurythmy program with performances by many local and invited groups, and we were told we drew a large audience. We were delighted that people appreciated our work so much—Ms Hou, who is a eurythmy connoisseur and always truthful, pronounced it the best performance yet.

The next day brought two shorter performances, and Astrid crafted the perfect programs for each age group. Both had singing, the morning verse, Venetian Gondola, and the Beethoven trio; the younger classes also had Rumpelstiltskin, and the older ones had the Chopin Prelude and Four People. And of course the Troupe made their signature move into the audience, bearing chocolates. We were also given chocolate and roses by grateful teachers at each curtain call, and the very vocal applause in both shows brought a clear message of delight and appreciation. In the hallways and over lunch, teachers and students sought us out to express their welcome and thanks. We were most grateful to Heiko and the eurythmy teachers who made our visit possible. With costumes packed we made our way back to the hostel, and in the evening attended a performance of an Offenbach operetta, a favorite Frankfurt pastime.

Our final day featured a far-ranging exploration of this intriguing city, with its plethora of museums and unique mix of old and new—in architecture, art, food, and technology. The students had wonderful and varied adventures, navigating with aplomb (and google maps), and having a great time. The city prides itself on being green, eco-conscious, and tech-savvy, yet Frankfurters also love their traditions, like comic opera and local delicacies. So we had our traditional final dinner with some Frankfurt teachers and friends at a restaurant that has been

serving local cuisine for nearly a century. Between schnitzel with *Grüne Soße* and *Rote Grütze* the students thanked their teachers and musicians, presenting each with a gift. Then each student spoke about what was meaningful to them about their experience in the troupe, and we were all touched by their poise, their consciousness of themselves in the world, and their gratitude.

This was the end of our run of performances, eight in all this year, and it was an emotional moment for everyone. The students channeled their strong feelings into doing eurythmy at a level we had only dreamed of, and their gratitude for being part of this experience was intense and heartfelt. Their written reflections later showed beautiful insights into what it can mean to become a part of this unique art form of eurythmy.

These were the last performances, and this was the last tour for the San Francisco Youth Eurythmy Troupe. The work has encompassed 29 years of performances, and 26 years of touring around the globe. The social and travel experiences were highly meaningful, yet the focus has always been on eurythmy above all—learning it, and sharing it. Over these years, hundreds of students have encountered this art and taken it in, becoming skillful and expressive, and living in its qualities. They have become eurythmy in a sense, as they let it flow into them and through them. Doing eurythmy is like making music, in that one becomes a vessel for something higher, yet the process is even more intimate, as each person is also their own instrument. The students have experienced profoundly how eurythmy affects them as human beings, and changes their relationship to the world.

In the many places where the students have performed, there was always the question of how it would be received—one never knows what the reaction will be. Amazingly, the reception was universally enthusiastic, even overcoming skepticism at times. This is because of the power of eurythmy to reveal the striving and nobility of the human soul and its objective relationship to higher forces of the cosmos. Eurythmy is both elevating and humbling for the performers and for the spectators.

It has been our great joy and privilege to work with these young people to bring eurythmy to communities around the world. Hearts were touched, and souls inspired. Friends were made, and common strivings deepened. We are immensely grateful to the many friends, colleagues, parents, and students who have been part of this work through their infinite gifts of love and support.

Astrid Thiersch and David Weber
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