

# Chamber Singers' Tour Comes Full Circle

By Sarah Wetzel  
For the Plain Talk

What would it be like to meet Mozart or brunch with Bach and Beethoven? What if you could walk a mile in their shoes?

The University of South Dakota Chamber Singers came as close as you can get to that on their performance tour of Germany and Austria over spring break.

The choir will be performing the same music they performed on tour today at 7:30 p.m. at First Congregational Church located at 300 S. Minnesota Ave. in Sioux Falls with a follow-up Vermillion concert Saturday at 7:30 p.m. at the United Church of Christ located at 226 E. Main St. in Vermillion.

The tour has been years in the making.

David Holdhusen, Director of Choral Activities and Professor of Choral Music at USD said he did most of the planning for the trip.

"I asked the students about two years ago what their thoughts were and if that was something they'd like to be involved with and we started talking costs and things," he said.

According to Holdhusen, the planning got going 18 months out with the first payment due from the students about 15 months before.

The total cost to each student came to about \$3,500 Holdhusen said, though the university helped some.

Holdhusen said he used the tour to create an inspired program filled with songs both familiar and foreign.

"I called the program 'Old World New World,'" he said. "The whole first half of the program are composers and songs related to Germany, Austria and that area. The whole second half of the program are American Folk songs, spirituals and composers. I took into account that we were going to be in these huge cathedrals so I programmed in music I knew would work really well for that."

According to choir President Becca Lunstrum and Vice President Hannah Lambertz, the audiences were not disappointed.

"They were really receptive and it was really affirming that music is the universal language," Lambertz said. "Even if they didn't understand the English they just loved it and it was really great to talk to them."

"The younger people in those countries all study English in school so there were always some that understood," Holdhusen said. "The one concert with the four encores was a small town outside of Vienna and they were more older people at that concert so there was a little less communication there but for the most part they were able to communicate at least a little bit."

"Even though there was that language barrier you could still tell how excited they were and how eager they were to get what little words they did know in English out to us," Lunstrum said. "It made us want to learn German and be able to talk to them a little bit more too. It was interesting and fun and I enjoyed it."

Though interesting and fun, the language barrier did present challenges.

"The most frustrating part outside of the musical context was trying to order food from someone who doesn't speak English," Lambertz said.

Lunstrum agreed. "There was a lot of pointing involved," she said. "Luckily all of our waiters were really nice."

Once in concert, there were no problems with communication.

"They all got into every performance," Lunstrum said. "There was one concert we had four standing ovations at the end. Every audience was really large too. When we've gone on tour in the United States we sometimes have smaller audiences but every concert we performed on tour we had 80 or more people there."

Even when tickets were charged, Lunstrum said they had full houses.

"There was one concert at St. Stephen's in Vienna," Lunstrum said. "Just because of the size of the concert hall they charged 10 Euro per person and it went for a donation to the church. We had more than 200 people there."

Needless to say it was quite a memorable experience for everyone involved.



University of South Dakota Chamber Singers had the opportunity to sing at Esterhazy palace in Austria where Hyden composed many of his great works.

COURTESY PHOTO

"We talked on the bus about what our favorite parts were and our favorite musical and non-musical moments," Lambertz said. "My favorite non-musical moment was the carbs."

A sentiment Lunstrum shared. "All their food was very fresh and very market-available," she said.

"There's a bakery on every corner where they make fresh bread every day. There's fresh vegetable and flower markets everywhere. Everything is amazingly fresh and delicious."

"For my favorite musical moment, I arranged a piece for the choir, Mozart's overture for the Marriage of Figaro for voices," Lambertz said. "We got to sing that in Mozart's church where he grew up and was baptized. That was pretty spectacular. It was something I put a lot of hard work into more than the usual choir year. It's not something I've done for a long time but it's something I really enjoy doing, arranging music."

Lunstrum said her favorite musical moment was visiting composer Anton Bruckner's church.

"We got to explore the abbey and the place where he worked and kind of grew up as a musician and learned everything that he knew," Lunstrum said. "We got to sing Bruckner in Bruckner's church and he's actually entombed right underneath the organ so we got to see his grave and sort of sing to him. It was a very moving experience for all of us."

To members of the choir, many memories they gathered on the trip will be held sacred.

"Whether or not you're religious there's definitely that connection," Lambertz said.

Holdhusen agreed.

"Sunday we were there we actually sang for a worship service and it was all in German and we had no idea what was going on," he said. "It was Bach's church. Singing in that space was amazing. I think most of the choir was in awe of the organist and what he did there. Regardless of the fact that we were unable to understand the religious service it was a very religious experience for the choir and emotional and just very awe-inspiring to be there."

Members of Chamber Singers also took advantage of the historic locations to do some sightseeing.

"We did group tours and walking tours," Lambertz said. "It took up a lot of our days actually. We didn't have a lot of free time but for the most part that was fine. We got to go to all these churches and Mozart's house where he grew up and we got to see a lot. We had this whirlwind tour of Prague, a place where you could spend two weeks and find something new every day. Epic would be the right word for that."

The group had one main tour guide and broke off into smaller groups with location-specific tour guides at various places.

Holdhusen said it is quite difficult to name the best experience of the trip.

"Day to day it changed," he said.

"I thought the greatest thing ever was when we sang at the Bach church then the next day it was something else and the next day it was something else. It was really

great just being together and making music every day in a new historically significant place. The history every place we sang and the musical genius living in the walls of those spaces, that was what was so amazing to me."

There was no shortage of life-changing experiences according to Holdhusen.

"I think every student had a moment like that," he said. "I don't think they were all the same. Every place meant something different to someone else. One thing that blew me away was seeing the little violin that Mozart played when he was five years old."

Glad to be home and still reveling in the amazing memories, the choir now looks forward to two final concerts, one in Sioux Falls and one in Vermillion, both in churches as opposed to concert halls.

"I always like to do that concert in a church because it's more communal," Holdhusen said of the Vermillion concert coming up Saturday. "We will have a reception afterwards in the basement where the students will bring cake and cookies and get to mingle with the concert-goers. There will be a free will donation but the concert is free and there will be complimentary child care in the basement. Hopefully we'll get young families to come."

One reason the choir is extra excited for these final concerts is they will play host to a very special guest.

"We have a composer that we've been working with who will be there," Holdhusen said. "His name is Jonny Priano and he has written some music that has really come to mean a lot to the choir."

The attendance of Priano actually came as a student suggestion according to Holdhusen. The students actually financed bringing Priano to Vermillion from his home of Pittsburgh.

Though Holdhusen and choir members have never met Priano in person, they have fallen in love with his inspirational music since being one of the first choirs to record one of his pieces about six years ago.

After noticing their recording of his piece on YouTube, Priano contacted Holdhusen and began a partnership that would change lives.

"From that point forward every year he sends us a new piece and all he wants for it is a great recording," Holdhusen said. "Last year's was one that took on a special meaning to the choir. The piece we did three years ago we actually sang at Hannah's dad's funeral so that has special meaning to her. He has become just a really important figure and we've never had an in-person opportunity to say thank you. We can't wait to spend two days with him and introduce him at the concerts this weekend. It will be very magical for the choir and hopefully also the audience."

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Seventeen students including eighth-grader Wyatt, fifth-grader Landon and second-grader Lainey competed in last Saturday's FunFair, a chance to test their piano skills for judges.

COURTESY PHOTO

## Piano Good Play

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For the Plain Talk

Seventeen piano students from the area participated in the first ever Piano FunFair last Saturday in the Warren M. Lee Center for the Fine Arts on the University of South Dakota campus. The event was based on a similar event sponsored by the Omaha Piano Teachers.

"It was fun," said Wyatt, 14. "I liked the judges. They were nice. We got free food out of it. It was really well directed. Terry Walters directed it and she's my teacher."

Walters tried to create a carnival-type atmosphere for the students as they were tested on various fundamental piano skills and theory.

"We had to do scales, arpeggios, four cadences and inversions and we had to perform a song from memory," said fifth-grader Landon. "You had to do sight reading and a test for major and minor chords and a theory test."

Though there was plenty of fun to be had, the students all had their favorite part of the day.

"I liked doing the award ceremony when you got the ribbons," Landon said. "I passed the level because to pass the level you need three tens and you get a big ribbon. This is the first one that I've ever done."

Landon commented that he would love to do the event again next year.

Lainey, second grade, liked doing ear training.

Wyatt explained what was involved with that.

"They played a key and we had to decide if it was major or minor," he said.

For Lainey, the hardest part was sight-reading. According to her, there's no real way to prepare for it.

Landon has developed a strategy for sight-reading which he excelled in Saturday.

I got a perfect 10," he said. "They give you a sheet of paper and you can look at it for a while and then I play my fingering and how I do it beforehand so I know what key it's in and stuff."

As far as nerves go, Landon also has a strategy.

"I take a deep breath," he said.

Wyatt also received a perfect score on sight-reading. "Play it on your lap before you go in there," he suggested. Wyatt said he can even hear the music in his head a little bit by doing this making it easier to play on sight.

There are a lot of musical terms that might seem strange to a non-musician but these kids know their stuff.

"There were a lot of different things like scales and arpeggios and cadences," Lainey said. "A cadence is a chord and then another chord and then another chord and then another chord."

"A scale you play all the notes in the key and an arpeggio you only play three notes but in different octaves," Wyatt said.

"The hardest part is probably when I had to play my song from memory," Wyatt said. "I played Scott Joplin's Maple Leaf Rag."

Wyatt was one of three students who received perfect scores in all the categories and received a trophy.

"Piano is fun and I enjoy doing it," he said.

Wyatt has been playing for four years and plans to continue with it at least through high school.

His favorite music to play, he said, is rock music by bands like the Beatles. Wyatt also plays trumpet as well which he says helps him with sight reading.

Landon also enjoys playing the piano

"I started in second grade and I'm a fifth grader now," he said. "I think it's fun to do."

Landon's favorite part about the piano is playing at his lessons.

"My teacher's really nice," he said. "She gives you tips on what to do for the fingering to make it easier."

Landon said he wouldn't be opposed to being a music teacher himself in the future.

"My dad's a music teacher," he said. "He plays piano. I also play the drums. I'm in fifth grade band."

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