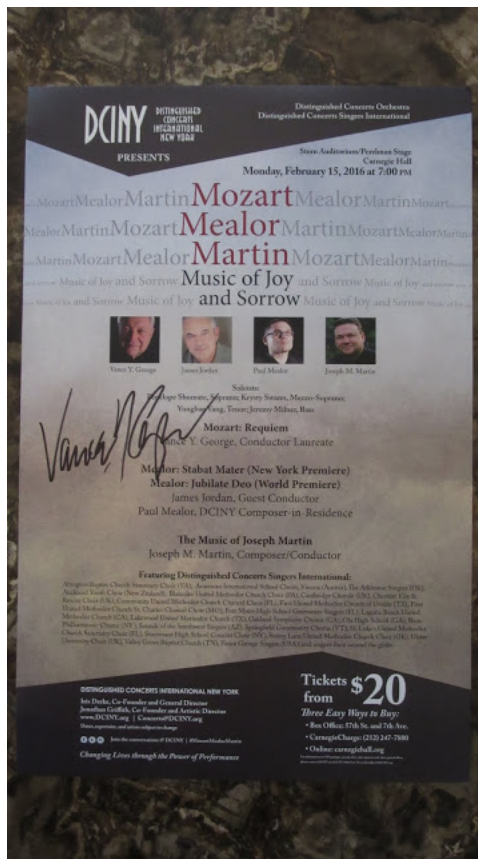


Requiem of joy and sorrow

February 12-16, 2016



I had been introduced to DCINY (Distinguished Concerts International of New York) back in 2014, when the members of Schola Cantorum were invited to sing David McCullough’s “Holocaust Cantata” at the Lincoln Center in New York. We had performed the work in Schola a few years prior at a Jewish community center, and when it came to our attention they were going to be performing the same work in NY, Schola jumped at the chance. We ended up having around a dozen singers, making for a memorable experience. (I had just started a new job about 2 weeks before that, but my manager let me take the time off un-paid since he was excited for me!)

We had maintained good relations with DCINY, and when another chance had come up to perform at Carnegie Hall – this time the Mozart Requiem, Schola was once again invited. Vance George was going to be conducting - I was excited to be performing under him. He had directed the “Carmina Burana” as a summer sing a couple years back and he directed quite a stirring performance! I had also performed the Verdi Requiem with his annotations - sharing his deep insights and comprehension of the music. There would be 4 singers this year from Schola participating in Mozart’s Requiem – me, Mark, Joan and Julia.

I’ll never forget the day that 9/11 happened - it was one of those things that you

remembered exactly where you were when something happened (like the Loma Prieta earthquake or when Kennedy was shot if you were around). I was asleep in my bedroom, and the phone call came at around 7 in the morning. My phone buzzed and chimed louder than I had ever heard it, jarring me awake. I just remember the words from my dad - "Turn on the TV" and "We are under attack". I ran over to the living room where my roommate Eng already had the news on. The second tower had just been hit and that's when they knew for sure it was not an accident. I sat there mesmerized for hours, staring at the TV, watching the towers fall shortly afterward. It was like out of a movie - it couldn't be happening. I remember going into work maybe around 11 that morning and sitting around not even able to be able to concentrate on my database code - I think I went back home within an hour - and so did my coworkers.

It was a dark chapter of America's history and grieving and healing would take years. The capture of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 brought some closure, but so many questions remained and so many edges remained ragged. I went home over Thanksgiving that year, and we decided as a family to visit Ground Zero. I couldn't believe that even months later, they were still cleaning up wreckage and finding remains of missing bodies. The smell of the ash and dust lingered for months after that. It was a solemn memorial - seeing handwritten notes and displays of solidarity and patriotism not seen in a long time.

Music can be a powerful means for healing, and I got to participate in a rendition of the Mozart Requiem on the 1-year anniversary of 9/11 in 2002. It was a stirring performance (and a memorable one for me - I was the tenor soloist in the Benedictus - I still remember about every note of it even to this day). The Mozart Requiem was the first choral piece of music I ever performed - it was during my freshman year when I decided to study music at MIT. Schola Cantorum was invited to participate in a 10-year remembrance concert of 9/11 as well, performing with several other groups. The risers were bursting at the seams when over 200 singers gathered together in the beautiful Stanford Memorial church in a standing-room-only packed house.

I was a bit nervous about the trip to Carnegie Hall as it neared - not really knowing what to expect. Would I make an obvious gaffe on stage? Come in early on an entrance and sing an unplanned solo (easy to do on one of the many fugue sections)? Flight get cancelled? Develop laryngitis the day of the concert? Get caught in a big snowstorm? There had been a "snow-mageddon" a couple weeks earlier, shutting down much of the east coast. In fact, when I was in high school, a bunch of us had tickets to a Broadway musical, and the day of the show, there was so much snow that the freeway was closed and we were unable to even get to New York!

February 12

I met at Mark's place where his wife was going to be giving us a ride to SFO for our flights to NY. I was excited about the trip but still a little nervous. A small misadventure with a broken laptop and a small delay leaving the house, but we were soon on our way. I had to pack my full-on winter ski gear, knowing it was going to be about 4 degrees with 40 mph winds soon after we got in. Fortunately I remembered I still had my NY cap from the last trip. I couldn't believe when we were at our gate that the trip was for real -

that we were on our way to Carnegie Hall!

I was in line to get a coffee and pastry for brunch by our gate, when I noticed a bunch of people lined up at the gate next to us. It looked like a solemn service was about to start, like a casket was going to return from a fallen soldier in Afghanistan or Iraq or something. I stepped out of the line when I saw the door open and a bagpipe starting to play The Marine's Hymn. I had expected "Amazing Grace" as you often here in funerals. Immediately afterward a very old looking veteran took his hat off and smiled to all the endearing people all around. It turned out to be Hershel W. Williams, a Marine who had received the Congressional Medal of Honor through his valiant actions during the battle of Iwo Jima in WWII. He is the last surviving recipient of the Medal of Honor from that battle.

We were soon aboard our wide-body Boeing 767 as we hit the skies. A deep sunset filled the sky with crimson hues somewhere over the clouds of the Midwest on our cross-country journey. I felt so small at this point – seeing the grandeur of the sunset, celebrating a Medal of Honor winner. And I had just heard that at LIGO, they had just made their first direct observation of gravitational waves using interferometry – two 4 km long "L-shapes" of lasers and sensors detected a stretching of space by one part in 10^{21} , confirming Einstein's theory developed 100 years ago.

It was a relatively smooth flight throughout, and we were soon touching down on the runway at JFK International airport. The taxi ride to our hotel at the Ameritania was quick - unlike our last trip where the taxi took an hour and a half in rush-hour traffic, this time we were stepping in the door in 45 minutes.

The hotel was swanky and modern and looked expensive and sophisticated everywhere you looked. We had to be careful to not touch the mini-bar in our room - the Snickers bar was \$7, the water bottle was also \$7, and heaven forbid, don't touch that small wine bottle, the 375 ml of alcohol would set you back a mighty \$38. But we got a decent rate for the room - less than \$200 / night (thanks Mark for booking the room early). When I booked my room (we didn't know if Mark's wife was coming, so we both booked rooms), my room was about \$50 more / night. I was thrilled to realize we could share a room after all (a 2-bed room was the same price as a 1-bed room, so it was a no-brainer!), and we cancelled my room and easily saved over \$800!

A café just down the street had some nice wraps and sandwiches. Although it was nearly 11:00 pm, a Cuban style Panini hit the spot for a near-midnight snack – the layers of pork were tender and tasty.

February 13

I couldn't believe we were in New York! It had been a long flight the previous day and I was glad to finally be there. Mark somehow had the energy to wake up early and use the gym, but I was happy to sleep in. The thick curtains kept out the light even though it was well after 9:00 by the time I stirred. I was happy to enjoy breakfast right at the hotel - they had a buffet like that of our favorite Best Westerns - make-it-yourself Belgian

waffles, fruit, yoghurt, muffins, OJ and coffee. A bunch of teenagers appeared to be in town for a fashion conference – they were showing off their swanky apparel.

Rehearsal wasn't until 1:00, so there was time to wander and check out some of the local sights. Mark had come back and wanted to walk as well. We were only a few blocks from Times Square, so we decided to have a look around. The Hershey's and M&M stores were nearby - not to be missed. Times Square is never without its costumed Disney characters who would be happy to come up to you for a photo (and tip!) I guess it was a form of begging, but it was entertaining. Mickey & Minnie Mouse joined us with Iron Man and Elmo. A couple Minions were across the street getting photos as well.

We were excited to be staying right on Broadway in NY, and Mark being a theatre aficionado was excited to catch at least a show or two. We looked at info on some of the shows that were in town - a large booth right in Times Square was a central hub for ticket reservations (at a hefty fee, however). We decided instead to wander by some of the theatres themselves and look. One show Mark was interested in was sold out for the evening, and another show wasn't going to open until next month. We stumbled into another theatre across the street - the Longacre theatre, where "Allegiance" by George Takei was playing. I had heard good reviews about George Takei, but wasn't familiar with Allegiance. They still had some mezzanine seats available. We both googled some reviews on our phones and when I read about the setting in a Japanese internment camp in WY, I was fascinated. Mark was interested as well so we picked up 2 tickets (at face value - no fees!)

Lunch was a 1/2 sandwich at the same place as last night - I had a chicken avocado wrap this time. I knew it was going to be a long rehearsal and had to be well fueled. It was just a couple blocks to the Park Central hotel where we were having our rehearsal. On our way over there, we saw a number of others carrying black folders - I felt the sense of camaraderie building, knowing that hundreds of people from across the country (and maybe even around the world) had come for this performance.

Another group was rehearsing already - the concert had two parts, and we were the second half. The first group was just finishing their rehearsal and we got to catch the last couple songs – some spirituals. They sounded lively and eager to sing. Meanwhile, Mark and I checked in in the back, picking up our badges and final materials. A few others were in line around us, and just a couple people over, I recognized one of them with red hair – it was Joan from Schola! And just a few minutes later, Julia showed up! I remembered a couple others from Schola said they were interested, but I had forgotten which ones. I enjoyed singing with Joan and Mark last year at the Lincoln Center and I looked forward to a repeat.

We all had our assigned seats - I was in row 6, seat 20, near the back center. A guy next to me turned out to be a director from a chorus in Vermont and his chorus had a couple dozen singers in NY - they rented a bus and all travelled together. A kid next to me on the other side was from Vienna, and about 40 of them were on tour to America to NY to perform with us. I reminisced about my tour with MIT to Vienna and Budapest where

we sang works by Stravinsky, Byrd and a couple others. Another group was from nearby Stuyvesant high school, and several other smaller groups joined as well. About 30 of us were from groups with less than 10 and we were all bundled as a miscellaneous group, the “Vance George Singers” group.



Taking our seats for rehearsal

We did a bunch of breathing exercises and pronouncing different vowels properly to get our minds ready for the grand work we were about to perform. We opened with work on the “Osanna” fugues that book-end the “Benedictus”, practicing the rhythms and fugal entrances. Over the next 4 hours, we worked on movement after movement, getting the notes and rhythms fresh in our heads again. I had studied on the plane, reviewing recordings on CDs and YouTube (on the “olla-vogala” channel where you follow along with the score), and prepared myself emotionally as well - I expected a flood of emotions could pour out at any time.

Back at the hotel we checked some Yelp reviews and found a nice Greek restaurant a few blocks away. I was game for Greek and enjoyed some pita breads with different hummuses, tzatziki sauce and smoked eggplant. The lamb was excellent and went well with a Mythos beer. Even though it was 4 degrees outside (NY was going through an unusual cold snap, even causing Code Blue alerts to be issued for homeless people), we felt we were on one of the sunny Greek islands on a summer evening.

We had tickets for “Allegiance” at the nearby Longacre theatre. The French neo-classical interior was exquisite with flowing gilded ornaments surrounding the stage and balconies. Our seats were in the mezzanine below the balcony - although the balcony was just above our heads, the architecture was designed so that nobody had an obstructed view. The lights were soon dimmed and the curtain opened.

The show was wonderful, better than I expected. We were lucky to catch the next-to-last show before it closed. George Takei is extremely talented, and I found a special connection with the fact that the show takes place in a Japanese internment camp (in

Heart Mountain, WY) and George Takei himself was interned as well in real life (at Rohwer, AR). My friend's mom had been interned during her youth in Tulelake, and I had recently visited several camps - Tulelake on our Lava Beds trip in 2014, Moab on my Cataract Canyon rafting trip in 2014 and Manzanar on my Mt Gould trip (near Kearsarge pass) in 2007. Seeing the guard tower, monument, museum, and an abandoned runway in Manzanar, full-grown cottonwood trees in Moab that had been planted as seedlings, and a museum in Tulelake gave a sense of reality to the dark chapter of American history. I wonder if Donald Trump is voted for president if Muslims would be interned due to fear of jihadists, in the same way fear of the Japanese was so pervasive in America during WWII (though many Japanese like in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team fought valiantly for America, and there are many Muslims in the US armed forces right now).

The show ended with a deep sense of forgiveness between generations - peace had finally been attained after many decades. Sam and Kei's grandfather managed to grow a garden in the unforgiving terrain, and seeing the new life in a flower, allowed him to pass away peacefully from this earth. In real life, it took over 40 years for a proper redress to occur, when President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act in 1988 to compensate the survivors of the Japanese internees years ago. It might be too little and too late, but at least an effort was put forth. I had never heard of such atrocities in school history classes, and I don't think these wrongs were ever addressed in any of our textbooks - it was all kept a secret. I wonder what atrocities are going on right now that are being conveniently hidden from the public, that might only be revealed 40 years from now.

It takes decades to properly grieve and mourn these atrocities. Our last concert in NY in Nov 2014 was about the sorrow of the Holocaust atrocities - we performed David McCullough's Holocaust Cantata, which was a tribute to the Polish Jews suffering in the concentration camps in Auschwitz and Buchenwald and others. I remember the day after getting my music for this concert, I was on a bike ride on the Guadalupe trail and I realized I was only a few blocks from the JAMsj museum (Japanese American Museum of San Jose), featuring stories, artifacts, and tales of the survivors of the internment camps across America. Expecting to just make a quick visit, I ended up spending a couple hours, processing the dark secrets that happened.

My mind was a bit numb as we exited the Longacre theatre and headed back to our hotel. Dropping our souvenirs back in the room (I picked up a CD), we went down to the bar downstairs for a beer. Finding it closed early for some reason, we headed next door to the 3 Monkeys. It was 0 degrees outside now and we hadn't bothered to grab our coats (since we were just going next door) - the bouncer at the door laughed and smiled that we must be crazy for going out without a coat! We enjoyed a local craft beer and watched some Motocross racing on one of the TV's and joked about crazy the politicians have gotten during the last couple debates - easy mindless entertainment for a change, to let the mind relax and recover after an emotional day.

Back at the hotel, it was nice to chill and just read a little of the "Tipping Point" before hitting the sack. I always marvel at the psychology of the human mind and what drives

people to make certain decisions when a critical mass is reached, whether it was something in fashion like “Hush Puppy” shoes, or something morbid such as engage in mass hysteria toward a certain race of people.

February 14

We had a half-day rehearsal today, this time with the soloists. I’m glad I was able to sleep well the night before since 9:00 am would be 6:00 am on my (west coast) clock. A quick breakfast of coffee and a pastry and a banana at the Starbucks got us started (and this time I found my gift card after “losing it” when it got stuck to the back of another card...)

Rehearsal was intense, a complete run-through of the Requiem, emphasizing the multiple fugues and important entrances. I knew some of the tempos were tricky and we would have to watch carefully, especially after yesterday where it seemed like the left half of the chorus was a couple notes ahead of the right half of the chorus! I think almost everyone in the chorus had sung the Requiem before, but all with different directors and different interpretations. Vance George knew of some tricks to make it really ring in the big hall - extra consonants to emphasize the runs of the “Osanna” fugue, a bit of extra “mmm” at the end of some phrases, and small bits of daylight at the very end of the big fugue at the end “Quia pius es”. The soloists were wonderful and I couldn’t wait to hear them the next day on the big stage!

Vance really knew his music theory as well. I had studied music at MIT years ago and when Vance talked about fugue subjects, inverted fugues, double fugues, the difference between an Italian and German 6th chord, and a Neapolitan resolving to the dominant, I had to dust off the cobwebs in my mind. I noticed on some cut-offs, however, that instead of holding the final note for the full value, we would cut off early. Maybe that was in anticipation of the resonance of the hall to avoid notes getting muddled together. But sometimes I found it natural to cut-off early anyway. There didn’t seem to be a precise rule, an objective truth for the cut-offs, which bothered me, coming from a mathematical mind. I guess it was a form of “musical ficta” where slight modifications may or may not be added during a performance - Monteverdi had many accidentals in his Renaissance style music that were just assumed and not precisely written. Vance knew how to express the music artfully, which I think is what really counted.

I was tired after the rehearsal but eager to make the most of our experience in New York. I hadn’t originally made any plans for sight-seeing during our 4 days since I knew there would be a lot of rehearsals - (how do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice! Practice! Practice!) (Of course, knowing the right people also helped a lot!) I knew the 9/11 museum had opened recently and the Freedom Tower had just been completed. What a better way to pay a tribute to 9/11 than to visit the site itself? Only Mark and I decided to go – it was still too painful for many people.

I felt the rest of the afternoon was orchestrated by God. I was originally expecting to just take a cab or subway downtown to the Freedom Tower, maybe do a quick walk around

the memorial pools (I had already seen these on a previous visit, though tickets and a long wait were required). I thought also it might be a good idea to get a timed ticket to avoid a wait but wasn't sure if it was worth the risk. Mark said he wanted to go to another show that night, but since curtain wouldn't be until 7:30 or 8, he was interested as well. We decided right after the rehearsal to head downtown.

A cab arrived almost instantly - hailing one was faster than catching an auto rickshaw in India (though an order of magnitude more expensive!) The \$1.3 million dollar medallion had to be paid back somehow. We passed the Intrepid aircraft carrier as we headed south - the Lockheed A-12 (predecessor of the SR-71) that I remembered was still parked on the flight deck. We paralleled a section of the High Line - the abandoned railway that had been converted into a park. Some people were walking the path of the old tracks - they must have been locals, braving the frosty air.

Mark was on his phone most of the ride down, checking out shows. He had apparently done his homework ahead of time, checking out reviews of shows in the New Yorker. Old Hats was playing, but apparently sold out. An improv comedy show still had tickets, and another show that I hadn't heard of "Something Rotten" still had mezzanine seats available. I had a hard time thinking about getting tickets to a silly show - my mind was preparing for a serious state of mourning and grieving. I trusted Mark's judgment with the tickets and we secured 2 seats for the 7:30 show of "Something Rotten" (though we would end up getting hit with some hefty fees when all was said and done - \$25 was the price of convenience per ticket!)



Remembrance pool

It was still pretty frigid when we arrived near the Freedom Tower - I don't think the mercury topped 10 degrees all afternoon. Some crunchy snow remained - a small remnant of the recent big snows. I had all my layers on - fleece, ski jacket, gloves and ski hat (it doesn't even get this cold in Tahoe!) The pools were exactly as I remembered from 2 years ago. The waterfalls were barely trickling, however - with the freezing temperatures, I don't imagine much water flowing. Several red roses placed by mourners by some of the names written in the dark granite plates surrounding the pools could have been placed by people who had lost someone during that fateful day - valentines to lost loved ones. I ran my hand across several of the engraved smooth granite panels.

I had actually forgotten that there was an entire separate 9/11 museum next to the

Freedom Tower. I thought the museum was part of the observation deck of the tower. I remembered the price being \$32 for admission up to the tower, and when Mark and I finally got to the front of the line, we were both puzzled when the price was just \$24. Maybe the price was lower at the ticket counter? Maybe \$8 of it was fees for booking online? When we realized it wasn't for the Freedom Tower, we almost changed our mind and left, but something stirred inside me to buy a ticket anyway. Mark followed after me and got one too. I think this "accident" was cleverly orchestrated in a profound way. I was reminded of how one of my dad's friends from the Navy who had worked at the Pentagon didn't show up to work on 9/11 since he had to testify for a court appearance that day. I've heard so many stories of people who missed their train in the morning to the WTC, or missed their flight when they should have been on one of the 4 ill-fated planes. I wonder how many times God sends His angels and we are unaware of His protection?

I wasn't at all prepared for the serious journey we were about to embark on. We had a quick lunch at the cafe by the lobby. I could barely eat my arugula salad, knowing right behind me were remnants of two large trident-shaped steel girders of one of the World Trade Center buildings. I had to sit facing away from the girders. My mind was racing with anxiety of the solemnity of the place.

Remembrance is a key aspect in preservation of our heritage and culture. The Taliban tried to wipe out so much history in Kabul causing people to lose their sense of rootedness, making them more vulnerable to defeat. I am quite proud of the work done to remember the events of 9/11. I am also proud of remembrances of the Holocaust and Japanese internment – many lessons can still be learned. I will have to visit the Holocaust museum some time (even though it was only a few blocks away from us).

After lunch, we headed down progressively deeper levels of the museum. Almost the entire museum was underground, following the footprint of the twin towers. Two large mournful paintings of people stricken with grief stood by the top of the stairs - I imagined the artist in tears as he slapped layers of paint on the chaotic and jumbled canvases.

The main pathway into the museum was a large ramp, descending 6 stories to the very foundation of the twin towers. Descending the first part of the ramp in silence, we heard recordings of snippets of how people first heard the news of what was happening when the attacks first happened. We came to a railing overlooking a deep basin. A 6-story high slurry wall on one side acted as a large retaining wall to keep out the mud and water of the Hudson River. Large retaining bars every 10 feet kept it from buckling under the force. Across from the slurry wall was a gleaming silver cube suspended like an image of heaven in Revelation - it was actually the underside of one of the pools we had just seen, and it formed the outline of one of the twin towers. Seeing the sheer size and immensity of the cube was a humble reminder of the magnitude of destruction that occurred. The original foundation of one of the twin towers was visible underneath the cube was visible as well - the girders had been cut right at their base, revealing their square cross-sections every 10 feet or so. Between the slurry wall and the cube was a girder of one of the towers, painted with some of the numerous responders during 9/11 -

various fire departments and police departments. Many heroes were made that day from ordinary people doing their jobs.

I could only sit and stare at the magnificent site for several minutes before venturing deeper into the chasm of painful memories. I felt how Jesus had to descend into the deepest reaches of darkness before he could be resurrected again. A large flag hung on the wall containing remnants of the numerous flags found and recovered from Ground Zero. A twisted set of girders hung on another side, buckled from the immense weight and heat of the collapsing towers. A bold message was inscribed in a blue tile mosaic in all caps - 'NO DAY SHALL ERASE YOU FROM THE MEMORY OF TIME'. We shall never forget. The terrorists thought they could weaken America by this destruction, but it only strengthened the American spirit. I was reminded of a counterintuitive thought experiment of how much water would you have to spray on the sun to cool it down - but actually spraying water would only make the sun hotter!



9/11 museum

At the base of the ramp, we saw both of the towers contained their own museums inside. Entering the first room, we were soon overwhelmed with the solemnity of the 2,977 photos of the victims of 9/11 - 2,606 were killed at the WTC and surrounding areas, 125 at the Pentagon, and 265 on the four flights (this includes the 19 perpetrators for a total of 2,996 killed). Each person had a story and was treated with proper dignity. I sat in the theatre during the reading of several names and their stories. I was amazed that even almost 12 years after the attacks, victims were still only then being identified. The mosaic of photos reminded me of Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choirs where singers from around the world submit videos of their individual voices singing their parts, and these videos are stitched together in a vast mosaic to produce a giant choir of thousands of voices. Whitacre's sound is ethereal - the dissonances and shimmer of his chords have a profound effect. His "Water Night" and "Lux Aurumque" are some of my favorites.

Artifacts recovered from the smoldering wreckage of the collapsed towers gave a personal aspect of the destruction - watches that had melted, still fixed on the time when the plane hit, telephones, rolodexes on people's desks, and other paraphernalia that was

used every day by ordinary office workers doing their jobs to raise their families. Artists had expressed their grief in so many ways, and some people even expressed their remembrance through tattoos, some covering their whole backs, that they could proudly show for a lifetime.

The second room in the other tower was quite a bit more disturbing. A fire truck from Ladder 3 that had been parked nearby one of the burning buildings had been scorched by the intense heat, and the entire back half of the truck had melted, causing the ladder and back half of the vehicle to droop downward. A blob of steel was once a bunch of girders from several stories of one of the towers, melted down like spaghetti. Candles and notes and mementos from the numerous make-shift memorials shortly after 9/11 were preserved. Phone messages, videos of people jumping helplessly from the burning buildings and newscasts from reporters nearby stirred the memories. The path through the room took you in chronological order of when the towers were hit and collapsed. The Pentagon was hit and the plane crashed into the field in Shanksville, PA, where the famous words of Todd Beamer were recorded from one of the “Airfone” devices on the plane - “Let’s Roll!” George W. Bush’s speech shortly afterward steeled the nation to fight terrorism - I still remember his speech on my first scuba diving trip to the Channel Islands in September 2001.

Outside the room, we descended another story below the actual foundation, where we could see the original steel grillage built on the solid schist metamorphic bedrock 70 feet below the surface scoured out by glaciers, which lay well below sea level. The thickness of the girders and steel plates was humbling - how much weight they had to support. The towers were engineered amazingly well, and seeing how they failed in the extreme acts on 9/11 showed us what we did right and what needed to be done.

A set of long escalators took us on an express ride toward the exit of the museum, shortcutting the long winding pathways we descended down. It appeared as a stairway to heaven ascending to the sunlight above. I rode the escalator in silence, seeing it as a metaphor for the end of my life on this broken earth, and that I would be on my way to heaven to be with Jesus.

Exiting the museum, we headed next door to the Freedom Tower. The imposing blue steel and glass tapered, rotated cube has a roof the same height as the original World Trade Center towers, topped with a 400-ft spire (don’t call it an antenna!), making it 1,776 feet high. It was architected by David Childs who’s firm also designed the Burj Khalifa – the world’s tallest building, in Dubai. I felt visiting the newly completed tower was a means for securing closure of the grieving process of the destruction and loss during 9/11. After experiencing the depth of hell in a most painful manner, I felt only then was it appropriate to ascend to the heavens going up the Freedom Tower.



Freedom Tower and remembrance pool

People were lined up for the elevators, patiently waiting their turn. We were told at the counter the next available ride wouldn't be until around 5:30, after sunset, a 1 1/2 hr wait. I was hoping to see the sunset from the top, but knowing our tickets for the show afterward were for a 7:30 show, that would make things rather tight. We might end up having to scarf a quick dinner on the go in that case. We were told, however, for \$20 more, we could get the "VIP upgrade", putting us to the front of the line and giving us access to the "VIP lounge" where we could enjoy drinks with the view. Sure - we thought, we had splurged a bit on this trip to NY, what was \$20 more?

Taking the escalators down to the elevators, we whisked by scores of people waiting patiently for their turn. It was a bit of change of mood - we had just been moving slowly and contemplatively in the museum with the masses of people, now we were treated like members of Trump's cohorts with money to burn. The elevator ride was under a minute - one of the fastest elevators in the US. A movie played on the inside walls of the elevator as we were whisked upward, portraying the history of the settlement of Manhattan from the Lenape Indian settlers before the European colonization, to construction of villages, and higher and higher office buildings. The Singer building (of sewing machine fame) over 600 feet high was the tallest building in the world in 1908. Sewing machines in that day were a vital technology. In 1971 the twin towers appeared right next to where we were. I caught just a quick glance of them before they disappeared 30 years later. During the last part of the ride, a flurry of girders started assembling themselves into place around us as the movie's chronology caught up with the present moment. I felt a sense of healing that we had overcome the hate of the terrorists and rebuilt.

The doors opened, revealing a giant movie screen welcoming us to New York. The curtain pulled back, revealing a magnificent view east over the East River. It seems every year a new skyscraper is completed - the skyline is always evolving. 432 Park Avenue's penthouse supposedly sold for around \$90 million, though it was empty most of the year - much of this elite real estate was used solely for investment purposes. I couldn't imagine having to make a 1000-foot elevator ride up and down every time I needed to go across the street!

With our VIP passes, we were escorted away from the crowd into a private VIP lounge. The modern decor was swanky and sophisticated. A bar in the corner beckoned us for drinks. Given our VIP passes, I felt - what the heck? Live like a high roller for an hour or two! The "NYC Yellow Cab" mixed drink felt as overpriced as the medallions on the taxis. The vodka and juice drink was satisfying but cost a pretty penny - \$22. But it was all about the experience. It was definitely an afternoon of mood whiplash - intense sorrow of the 9/11 museum, but intense joy of seeing the newly constructed tower, and getting to call Nisha to wish her Happy Valentine's day from the 102nd floor!



Manhattan from the Freedom Tower

The view extended up through all of Manhattan to the north - the Empire State building and Rockefeller Center were right there next to 432 Park Avenue. Across the Hudson River was New Jersey. The air was so clear after the bitter 40 mph winds of the previous day - we could see the outlines of the Poconos Mountains in PA. To the south was the Island of Tears - Ellis Island, another place of joy and sorrow. Many immigrants left their homes and families in Europe to escape wars, potato blight in Ireland and economic hardship to seek a new life in America, the land of opportunity.

The Statue of Liberty stood proudly on Liberty Island. The Empty Sky memorial lay in the glare of the sun to our west - another memorial to 9/11. Two walls that framed the former location of the twin towers, now point to empty sky. Governor's Island and the Verrazano Narrows Bridge stood to the south. Queens to our east lay across the East River, bridged by the famous Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges. The buildings appeared to glow in the late afternoon light as the lengthening shadows gave depth to the canyons between the towers of steel and light.

Rejoining the masses after our VIP experience, we were surrounded by tourists once again. We took just a few moments to have a last look around and pick up a souvenir magnet before heading out. It was a quiet ride down the 100 floors back to the ground level. The gibbous moon reflected on the side of the Freedom Tower as we walked back to the street to hail a cab back to our hotel.

Almost immediately an “Uber” driver showed up to give us a ride. I hadn’t hailed it with my Uber app (though I was thinking about it - Uber was cheaper than cabs many times). I was hoping to get a proper cab. In NYC, some cab owners have paid over a million dollars for the medallion, giving them a permit to pick up people. But with the appearance of Uber and Lyft and other ride-sharing apps on people’s phones, taxis have suffered greatly. Some taxi drivers have had to declare bankruptcy. A medallion that was once worth over a million dollars might have dropped 40%. Some drivers even borrowed against their medallion to buy a house (not the other way around), causing people to lose their homes.

I was hesitant at first, but we decided to get in anyway since we wanted to get back to the hotel quickly. Our driver knew the shortcuts and tricks to get us around traffic (though I’m not sure how much of it was legal - I guess it’s only illegal if you get caught). I was checking email on my phone when I saw we were almost to our hotel already. We made the mistake of not negotiating the price (which if we had used the Uber app, we would have known up front). The taxi ride down was about \$20, but this “Uber” driver was asking a hefty \$35. We were at his mercy and didn’t have much choice, realizing he was actually a “rogue” Uber driver, not a bonafide one. Oh well - lesson learned.

Curtain for our evening show was at 7:30, so we had a little over an hour for dinner and to wander over to the theatre. Dinner turned out to be a “bromantic affair” at a fancy Italian place with candles and roses for Valentine’s Day! The restaurant had good reviews and I was not disappointed with the food and service. The scallops and red wine were excellent. A street artist just outside the restaurant was doing a spray-paint rendition of a 9/11 memorial painting - twin beams of light reflecting the former locations of the towers.

The St. James theatre was just down the street - the sign read that “Something Rotten” was a “valentine to Broadway musicals”, a fitting title given which day it was! I was ready for something a little lighter than last night’s show. Mark had read some good reviews of the Shakespeare spoof comedy, and I was looking forward to just enjoying the evening.

At first I was expecting a corny tongue-in-cheek sort of comedy, but the show was quite a bit better than I expected. We had sung some “Brush Up Your Shakespeare” a few years back with Schola, and found out All’s Well That Ends Well even if “Hamlet” was misunderstood as “omelette”! I hadn’t expected it, but I found that seeing a comedy turned out to be quite a healing experience, that even after the terrible tragedy of 9/11, people are able to enjoy themselves once again with a night out on the town. Living in a persistent state of mourning would be evidence that terrorism has defeated us.

It was a bit late when the show let out, and the mercury was dropping fast once again, so we high-tailed it the several blocks back to the hotel where we could warm up again and get some good sleep in anticipation of the big day the next day. Mark's wife had graciously sent for some chocolate cupcakes to be delivered to our hotel, so we got to enjoy a nice surprise dessert at the end of the day!

February 15

I couldn't believe the big day was finally here! I was thankful for getting a good night sleep and waking up fresh. No sore throat or laryngitis - whew! I was glad to have a couple hours on my own to relax and peacefully stroll through town, maybe visit Rockefeller center or one of the museums. It was overcast, but didn't look too bad. Snow was forecast for later in the day. Mark was going to be visiting friends and family in the morning and afternoon so I would be on my own. I was looking forward to just wander for a bit.

After breakfast coffee and a bagel at the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf across the street, I headed down 54th street by MOMA over to 5th Avenue. I might be going back in the afternoon when my parents visited but that was fine. You could show your love for the Big Apple at the LOVE statue. I remembered St. Patrick's cathedral was under renovation last time I was there, and there was a service going on, so it was hard to see much. I was pleasantly surprised to see all the scaffolding was done and it appeared the 3-year renovation was completed. The marble was exquisite, and I remember seeing the difference last time between the restored and un-restored stone. Pope Francis had visited in September 2015 right after the restoration was completed.

Entering through the "Door of Mercy" on the side, I soon entered the solemn and silent sanctuary. My mind needed a quiet place to process the events that had taken place so far and prepare me for the rest of the big day to come! A few people were seated, some reading, some praying, and some quietly meditating in the holy place of worship. I enjoyed our trip to Germany in 2014 and felt the visit to the Neo-Gothic style cathedral was taking me back to Europe. But instead of being 900 years old, this church was not even 150 years old. The vaulted ceiling supported by dozens of majestic columns brought my gaze heavenward. "IHS" stood at the very pinnacle of the ceiling at the intersection of the transepts - it is an abbreviation of ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, Greek for Jesus. Dozens of statues, altars, and stained-glass windows adorned the sanctuary. Two majestic pipe organs would fill the church with music. I'll have to come back for an organ concert! A crypt lay below the main altar - I imagine it was full of old tombs, like those in Munich we saw in 2014. I wonder when people are allowed in.



St. Patrick's Cathedral

I probably spent an hour inside, wandering the various hallways and side altars, admiring the work and care taken as an act of worship. I hope it can last another 750 years! Walking across the street, I came to Saks Fifth Avenue, which in stark contrast seemed to be a sanctuary to consumerism and money. Wandering just one hallway inside was enough - I sampled one spray of designer cologne, which was probably easily \$100 for a small bottle. (The scent remained for nearly a week, which was surprising, so maybe it would have been worth it!)

Rockefeller Center with the famous Atlas statue was just across 5th Avenue. I re-visited the skating rink I had remembered from a couple years ago right after Christmas. On this cold February morning, the ice was mostly quiet with just a few skaters. The \$32 price was enough to keep me just watching from the sidelines for a few minutes. A glittery snowman stood right in front of the mighty Rockefeller tower.

Stopping at a Godiva chocolatier down the street to warm up, I mulled over buying a box of dark chocolate or at least a chocolate covered strawberry, but alas, \$7 for one strawberry made me think about coming back next time. I guess a lot of rich people stroll 5th Avenue, by the Rolex watch store, Tiffany's or any of the other designer brand stores. I recognized some of the brands as customers of Centric Software so I took some pride in knowing what some of clientele was like. There was a lot of glitz and money up high, however my role as an engineer actually has me quite removed from most of the action, isolating me, and creating a dissonance and a sense of artificiality in my daily work. I am looking forward to a trip to Haiti coming up, where I will be joining volunteers with Compassion International, working with needy children – I wonder how long I would be able to hold out doing software before I would feel I need to do something more real.

I peeked into the Tiffany store and had a glance at the famous Tiffany Diamond. The

brilliant yellow diamond was now set into a necklace - the setting was only changed recently, though the diamond itself was the same, gleaming as if it were in the Smithsonian. This crowning glory of consumerism was juxtaposed with the Trump Tower just next door. He had such an ego to invite people to have a drink at the “Trump Bar”, then dinner at the “Trump Grill”, followed by dessert at the “Trump Ice Cream Parlor”, then souvenir shopping at the “Trump Store”. I wonder if a Yellow Cab mixed drink would be \$22 at the Trump Bar, but I didn’t bother to go in and check - I didn’t want to know. Trump was proudly selling his book “Crippled America” - I fully expected his narcissistic and bombastic rhetoric like what we’ve been hearing at the presidential debates. I wonder if he would really make America great again like he said in his book, if he somehow managed to get voted for president. After seeing all the turmoil at the 9/11 museum, and knowing all the turmoil around the election, I am almost afraid that if he did get elected, something crazy would happen, that he would get assassinated, or the economy would crash again, or terrorists would strike again.

Central Park was just a couple blocks down 5th Avenue, at the corner with 59th. The Apple store was right on the corner, across from the statue of William Tecumseh Sherman from the Civil War. I wonder if Steve Jobs might be enshrined in 150 years. The seals at the Central Park zoo were swimming lazily - one of them got out of the water to pose for a photo. The glockenspiel at the clock tower just past the zoo were chiming and the animals were parading around - it was 11:00. Afterward it was a quiet stroll through Central Park - up to the Bethesda fountain, which I had remembered from 2014. The fountain was quiet now, with the weather far below freezing - the plumbing would have frozen long ago if they left it on. The Lake was completely frozen, probably thick enough to skate on (though I wasn’t about to try it!) Horses and buggies carried people lazily along the carriageways. Ladders had been placed around the lake to assist in rescuing anyone who might fall through the ice. The Pond was frozen as well, this time with the ice plenty thick enough to walk on safely (though I went out only a few feet to retrieve a lost tennis ball on the ice). I remembered there was an ice rink there as well from my previous visit, and upon seeing it, I quickly noticed it proudly displayed as the “Trump” rink. The ice was in the process of being zambonied by a “Trump” machine - the bold face letters making sure we didn’t miss the name.



Central Park

It was already almost noon and time to get back to the hotel to get ready for our dress rehearsal. On my way back to the hotel, I looped back on another street a couple blocks over where a building was going through some extensive renovation. Walking on a temporary path underneath a bunch of scaffolding I peeked through a gap in the fence to

see what kind of work they were doing. The inside was mostly desolate, stripped down to the fire-proofed steel beams and concrete foundation. The sight of the naked girders brought back a flashback that nearly took my breath away.

A steel grating on the sidewalk a little ways down had an uncanny appearance as well - the bars were shaped just like the steel beams on the outside of the World Trade Center. These flashbacks would continue for at least another week. The cactuses on a box of taco shells at home looked uncannily like the “trident” steel girders in the 9/11 museum - I had to turn the box around so I wouldn’t see the cactuses. And my routine for the gym the next week would have been to do the stair-masters (I normally rotated between elliptical, bike and stair-masters for cardio). My routine on the stair-masters was 110 floors, which I think started shortly after 9/11, when that fall, I hiked Clouds Rest in Yosemite with some friends, and I had developed a training routine that during a typical 20 minute workout, I would climb 110 floors, which matched the number of floors of the World Trade Center). Sensing the flashback again I had to refrain from the stair-master at the gym and repeat the elliptical instead.

A cafe was across the street, the “Fresh & Co” which I recognized from 2014. Nisha remembered the healthy wraps and soups there, and I was happy to see they were still in business. I ordered a panini to go and enjoyed it back at the hotel, before grabbing my music to head to Carnegie Hall for our dress rehearsal!

It had started snow flurrying as we walked the couple blocks to the stage door at Carnegie Hall - a nondescript door on the opposite side of the building as the main doors. Security was strict and we were instructed to leave everything except our music behind. No water bottles, jackets, hats or other accouterments. If you were caught pulling out a camera to sneak a photo from the big stage, the hall police threatened to confiscate your camera and perhaps even bar you from singing on stage that evening. I was bummed about the excessive security, knowing the motto “pics or it didn’t happen”, especially in our Instagram / Facebook society. Oh well, we’d seal it on our memories.

Half the group went up to a large green room on the 6th floor (hoofing it up all the flights of stairs there!), and half the remaining folks went to the 5th floor and the rest were on the 4th floor. Some posters on the walls of the green room reminded me of other famous people who might have stood in the exact spot we were. Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday might have warmed up for their big shows many years ago, standing on the same cross-cut wood plank floor. We only spent a few minutes in the green room in order to line ourselves up according to our rows and files before marching back down the many flights of stairs to the main stage.

Entering the stage row by row from the back, we filled out our 8 rows of 32 singers per row (256 in total, which I figured out quickly from playing the 2048 game too many times). I had seen pictures of Carnegie Hall since I was a kid, knowing that the best of the best only ever get to be on stage there! The hall was magnificent - the Italian Renaissance design was borrowed from similar grand venues in Europe. Carnegie Hall was built completely from brick and masonry without any steel, and the thick walls

reverberate the sound as well as insulate well from the cacophony of street noises outside.

There were 2 complete tiers of boxes above the floor Parquet level, wrapping completely around the enormous hall. Above the two tiers were two more balconies - the "Dress Circle" and the upper balcony (the nosebleed seats, only reachable by climbing 137 steps!). I did a rough count and there must have been over 2,000 seats (I googled it later and found it to actually be 2,804). I was shocked to learn that the hall was actually slated for demolition in the 1960's after the New York Philharmonic moved to the Lincoln center. I had performed in larger halls - the Sommet Center in Nashville when VIH took the bronze medal in the BHS international competition in 2008 had over 10,000 seats. And I had performed in similarly elegant venues in St. Petersburg, Russia, when VIH got invited to tour Russia the year after winning the medal. I really enjoyed Russia and never really felt nervous, and after seeing the similarities in Carnegie Hall, that helped me get the butterflies out of my stomach after all. But I felt Carnegie Hall was on my bucket list.

It didn't matter how prestigious the venue was - it was just you and the conductor. Watching his baton was the key. I had sung the Requiem probably half a dozen times and could probably sing most of it from memory, but I knew this experience was going to be on another level all together. The rehearsal went by quicker than I expected - the orchestra was already tuning and the downbeat was about to start. Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine. Grant them eternal rest, Lord. Kyrie Eleison. Lord, have mercy on us. And have mercy on us as we sing on the big stage tonight!

It went by like a whirlwind - it was already 2:30 and we were just finishing a few spots on the last movement. My phone buzzed in my pocket - it must have been a text from my parents that they had just arrived and were in the hotel (though I couldn't check it until we were done with rehearsal but I knew their plan). I was excited as we started filing off the stage so I could meet them. I was thrilled they made it, since the last concert at the Lincoln Center their plans fell through when my dad got sick. A couple people were sneaking some quick photos at the end of rehearsal of the grand hall - seemed like the "camera police" wouldn't really care anymore. I saw a couple dozen phones come out - even some of the orchestra players got theirs out too. I grabbed a quick selfie and one of the hall before walking off. I grabbed a quick souvenir at the gift shop before leaving.

It was snowing a wet sloppy snow as I headed back to the hotel, but it must have been 20 degrees warmer! It supposed to get to over 50 degrees and raining the next day - I couldn't believe it! At least travel the next day shouldn't be as much of a hassle with rain instead of snow. After dropping off my music in my room, I speeded up to the 11th floor and was thrilled to see my parents - yay! We had originally talked about going down to the 9/11 site together, or strolling along 5th Avenue or visiting a museum, but after seeing the crappy weather and knowing we were all happy to just hang out and catch in in the hotel, we just stayed put for a bit.

Stella and Vivian had just gotten gold medals in a gymnastics meet - my parents had just received photos - nice! It's amazing how much the kids have been growing up the last few years! I'm glad to have been able to see everyone over the holidays and that Nisha

could make it too. I missed her on this trip but I knew just the next day we would be together again at home. I showed my parents the photo of the view from the stage, and after seeing their tickets we figured out where they would be sitting. They were on the 2nd tier a few boxes left of center. Cool - now I knew where to look during the concert. Similarly since I knew my position (row 6, seat 20) I could tell them where to look for me on the risers so they could spot me among the sea of singers!

It was around 4:30 and getting to be a good time for an early dinner. I knew we had a banquet planned for our afterglow party after the concert, but I knew I wasn't going to last until then without a decent dinner. I knew of a pizza place between the hotel and the Ed Sullivan theatre just a couple doors down, so we tromped around the corner in the slushy snow to the restaurant. A line was already queued at the entrance of the theatre so the lucky few could catch a taping of the Stephen Colbert late show. I would have liked to try and catch a taping myself (there was plenty of fodder with the presidential campaigns going on), but they didn't do it over the weekend and tonight was the only night and we had a more important engagement for the evening!

The salad was satisfying and the New York-style pizza was light and crispy, just the right amount to keep me going for the evening. We watched the snow accumulate out the windows from our 2nd floor table. The restaurant was quiet - I imagine it was quite full after shows at the Ed Sullivan theatre, so we got to talk to the waiters a bit - they wished me good luck on the stage!

Back at the hotel, my parents got changed and ready to go to Carnegie Hall for the 7:00 curtain. Meanwhile I re-joined Mark in our room to change and freshen up a bit and review the music for a bit before heading to the stage door for our 7:45 call time. Mark's forgotten bow-tie was remedied by a spare in my bag - I always brought a couple extra accouterments just in case anything happened before a big concert. We were the 2nd half of the show, and of course didn't have tickets to go in for the first half (unlike last time in NY at the Lincoln Center when I was able to take Uncle Kish's ticket and see the 2nd half of the concert - we were the first half, so it worked.)

Fortunately, the snow had mostly stopped - we didn't want to be waiting outside in our tuxedos too long! The door didn't open until a bit after 7:45 as they were a bit behind schedule. The buildings around us were socked in clouds above about the 30th floor (quite a contrast to the previous day where you could see out forever). It was fun sharing our experiences - my trip to Russia and my previous trip to NY. I think most people in the line had similar musical experiences as well, creating a wonderful feeling of camaraderie.

The line started moving, and we were soon going inside. Our coats again had to be hung on the multiple racks by the stage door entrance before we headed up to our respective green rooms. The closed-circuit TV was playing the Meador - from the first group. The sound was pretty low and the video wasn't great, but I knew it was real, and we would soon be on the big stage. The Meador seemed to go on forever - they were getting more delayed. But maybe just my sense of time was being distorted with the immense

anticipation.

But soon again we were lining up in our ranks and files and heading down the many flights of stairs to the stage entrance. I couldn't believe we were finally doing it! Music in our upstage hand, we filed down the hallways toward the stage. On the last corner before coming into the bright lights, I noticed a bunch of carts hanging along one of the walls - their wheels protruding out in a geometric pattern very similar to the pattern of tie rods in the slurry wall visible from the 9/11 museum. A brief but intense flashback hit me just moments before entering the stage - I had to stay focused.

Vance George soon took the podium and once again, the familiar 440 Hz "A" started sounding as the orchestra started tuning - the strings, winds and brass. I peeked along the 2nd tier just left of center and lo and behold, the pink sweater of my mom was there! And my dad was there too next to her! Then I recognized her blue phone as it came up - I winked: "take a photo! Good. Another one - yes! And another, and another - gotta capture every moment!" I wasn't sure if it was going to be allowed, but after seeing a bunch of flashes go off from other people's cameras maybe they weren't going to really do anything. The house was mostly full - maybe around 2,500 of the 2,804 seats were full, waiting in solemn expectation of the downbeat.

The concert started very slow and deliberate with the first movement. The work started quietly with a barely noticeable progression, as when a tree of remembrance is just planted and starts to grow, its first tender shoots coming up out of the snow. I had to concentrate again to stay focused. I was afraid of bawling out in tears during a quiet section, but once we started singing the first movement the techniques we had learned in rehearsal were coming back. After what felt an eternity, however, I noticed we were only on page 6 (I remembered my score having 80 pages!) But I think after the Kyrie Eleison movement, the butterflies fluttered away and the rest of the concert seemed to fly by. Next I looked, we were on page 56!

But then the "Lacrimosa" movement hit me -

Lacrimosa dies illa,
qua resurget ex favilla
judicandus homo reus.
Huic ergo parce, Deus,
pie Jesu Domine,
dona eis requiem. Amen.

That day of tears and mourning,
when from the ashes shall arise,
all humanity to be judged.
Spare us by your mercy, Lord,
gentle Lord Jesus,
grant them eternal rest. Amen

I remember a scene of firefighters atop the ashes and wreckage of one of the World Trade center towers raising an American flag like the famous flag raising after the pivotal battle of Iwo Jima in WWII. I feel many of these brave firefighters deserved a Congressional Medal of Honor (posthumously) for their actions - I thought again of Hershel W. Williams from the airport.

The rhythmic basses in the Recordare reminded me of the rhythmic "heartbeat" in a museum in St. Petersburg, where a constant "heartbeat" would play on the radio to

encourage people to endure and survive during the brutal 900-day siege in WWII.

The final movement “Lux Aeterna” brought a closure of the intense joy and sorrow of the Requiem -

Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine,
cum sanctis tuis in aeternum,
quia pius es.
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine,
et Lux perpetua luceat eis,
cum Sanctis tuis in aeternum,
quia pius es.

Let eternal light shine on them, Lord,
as with Your saints in eternity,
because You are merciful.
Grant them eternal rest, Lord,
and let perpetual light shine on them,
as with Your saints in eternity,
because You are merciful.

I had sung the words so many times, but seeing the extremes of joy and sorrow in the text after visiting the memorial the previous day took on another whole meaning.

The soloists sounded wonderful. The bass in “Tuba Mirum” rang a deep tone as if the earth itself was singing. The soprano in “Lux aeterna” sounded like heaven singing. The final “Sum Sanctus” double fugue urgently sprang forth as the entrances accelerated in stretto fashion. The diminished 7th chord right before a pregnant pause on the very last line of the work set the entire orchestra and chorus for the finale “Quia pius es”. I felt a sonority so grand, as if the gates of heaven were ringing with the open 5th of the final D chord.



On stage at Carnegie Hall

I couldn't believe we were finished already - it went by like a blur. The house lights were coming on as the audience gave a roaring standing ovation. My parents were standing in

the back - I'm so glad they were able to come! We were filing off the stage and making our way back down to the wardrobe room to retrieve our jackets before heading out. Passing a row of coats and behind that another row of coats, I finally found my red ski coat. I thought of the kids in "The Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe" which I had just re-read recently, where the children passed through a magic wardrobe to enter the land of Narnia. Here we were coming back from our Narnia (Carnegie Hall), back through the coats and to real life again. It felt all as a dream. These memories would last a lifetime, and over the following couple weeks I would find connections to the experience, and new forms of expression I would only begin to discover - it was like unwrapping a large gift. In fact, I felt the entire experience of this trip formed seeds of ways to describe God's goodness that I would uncover layer by layer for many weeks.

I rushed around the building to find my parents - they had texted that they would be by the ticket counter. When I got close, I was just about to text them that I was on my way, when I heard my mom saying "Matt!" I was elated! We had done it! Except for a small do-over near the end when half of the orchestra thought we were in 2 and the other half thought we were in 4 (the 2-second redo was barely noticeable), and maybe a little over-singing in the choir, I thought it went flawlessly. I was happy and didn't have any regrets that we could have done better.



Meeting my parents

We cabbied it the couple blocks through the slushy snow (it was now raining) to our hotel. We enjoyed a glass of wine and stories about what my dad was planning to do after retiring barely a month ago. Since both my mom and dad were retired, they were planning some vacations and home improvement - they were thinking about remodeling another one of the bathrooms at home. I was already thinking about my next adventure - my 1-week trip to Haiti in March to visit our sponsored child. My folks were talking about visiting the 9/11 museum like I did the previous day, before catching the train back to Harrisburg.

They had moved our afterglow party to the Empire Steakhouse, which I saw was directly across the street from our hotel - nice! I said good-night to my folks and headed over. A buffet of filet mignon, salmon, calamari, and salad and drinks was enjoyed by all. We were with the "Vance George singers" group - the "miscellaneous" group, since Schola only had 4 members (the minimum was 10 for a "group"). It was nice to all be together again - me with Mark, Joan and Julia. Vance George made his rounds around some of the tables and we got to wish him congrats and toast to a wonderful concert.

It was probably 1:00 in the morning when I stumbled back across the street to the hotel. It was at least 50 degrees now with light rain - warmer than it was during the concert - strange weather. I promptly hit the sack, breathing a sigh of relief we were all done!

February 16

Even though it was a late night, we didn't have too much trouble getting up to do our final bit of packing for the airport. A cab soon pulled up and we were on our way to JFK. Most of the drive was reverse-commute, and we were pulling up to the Departures curb in good time. I watched the planes take off into the grey rainy sky, far from any buildings.

It was mostly cloudy over the eastern half of the country where a warm air mass encroached unusually north. It was clear west of the Rockies, opening spectacular views. Disney's "Inside Out" was playing on the plane. Even though I had seen it before, it struck me in a new way, seeing the journey of joy and sadness exploring their way around Riley's brain when they get blown out of her emotional headquarters, manifest in Riley's suffering through emotional numbness and depression. Both the sadness emotion and joy emotion worked as partners of healing, and when they eventually find their way back, a new type of memories get formed as an amalgam of joy and sorrow. The Requiem performance in Carnegie Hall and the remembrance of 9/11 formed an amalgam of joy and sorrow - with hope for healing and a better future.

We flew right over Half Dome in the Sierras before swinging to the north to land at SFO. I had just finished reviewing our Beethoven Mass in C score - we were singing that along with Haydn's Lord Nelson Mass for our next Schola concert next month and we had missed rehearsal last night. It was colder in CA when we landed than it was in NY when we took off. I was glad to be home! Mark's wife picked us up shortly afterward, where I retrieved my car at their place (still in 1 piece!) - thanks for the ride! I hardly got much rest, since as soon as I got home, my laptop was waiting for me to log into work (today was a work-day) and deal with an Adobe integration issue at work. Back to the routine. But the trip would be something I would never forget.