

## Spain / Portugal

*Jun 9-17, 2023*



Since we moved back from Virginia in the fall of 2021, I had not sung as part of a classical choir since I left Schola Cantorum in spring of 2019. It wasn't until around November of 2022 when Nisha re-discovered Peninsula Cantare, a group that I had sung with many years ago that I got back into choral singing. I had missed classical choral singing more than I realized. Schola had remained fairly heavy-handed with rules related to covid, even after most of society had moved on from various mandates concerning masks and vaccines, and I feared singing with "pandemic-mode" restrictions would bring more fear than relief. Cantare, on the other hand, didn't have such mandates, and I would have the chance to enjoy some of the pre-covid normalcy once again.

Although I had missed the first concert of the season, the rest of the program for Peninsula Cantare looked promising for the year, including poetry set to music in "Fern Hill" which I had sung many years ago. The spring concert was going to feature the wonderful Mozart's Coronation Mass, which I had done in a Schola summer sing a while back. And as icing on the cake, the chorus was planning on taking some of their repertoire including the Coronation Mass on a tour to Spain / Portugal in the summer! I had many fond memories from previous choir tours, and I looked forward to finally getting that chance once again.

I decided to audit a rehearsal shortly afterward, and audition with the director Jeff Benson to see if I would be a good fit. It was indeed a wonderful evening with the director enjoying

my voice and me enjoying the rehearsal. It was a younger group with a vitality in the sound that I hadn't been part of for many years. I was looking forward to January to actually singing together.

A couple short weeks later, I got an email from Rob J that they were looking for "backup" singers to perform with Andrea Bocelli in the Chase Center in SF! I didn't take it all that seriously at first - who was I to participate in such a grand performance? I clicked on the link in the email and they said they were full anyway - oh well. I didn't have many expectations. My hopes and expectations had been numbed repeatedly since 2020, and I didn't have much motivation.

But Nisha was insistent on me pursuing this opportunity - I should email Rob and Jeff Benson to see if they could fit me in somehow. Indeed that paid off - I got an email back with a fat .pdf attachment with all the music and schedule of the dress rehearsal! I wasn't even an official member of the choir yet, but they must have really believed in me - I couldn't let them down!

The day felt like a dream - in many ways, too good to be true. The first half of the concert was in Bocelli's wheelhouse including classic Italian opera songs and choruses from "La Traviata", "Il Trovatore" and "Nessun dorma" from "Turandot". Bocelli also performed part of the "Bocelli Family Christmas" with his amazing daughter Virginia Bocelli, who herself may become an opera star someday!



It would be one of those experiences I would remember for a lifetime (I could milk it for years in the game of "Two truths and a lie"). I had been privileged to sing on the big stage in Carnegie Hall with DCINY last time in 2018, and I felt after the world stopped turning

during covid for several years, this was a sign that maybe there could be good times yet again in the future to look forward to. The world wasn't all bleak and hopeless. I had to trust in God's timing that He would open doors at the right time.

Coming off such a high with that experience made me wrestle with an old nemesis in my mind once again - karma debt. This isn't about re-incarnation about being born a cockroach or a rat in a future lifetime, but a more immediate form of payment. It's happened too many times in the past where after enjoying something immensely (too much?), we find something wrong soon afterward. We got back to the car after attending a company holiday party some years ago to find a parking ticket under the windshield wiper. I got back from a wonderful trip to San Diego with my company and found a couple days later that I had caught covid during the trip. These seemed to be debts that had to be paid for "having too much of a good time" - as if I should learn to temper my excitement.

I've grappled with karma debt for many years now, and every time something happens, it gets reinforced with confirmation bias. I know I should be grateful for every good thing I am given. I hate to think of life as a zero-sum game. That in order for something positive to come out, there has to be something negative to "balance it out", like a yin / yang. I just have to be reminded of God's goodness and faithfulness - Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice of dying on the cross to pay the debts that I should not need to deal with.

They still had a few spots left to sign up for the tour to Spain / Portugal, and I managed to secure my spot. I remained cautiously optimistic. Nisha and I got to attend the Christmas concert in December (even sitting right near the front row!), which gave me a boost of optimism and expectation for the year to come.

### The Tour

After many months of waiting, the big day was about to come. I would be getting on a plane and flying to Spain. It had been many years now since I've made a trip out of the country. My last trip was to Japan in 2017. Since then, every flying trip (except a short company trip to San Diego) felt as if it were for "business" - flying back and forth to the east coast for family and to take care of our house in Virginia.

I had booked my flight a day early, to give time to get over jet-lag, explore around a little on my own, and to give some buffer in case anything got delayed. With so many flight hassles over the recent years as society rebounded from covid, international flying seemed it might be as unpredictable as ever. I was cautiously optimistic about what would transpire. I'm sure there would be factors outside my control, but often that was par for the course.

My eagerness for the trip was soon muted however - in fact, the very morning of my big flight to Europe, I was awoken by a text on my phone. It was from the airline that my flight had just been delayed by 2 hours! My connection in Paris was 3 1/2 hrs, so what would have been a leisurely stopover could become be a nail-biting dash across the massive

Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris.

While waiting in the SFO airport, I still held out remnants of hope that somehow they could crank the engines on the plane a bit higher to make up some lost time in the air. We started queueing to board, and the passengers next to me had a puppy in a carrier - the adorable face reminded me there is happiness beyond what I could see at the moment. My mind had been fixated so long on making the connection, and if things didn't work out, it would indicate the forces above had somehow betrayed me. But the puppy and its owner were just enjoying the moment. I've struggled for years to just "live the moment". A liminal space like an airport was a place of transition from one place to another, and my mind was in the process of locomotion - always thinking about what was coming next, rarely what was in the here and now. I was always waiting for the next thing.

They announced we would be yet another 30 minutes late since the fully-loaded 777 had a number of passengers needing extra time. And of course, there was not enough room in the carry-on baggage space. I was glad to make a last-minute decision to take a backpack as a carry-on instead of my rolling carryon, since most likely my rolling carryon would have had to be gate-checked, and I would pick it up in Seville when my flight was completed.

I was near the middle of the row of our flying cattle-car, far from any window where I could peer outside what was happening around. I knew air traffic control was a complicated process, especially after hearing many gory details after covid restrictions started easing and hordes of passengers were fulfilling their years of pent-up demand. I had recently won a tour of the SFO airport control tower, which I was planning on taking right after returning from Europe. I'm sure there would be details I wouldn't care to know. I have been fascinated by aviation since I was little - my dad would tell me stories from his Naval flying days when I was growing up.

Maybe knowing too much isn't always a good thing - the knowledge would be overwhelming, and with an increasingly pessimistic world-view being enhanced in the last few years, my anxiety would be triggered. Social media and information online boomed while we spent multiple years at home, with multiple echo-chambers of negativity and cynicism developed through the process of confirmation bias. There is a quote by Anais Nin - "Life Shrinks or Expands in Proportion to One's Courage". My courage had taken a beating over the last few years and so had my life. It took a lot of energy, but now I was ready to try for a new start.

I could finally feel the acceleration once we hit the runway, and we were airborne. Several POV cameras had been provided on the plane, showing us the pilot's view as we zoomed down runway 28R on our takeoff roll. The camera switched to a downward-facing one, giving us views of San Francisco, across to Canada, to a dusky sunset above the clouds. A plate of chicken marsala and rice arrived with a glass of champagne to fulfill my appetite. Soon afterward I was enjoying a small bottle of chardonnay with

dessert. I got to have a small island of “living in the moment” after all - the food and drink were much appreciated!



I slept in fits and starts, still with the uncertainty that my connection would be OK. I was down to 75 minutes, so I started rehearsing my battle plan to be executed as soon as we landed. I awoke with a crook in my shoulder and realized I actually got a few hours of sleep after all - good. The camera showed a blinding bright terrain below. The clouds had parted, and we were flying over the immense glaciers and nunataks - knife-like mountain ranges - of central Greenland. I was fascinated and glued to the screen as I imagined what Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite may have looked like during the last ice age. Cathedral Peak, Tenaya Peak and Mt Conness would have been granite blades sticking up through a vast sea of ice. The scene was from an ancient world, pure and free from human influence that had corrupted the world. I felt at least for a brief moment, my cynicism of the world was covered in dazzling ice of unfathomable thickness.

I had remembered the story of the Glacier Girl - a P-38 Lightning that crash-landed in WWII on the ice in eastern Greenland. We probably flew right over the site. I am amazed that the plane got a second lease on life after being buried hundreds of feet in the ice for decades. I wonder if any of the other planes might ever be recovered in the future waiting to be discovered. Joy that had been held dormant for decades was allowed to be expressed again.

I must have napped again for a while since I awoke again to my ears popping. We were descending. Switching to the POV “flight-simulator” mode, I saw the altimeter read 28,000 feet, descending at about 1,000 feet per minute. Our heading had gone from NE to E to SE as we traversed a great circle of around 7,000 miles. The ETA had held steady for nearly the entire flight, so I knew time was still of the essence.

To my relief we finally touched down in Paris and began our long taxi to the gate. I knew we had to get from terminal 2E to 2G, which I thought was just 2 corridors over (within the same terminal 2, right) - it couldn't be too bad, right? On the ground, we rolled to a stop and the seatbelt sign went off - great, we were at the gate, right? Hmm I craned my neck to peer out the distant windows, but no airport terminal building was in sight. Hmm - was our gate not ready?

Apparently no gate was available for us, since they had deployed some temporary stairs for us to exit directly on the tarmac. A bus pulled up, taking the first group of passengers. A few minutes another showed up, and finally another one. I think I made it on the 3rd bus. The bus ride along the tarmac felt like an eternity before we made it into the airport terminal itself. My 75 minutes was down to 45 minutes now to run across 2 corridors to terminal 2G to my gate.

I was dismayed however to enter an enormous room full of crowds of people. We had to go through immigration here - I thought I would deal with that in Seville. This was our first point of entry to the "Schengen" zone. I had only learned that word recently, having confused it with "Shenzhen" - nope, that is on another continent far away. My hope gradually faded as the line inched forward as we made our way to the immigration stations. I felt trapped in an immense liminal space - a place of waiting, a place of transition. I've heard how God can work in liminal spaces, when the mind is pliable in a different way in extraordinary circumstances. I had struggled immensely with a lack of feeling grounded after we moved to VA and having to deal with the isolation during covid and family tensions after my mom's passing. At least here, I knew if I missed the flight, there would be another one - the struggle would nowhere near my previous struggles.

We were about 3/4 of the way through when the line stopped altogether, and a row of machines with green circles switched to showing red X's. Hmm - that couldn't be good. Apparently the immigration checking database had just crashed and some technicians were trying to get the machines reset. Meanwhile we had to get our passports stamped by hand. I gave the officer a smile as I received my stamp of approval to enter the Schengen zone once again - my first trip since Germany in 2014.

I peered at my watch - it was 3:40 pm, the time of my flight departure. Maybe they could hold my flight... or maybe not. The sea of people snaked its way to baggage claim. Hmm - I didn't expect to have to claim and re-check my bag. Customs wasn't supposed to be until I landed in Seville, right? In my delirium, I started questioning the process, since I hadn't thought about the immigration entry point earlier. Of course, now time didn't matter as much since the next flight might not be for many hours.

I watched the bags for a few rounds - they had all been off-loaded, and of course mine wasn't there. It was checked through, as promised. Following the arrows to terminal 2G took me to a bus station. Hmm - 2G was a bus ride away! It was a 10-minute wait for the next bus and a 15 minute ride, so in 25 minutes I was walking into the terminal. It was

pretty quiet. The signboards indicated the Seville flight had indeed departed on time, and there were no more flights for the day. Bummer.

The lady at the checkout counter saw right away that I had missed my connection, and God's grace chimed in at the most needed moment. In less than 10 minutes, she had me checked in and confirmed on tomorrow's flight, including a free lunch at the airport cafe, hotel reservation (with dinner / breakfast the next morning included)! My emotions got the better of me when I finally sat and enjoyed my smoked salmon wrap and chocolate croissant for dessert at the airport. I had most of a day of down-time to catch up, relax and get back on my feet. I would actually have time to take the train into downtown Paris and check out the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe, but actually just relaxing in a soft bed for many hours would be like heaven!

It turned out I would be on the same flight as several of our chorus members after all! I was originally disappointed I was the only one to be on my flight (they had a spreadsheet of who was taking which flights, and most people were flying the next day). I double-checked the spreadsheet and saw Patrick, Pia, Geoff and his wife would be on that flight - I was actually pretty excited to be traveling together.

My \$10/day international calling plan with AT&T kicked in, and I was able to keep Nisha abreast of all the changes in plans. And I could reach Maggie, one of our travel coordinators to let her know as well. I might even be able to get my money back for the pre-night hotel in Seville which I wouldn't be able to make. Nisha and I talked for hours, while watching the French Open - Djokovic was playing in the highly anticipated French Open final, and we were able to share in the final nail-biting moments on the final set which Djokovic won 7-5.

Dinner was a basic chicken breast with rice and veggies. It was free so it tasted even better! The couple at the table next to me was from Tennessee and we swapped stories from our trip to Gatlinburg, Nashville and the Smoky Mountains. They were on a tour with their church. It was nice to have familiar faces along the journey. I enjoyed some wine with the all-you-can-eat dessert buffet - another bit of grace where I sensed God's faithfulness in a liminal space of transition and uncertainty.

Manchester City was playing Inter in the UEFA Champions league. I followed most of the first half before nodding off to sleep. I managed to stay up until nearly dark in my attempt to get over the jet-lag. I had just started to doze again when I thought I heard the room phone ringing - hmmm, who would be calling? I managed to pick it up on the last ring only to hear a click. Hmmm - must have been a mistake. I heard a knock on the door a few minutes later however. Hmmm - were they giving me my check-out receipt early? I got the door, and a lady with a credit card machine showed up. Apparently I had forgotten to pay for my wine during dinner. Whoops! The dinner was free, but of course it was only fair that the drinks wouldn't be - I must have been more tired than I thought. I tapped my credit card and she said thanks, and the rest of the night was a blur until dawn the next



morning - I must have finally slept properly.

The European breakfast of rolled cheeses and meats and pastries was a welcome start of the new day. I had a renewed vigor to get back to the terminal and meet some of the others to start our much anticipated tour properly. I had briefly thought about taking the train into Paris the night before, but simply sleeping, watching TV, and reviewing the music was plenty enough. If I had the day on my own in Seville, I might have been just happy sleeping, watching TV and reviewing my music there anyway. So maybe in the end, it didn't matter a whole lot that I had missed the connection. I was just glad to have remembered to pack a change of clothes in my carry-on bag!

I was in the middle of eating lunch at the airport lounge when I get a tap on my shoulder. It was Geoff H from our choir group! Cool - we were already getting together. His wife was just getting a seat. Then just around the corner, there was Patrick and Pia. Great - I was thrilled, and I felt like things were finally happening for real!

We were soon on the plane and pushing back from the gate on time - yay! The engines were just starting to fire up for our last leg of the journey, when a moment later, I hear the engines powering back down. Hmm - that couldn't be good. I looked out the windows and saw dark clouds starting to build - they had been predicting afternoon thundershowers, and I thought we'd be off the ground in time. But now, I was not so sure. There was some announcement in French that sounded important. Then it was repeated in Spanish, and I picked out some words for "mechanic" and "door" and "short". The announcement came in English and indeed it was an issue with a latch on one of the cargo doors. Luckily it was indeed a short delay and 15 minutes later, we were taxiing out to the runway for "take 2".

Once we were in the air, the threatening clouds of the humid air around Paris diminished as we flew southward toward the semi-arid regions in southern Spain. I knew we were just across the Strait of Gibraltar from Northern Africa and the Sahara Desert, and I had checked the weather forecast on my phone multiple times. Indeed, it was glorious sunshine and beautiful temperatures in Spain - a high of around 30-32 C for the next couple days. Southern Europe had been getting more frequent heatwaves in recent years so I was thankful for the weather we would be getting. (In fact, just a couple weeks later, it would break 40 C for several days, kicking up numerous heat advisories. And much of Europe is without A/C, unlike the US, so it would be tough).

Bienvenidos a Sevilla! I was so excited to finally be in Spain! I was hoping for all the best with my luggage, having not seen it for over 36 hours. Waiting at baggage claim, the expected bags for the 5 of us from our group were turning up empty. Hmm - did none of our bags make it? Patrick, however, had the foresight to put an AirTag in his luggage, and indeed his bag was at a different baggage claim spinning around the belt. Of course - we had to go through customs, so we would have to pick up our bags from the "Non-Schengen" incoming flights. One by one, our bags were coming. Except mine. Hmm



- they had promised it would turn up. Hmmm - maybe I should have gotten an AirTag myself - I had considered it briefly before this trip. I asked somebody at one of the baggage counters if they could scan my claim tag, but their computer wasn't compatible with the bar code. Hmmm - I feared the worst. I went back to claim 7 where we had picked up the other bags, and voilà, there was my bag - yay! It must have been like a LIFO stack - since my bag was probably the first on, it was the last one off.

Our guide Iris showed up with the bus taking us to our hotel - yay! I wouldn't need to figure out a taxi after all. And as icing on the cake, on the bus ride to the hotel, she asked if any of us were interested in a flamenco dance show in the evening after dinner! Sure - why not! Less than 24 hours ago, I felt so lost and forlorn with regrets - maybe I should have never gone on this trip. But now I was in my element. After a slow start, I was moving full steam ahead!

Checking into the hotel was like heaven - being able to change into real clothes, shave, and settle in. Dinner was at a tapas bar near a flamenco theatre in downtown. The Iberian pork, breads and tinto verano (rose wine) hit the spot. Our first real taste of Spain - no pun intended. It was a journey, and all's well that ends well!

The flamenco theatre was right next door to the Plaza de Toros - one of the famous bull-fighting rings. There had been a bullfight just a couple days ago, and they were having fights about once a week for the summer. I was intrigued to see such a spectacle in person, knowing how deeply entwined bullfighting is in Spanish culture. I have always appreciated the opportunity to witness cultures different from our own in America and observe what has stood the test of time through the centuries.

I was torn though - having attended a seminar in San Jose by Will Tuttle. A free-spirited vegan, he has lived a counter-cultural existence for decades. He has been very healthy and hasn't visited a doctor for many years. He owed his health to a vegan lifestyle. We had a wonderful vegan dinner at the Vegetarian House where he presented his book "The World Peace Diet". Having just enjoyed the Iberian pork and being introduced to a dominant culture, I remembered one of Will Tuttle's points - many European nations have developed a herding culture involving the domination of large animals such as cows and horses. The Spanish conquistadores brought horses with their armies to South America and conquered many people groups including the magnificent Inca civilization. This dominating culture would be played out in spades at the bull ring - bullfights were planned almost every week.



The flamenco show was fantastic - the small theatre at El Patio Sevillano was intimate and there was not a bad seat in the house! I finally felt I had transitioned from “getting here” to “being here”. Sangrias and guitars and castanets and dancing made for a wonderful piece of culture. One of the dancers was so enthusiastic that midway through one of the songs I heard a clattering sound - one of her earrings flew off and skittered across the stage! Being on a tour to present our music from the Bay Area, I was excited to see how the Spanish culture is a musical culture - flamenco had been around for centuries and the upbeat guitars and dancing were in the lifeblood of the people. I looked forward to presenting our own music over the next several days.

### Day 1

The next morning started with a tour of the fantastic Plaza de España. I knew it was only a few kilometers from the hotel, and initially I was bummed to not have been able to arrive a day early to check it out myself. (There was a bike rental rack right next to the hotel where I would have loved to take a bike for a couple hours to explore). But as luck would have it, we ended up going right to the place on the bus!

There wasn't a lot of detail on the itinerary, and I didn't google too many places before my trip. I didn't want to count the chickens before they hatch. After the repeated cancellations in March 2020, it felt overwhelming to anticipate the future that felt so uncertain anymore. It may be a form of mild PTSD and fear of disappointment after several years of mind-numbing bad news. But I was thrilled to enter such a magical place after so many years.

Like the famous Alhambra in Spain, the plaza had a mix of Renaissance architecture with Islamic architecture from centuries of Moorish invasion. Built for the 1929 Ibero-American Exposition World's Fair, it was a best of all worlds - the graceful minarets, arches, bridges and columns flowed together in a feast for the eyes. Intricate tile

depictions of many cities in Spain were laid out in alcoves along the semicircular plaza. A lone violin's melodies in one of the hallways penetrated the atmosphere from a prior century. As icing on the cake we found that this plaza was so "exotic" that it was featured in the Star Wars Episode II movie "Attack of the Clones" where Anakin and Padmé arrive on the planet Naboo!



Gardens with walkways and fountains graced the paths around the royal Alcázar castle - the royal palace. A towering double-pillared monument to Christopher Columbus stood prominently in one of the squares in the Paseo de Catalina de Ribera. Many Spanish explorers originated from around Seville, and they would not be forgotten. History is written by the victors. Things had been different in San Francisco, CA, where recently a prominent statue of Columbus was vandalized and later removed in June 2020 shortly after the George Floyd protests. This part of history will never be remembered the same in America. As a kid I thought of America as the best country in the world - now I am no longer so sure.

Walking down the narrow cobblestone streets adjacent to the Alcázar castle with Paco our guide, we were greeted by a guitar in one of the public squares. One of our guides apparently knew him, and he started leading us down the street, singing the Macarena! We were dancing unashamedly as we made our way forward to our next destination - the fantastic Seville Cathedral.

The cathedral had been one of my most anticipated stops on our tour. Starting as a mosque dedicated in the year 1182, it was converted to a Christian cathedral during the Reconquista of Seville in 1248. The Gothic architecture is textbook, including enormous flying buttresses, spires, gargoyles, rose windows and altars. The Giralda bell tower was actually originally a minaret of the mosque dating back to the Islamic days. The magnificent golden Retablo Mayor sculpted by Pierre Dancart over 44 years told the story

of Jesus from his birth to his death and resurrection. The tomb of Christopher Columbus stood in an alcove, supported by 4 grand figures. Columbus isn't quite viewed the same way in America these days. The 104 m tall tower can be climbed. I peered overhead and saw faces with phones pointed downward taking photos from the dizzying heights.

I couldn't believe this was real as we were entering the grand doors. A line from Handel's Messiah "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in." I was awed at the ancient entrance of the cathedral. I knew the cathedral was one of the largest in Europe, and it is a well-deserved UNESCO World Heritage Site. Trailing only St Peter's Basilica and the Milan Cathedral, it is the 3rd largest in Europe and 4th in the world. (There is a huge 20th Century cathedral in Brazil, but is very different - does it count?)

Gazing at the soaring arches and magnificent architecture was humbling. A knot formed in my stomach as I thought about so many wrongs of the past, impure thoughts and broken relationships that had come about in recent years. The thought of karma debt came back to mind. Was I going to have to "pay" for this experience in the future, in the form of a strange mis-hap coming my way?

Maybe there was karma debt "in reverse" - Had I already paid the debt through the hassles of the travels over the last couple days - the missed flight, being stuck overnight, and the broken passport check machines? I had been going through an extended period of spiritual dryness over the last few years. The isolation through moving away to VA, family distancing, and covid social upheaval had withered much of my spiritual connection. I knew I was forgiven and my debts had been paid by Jesus on the cross, but that knowledge had felt abstract and academic. I would go through an intense period of spiritual searching after this trip. After the trip, I would have dreams about going into a bathroom and trying to figure out how to use the shower - the controls would sometimes elude me. I was searching for cleansing but would end up frustrated.



Climbing the 36 ramps spiraling around the bell tower gave a panoramic view of Seville - the city was laid out before my feet. A euphoria swept through me as I felt we were finally enjoying something I had longed for deeply. The architecture was spread about my feet - the gorgeous Alcázar castle was just below, the twin spires of the Plaza de España were just behind, and the river was visible in the distance. Crowds were forming as the bells were getting ready to chime 12:00 noon. Having been playing handbells in our church for a year and a half, I imagined the angels above playing heavenly music with the bells.

We could have spent all afternoon, but alas time was ticking, and we had just 45 minutes left for lunch. A paella restaurant was just down the street, but the seafood and rice would have to bake for 30 minutes to be ready. Bummer, but a pan-seared salmon dish was ready in 10 minutes - nice! I loved the al-fresco style dining in Spain, and it seems to have gotten more popular in America since covid - I hope it would be here to stay!

After lunch, we were finally off to our first official rehearsal! There were 4 groups total - the Los Altos High School choir, the Monta Vista High School choir, the San Jose State Choraliers, and us. As we filed into the rehearsal room, I felt a deep sense of camaraderie and fulfillment of purpose. We were all common-minded, bringing our music to another culture. There was a sense of arrival and belonging at last. After traversing many liminal spaces over the last several years, this feeling of purpose was more profound than I expected.

We opened the rehearsal with some of our usual warmups, then soon afterward we had a wall of sound. We had all worked for months preparing for this moment! The South African sounds of “Kwangena Thina Bo” resonated throughout the room. “We Shall Walk through the Valley in Peace” brought a serenity and release from all the uncertainty from the past few weeks. The music was cleansing to my soul. “Mangisondele” brought tears to my eyes - it is a worship song from the Zulu culture and is written in the



isicathamiya style - a cappella singing with close harmonies that originated among mine workers during the apartheid years. Often it is in the crucible of difficult circumstances that much beauty can be created.

The concert was in the magnificent Cerezo Theatre. The 90-year old theatre, designed by Julián Otamendi is eclectic in style, with French modernist influence and inspired by Viennese theaters, as shown by its spectacular facade and interior decoration of ceilings, cornices, box seats, and the main stage. I had performed with a choir in Vienna back in college and felt a sense of deja-vu.



The evening was a festival of choirs - all 4 of us had a turn on stage, performing various numbers. I enjoyed listening to the others as they performed. Lauren Diaz and Amy Young directed the high school choirs with an amazing sound. The first choir did “Hold On” by Jester Hairston - I remember doing that piece in Schola many years ago. The other choir did Bogoroditse Devo - also a favorite. Our music was a combination of music from our March and May concerts that we had performed locally in Palo Alto -

*We Shall Walk through the Valley in Peace, arr. Undine Moore*

*Shenandoah, arr. James Erb*

*Mangisondele, arr. Michael Barrett*

*More Waters Rising, arr. Saunder Choi*

*Never One Thing, arr. Corie Brown*

*Hark I Hear, arr. Alice Parker*

*Yemaya, arr. Diana Saez*

*Kwangena Thina Bo, arr. Lhente-Mari Pitout*

For the final 2 numbers all of us combined together on the stage - somehow all 150 or so of us managed to squeeze together (forget “social-distancing”!). Being part of such a grand,

organic vocal ensemble would bring memories to be cherished for many years. The Kwangena piece has some simple choreography, and all of us performing the movements as a unit gave an even greater sense of being parts of something greater than ourselves.

The audience gave us a rousing standing ovation - I was reminded of my tour with VIH to Russia back in 2009. Being able to participate in a cultural exchange of music was a real privilege.

### *Day 2*

The next morning, we were off to Portugal! I wish we had an extra day or 2 in Seville - we were just getting to know our way around Spain (and I was more familiar with the language too!). But we had to start our 6-hour drive fairly early to make it to Lisbon at a reasonable time. We were caravanning in 3 buses all traveling together. After the late night concert the night before, it was nice to just recline the seat back in the bus and watch the scenery go by.

Orchards of olive trees, orange trees, umbrella pines, and cork trees with their bark at various stages of harvesting, sunflower fields, and numerous stork nests on poles in the fields greeted us along the journey. Orange marmalade is made from the many orange trees - since the oranges are more tart in this ecosystem, they go well in marmalade. We finally crossed the cabled Guadiana International Bridge into Portugal over the Guadiana River.

We soon came to Faro, one of the towns along the southern coast of Portugal. The capital of the Algarve, it has some of the most beautiful architecture in Portugal, as well as one of the oldest cathedrals. Our bus had planned a rest stop before Faro, but decided to press on to have more time in Faro itself - the decision turned out to be well worth it!

We only had a couple hours in Faro, but it would be a highlight. Entering the walled city, we knew we were in the right place when we saw "musical" graffiti in the form of a bunch of treble clefs spray-painted on various buildings! Touring the magnificent cathedral, I was reminded again of the ancient, holy glory of God and the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit, made possible through knowing Jesus.

Numerous side chapels festooned with brilliant blue tile walls and 18-karat golden altars were dedicated to the saints and apostles. Furthermore, as much as the beauty awed us in the cathedral, the sound of our voices was like heaven. A few of us were in a small side chapel when Patrick decided to sing a short solo - the medieval sound of the music reverberated through the halls like it was amplified by angels above. I answered back with the short antiphon of "Gloria in excelsis Deo" - again I was humbled by the beauty and glory all around me.





The other buses had arrived about an hour later, and now all of us, around 150 of us were in the main sanctuary of the cathedral. Jeff Benson decided to try a couple numbers a-cappella to see how things might sound. It didn't take long for the entire hall to resonate with "Hark I Hear the Harps Eternal" and "Mangisondele". We had those pieces mostly memorized by this point, so the sound just came naturally. I barely made it to the end before my voice started to break down in tears - I couldn't believe the marvelous gift of the music we had been given.

We strolled the streets, exploring the numerous small shops along the way. Hats, handbags, T-shirts, and sardines (yes there is a shop with thousands of cans of sardines!) dotted the narrow streets. We were running a bit late, taking in all the sights around us - I felt some ADHD kicking in while exploring. A few of us went into a cafe to grab a quick bite before our call time back to the bus. No time for paella again - oh well.

We were on our way once again on the bus, cruising along the countryside. Crossing the Ponte 25 de Abril bridge into Lisbon, we knew we were almost to our destination. The bridge reminded me much of the Golden Gate Bridge - the main span between the two towers painted in international orange bore a strong resemblance. For the next several days, we would be getting ready for our big finale concert we had been preparing months for. I couldn't be more excited!

Dinner was at the wonderful Solar Dos Bicos restaurant right by the waterfront. The seafood, rose wine and warm bread with olives was a delight for the senses. Again, the al-fresco dining was wonderful as we watched the tourists strolling by as the sun was setting.

A couple enormous cruise ships had pulled into port, and we took turns trying to guess how many people and staterooms were on each ship. My guess was around 2000 passengers which I thought might be an exaggeration, but a quick Google search on the Anthem of the Seas turned up a far larger number - 4180! My "exaggeration" was far short of the actual number - it was an under-xaggeration! It appeared covid was a thing of the distant past - we had wondered for a long time if anybody would have felt like doing a

cruise again, but now we could feel we could enjoy life once again to the fullest.

### Day 3

We had our first rehearsal the next morning at the Holiday Inn Continental. The room was filling up quickly - there were 5 choirs all coming together for the grand performance in a few days. The SJSU Choraliers and both high school groups were with us, as well as another group that had flown in from Tallahassee FL! Directed by Michael Hanawalt, the Tallahassee Community Chorus was joining us.



It was all coming together. There had been so much anticipation for all of us to come together. I was reminded of previous trips with DCINY where people would come from all across America (and the world) to make music together. I was almost in tears even getting through the warm-ups. The resonance of the sound from the entire community was mesmerizing. Although we had performed Zadok the Priest and the Coronation Mass just a few weeks ago, it felt like being on another level entirely, as if the local performance was just a dress rehearsal!

Lunch was at an underground mall at the Campo Pequeno bullfighting ring! Apparently, bullfighting was a big thing in Lisbon as well. After lunch, a few of us perused the nearby shops where we got to peek at the latest trendy fashion, browse a bookstore (which included "Spare" about Prince Harry, translated into Portuguese), and even a beginner "be a Tik-Toker" kit with instructions on how to become the next social media sensation. The movie theatre featured full-size Power Rangers, Stormtroopers, and Mickey Mouse characters. Sometimes I felt right close to home, though I had to do a double take when I saw everything was in Portuguese.

In the afternoon we got to tour the magnificent Mosteiro dos Jerónimos, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, opened in 1495. On the way we passed under the Aqueduto das Águas

Livres - built in the early 1700's. The Roman-style construction was several hundred feet high and has survived several large earthquakes. Though our trip was focused around bringing our music to Lisbon, I was glad to get to “play tourist” and see some of the magnificent sights.

Arriving at the half-millennium old monastery, we parked next to the dozen or so buses already queued up in the parking lot. It was like the old days as we made our way to the back of the line to enter. The line moved slowly and seemed to take an eternity in the sweltering heat outside, but the wait would prove to be well worth it. Touring the monastery transported us to hallways of arches, vaulted ceilings, gilded altars, marble columns and fresco paintings. Having not traveled for so many years, I had felt like my world had shrunk. This trip was one of my first forays far outside my comfort zone, and seeing how God was worshipped in such grand architecture reopened my spiritual eyes of His heavenly grandeur.



Just a little ways from the monastery was the fantastic Tower of Belém, built in 1519. The castle, located on the shore of the broad Tagus River was a monument to the former days of medieval warfare. Numerous cannons along the waterfront a little further down the beach was also a testament to the strategic location of Lisbon. The view reminded me much of San Francisco. The 25th de Abril bridge spanning the Tagus River resembled the famous Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco with its twin towers and enormous span, painted in International Orange. The cross-hatches of the towers match those of the Bay Bridge. Again, I had to do a double-take when seeing the Christ the King monument on the far side of the bridge - it resembled the famous Christ the Redeemer at Corcovado in Rio de Janeiro.

A double-scoop of chocolate and mango gelato hit the spot while we made our way back to the buses back to our hotel. It had been a full day, but the fun wasn't over just yet! On



the ride back, we managed to get a reservation for a nearby restaurant with fado dancing and music. A Portuguese tradition, fado had been around for at least 200 years, with its history in Lisbon. I was thrilled to experience a local music genre, in the same way we got to visit a Flamenco dance show in Seville.



The rhythmic guitars, mournful tunes and lyrics provided the perfect way to celebrate some of the musical culture of Lisbon. I felt our tour was a musical exchange program where we could learn about each other's music - the exchange went both ways. The music left a wonderful impression on me and I even was able to get a signed CD at the end of the dinner and dessert. In fact, just about a decade ago, fado was added to the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In an era where many elements of culture are being lost due to hostilities, partly due to the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Russians in Ukraine, I am honored that there is an internationally recognized heritage list of culture to preserve the cultural treasures that have been around for hundreds of years. These treasures can be lost in a single generation if effort isn't made to keep them alive.

#### Day 4

The next day, we had some time to just enjoy a "vacation day" on the beach. I had time to send a postcard to me and Nisha back home in CA (which would arrive several weeks after I returned!). I got to stroll the streets near the hotel and wander into some local shops. I was hoping to have some personal time in Seville to wander around, but this bit of strolling was refreshing. So much can be explored by walking - I still think about Paul Salopek's walking journey around the globe, which I have been following for nearly a decade. Peeking into a curtain shop, I pursued several bolts of intricate Victorian patterned fabric that was sold by the meter. Maybe sometime back in America there will be a renaissance of beautiful designed drapes, carpet and upholstery after our current minimalist era had run its course. I'm tired of the "house-flipping" shades of bland grey and off-white commonly used in today's new construction.

I would experience a reverse culture shock coming back to America after the trip, and I felt I need to put in my own effort to appreciate what we still have near home. It is a privilege that Nisha also appreciates history and art and music, and we make an effort to participate. In fact, Nisha had learned recently about the Carmel Bach Festival, and we had just bought tickets for an organ concert at the Carmel Mission basilica, as well as another nearby concert. I'm glad to have something to look forward to once I was home!

We headed westward on the bus along the southern coast of Portugal. About an hour west of Lisbon is the beautiful Cascais beachside resort community. Sidewalks with wave-like patterns, palm trees, crystal beaches with limestone grottos, and a 500-year old citadel grace the town. So much anticipation and adrenaline had gone into this trip so far, my mind needed a break. The emotional roller coaster would take many weeks to process all the thoughts and memories!



Wading in the warm clear water, I wished we had an extra day, but I cherished every minute of it. Music was playing on various squares, and gelato ice cream shops dotted many of the street corners. We broke out into impromptu song with “We Shall Walk through the Valley in Peace” along the beach front. A late lunch of bacalao and roasted mushrooms in olive oil capped off a wonderful half day before heading back to Lisbon.

We had just a short time to freshen up back at the hotel before heading back out to the Lisbon town center for our dress rehearsal at the beautiful nearly 400-year old Igreja Santa Catarina. Just down the street was a restaurant in an old train station - good food was everywhere! I'm not sure if I was gaining or losing weight on the trip though with all the walking and mental exercise of the music!

The cathedral was magnificent, like out of a dream. It had been many years since getting

to sing in such a venue, and after 2020, I wondered if I was ever going to have the chance. I feel a deep part of me had been resurrected - I was reminded of how the WWII plane was resurrected after being buried deep in the ice in Greenland. Although God's goodness may seem far-off and clouded over in thick fog, I needed a reminder that it is still steadfast.

The emotional whiplash was still nipping at our heels, however. It came to our attention that there were several cases of covid that had cropped up in one of the high school groups traveling with us. There were 4 positive tests, and the 4 students would have to quarantine for the rest of the tour, missing the final big moment - bummer. I feared the lurking karma debt, and what if I came down sick with a horrendous sore throat the next morning and I came out positive too? I packed a couple tests with me just in case, but like insurance I was hoping to not need to use it. As much as I wished our tour was 2 weeks, maybe I was glad we were near the end since the 4 cases could turn out to be 40 very quickly. We scrambled to find a bunch of masks for everyone at the last minute. I had kept a singer's mask in my backpack, so I was all set. But our spirits were subdued for the moment.

Once we got warmed up, however, and our voices started flowing to the heavens in the centuries-old resonant space of the cathedral, I quickly forgot about the inconveniences. I just wanted to stay healthy to enjoy the final moment the next evening with a packed-house audience.

Although I knew the music very well, and had just performed it a few weeks ago, it felt glorious in a resurrected way. It was as if we had been viewing a movie in black and white on an old TV with mono sound, but now we were watching it again in IMAX-3D with fantastic surround sound.

My mind was racing as we went over our parts. Much of the music was grand and not to be rushed. Each moment was to be savored. I was reminded of a late-season spring skiing trip to Kirkwood a couple months earlier. The mountain, laden with a near-record snowpack for the season, was grand, and instead of racing down the mountain at break-neck speed to "look cool", I relished each turn in the spring-corn snow, making slow but deliberate movements as I traversed my way down the mountain. I felt the ski trip as a metaphor for life that could be realized again and again.

Back at the hotel we enjoyed a little afterglow from our dress rehearsal. A round of caipirinhas reminded me of our days back in Brazil with a previous incarnation of Peninsula Cantare back in 2007. It had been many years since going on a tour like this, and I was privileged to be able to make memories with a great group of people that I hope to be able to sing with for the years to come.

### Day 5

Our final official day of the tour was upon us! We had a few hours in the morning to "play tourist" again in downtown Lisbon. We got to do a tour on tuk-tuk's that could take us

along the narrow cobblestone streets of the old city. The tuk-tuk's here were quiet and electric - far different than the noisy and dirty auto rickshaws in India. Many tuk-tuks were brightly colored, festooned with familiar characters such as Homer Simpson! We got to visit several viewpoints along the way and just cruise around the city - a great way to let the mind unwind a bit, since our big concert was coming up in just a few hours.



Several of us got to enjoy lunch in the grand plaza adjacent to the Arco da Rua Augusta. I've never gotten tired of the seafood and the wondrous flavors. Mid-way through the meal, however I was interrupted by a buzz on my phone - it was an alarm to check into my flight 24 hours later. Bummer - the trip would be coming to an end soon. I was soon checked in - it went without a hitch, so I hoped for good vibes on my return flight. It was bittersweet, since as much as I loved Spain and Portugal, I missed Nisha and the comforts of home. Gelato on the main street was once again a treat, and I managed to pick up a few souvenirs for home (I didn't have a chance to pick up anything in Seville).

Back at the hotel, I felt we were entering our final rotation to gear up for the big concert. Having traveled with VIH to international conventions for many years, I was familiar with the routine of "being in the rotation". We were on a schedule. We got our backpacks ready with our concert black clothes and our music. Patrick and I decided to uber a ride to the cathedral - faster than the bus and wouldn't involve a 1/2-mile walking along the narrow streets that the bus wouldn't be able to traverse!

It was hard to believe the big moment was just about upon us! Everything was finally coming together for our climax at the grand cathedral. My dreaded sore throat never developed so all looked like a go for me. The stage was all set with all 5 choirs on the risers - we were bursting at the seams! It looks like no more covid cases cropped up among us - phew! The local orchestra from Lisbon was tuning up - it was a wonderful cultural exchange where we all came together as a unit. We had several kinks to work out since it was our first time all playing together, but we soon had things figured out.

We had a couple hours break to find dinner nearby - there was the "Time Out Market" where we enjoyed a short time-out from the music to recharge our batteries for the big night. It was an immense food emporium where you order from any one of about 48 booths, pay, then join a long communal table. We heard various languages around us -



many young people enjoyed the atmosphere. It felt like being on a college campus with a lot of positive energy.

Back at the cathedral, we did some warmups in a couple green rooms and changed to our concert black. The countdown was down to the last few minutes. At first it seemed to last an eternity, but in retrospect, it passed in a heartbeat. The doors were open and we were filing onto the risers.



We started with Handel's Zadok the Priest. The arpeggios in the orchestra in the first movement got my heart racing as I anticipated the opening words - "Zadok the Priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon king". The initial double-forte D major chord was a wall of sound reverberating off the centuries-old walls of the grand gilded cathedral, echoed in the rococo ceiling, exquisite paintings, and vaulted chambers all around us. It was a monumental time for God's people to have a new leader ruling with wisdom. I pray for America's leadership, especially with an election coming up the following year that we can have a solid leader the people can believe in and be united once again.

Having just watched the coronation of King Charles III in May, the images flashed through my mind of a new era. "God save the King" begins the second movement of Zadok the Priest - we had heard it on TV during the coronation. I wonder if the monarchy will "live forever" in the UK - there has been too much drama and divisiveness in the people. Is the monarchy going to hold even for just 1 more generation?

The music gave me a glimpse of what society would be like with a grand leader we could all believe in. I long for the day where we can all live in peace. The audience sat mesmerized by the music - it was a gift we could bring to people where choral music had to go nearly silent for nearly 2 years. May it never be forgotten.

The main work was next - Mozart's awesome "Coronation Mass". Composed in 1779, it has stood the test of time. It was first documented to be performed at the coronation of Francis II as the Holy Roman Emperor in 1792. It is rather fitting that King Charles III was also just crowned king last month, and again visions of the lavish ceremony streamed through my mind during the performance.

*Kyrie Eleison* - Lord have Mercy. I am thankful for the mercies given to all of us, and the privilege of the opportunity to perform this mighty work. *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* - Glory in the Highest. I felt like we were in the highest glory singing with nearly 200 singers and orchestra members to an audience where the back rows were standing-room only!

Although I had sung the *Credo* countless times, this one felt especially poignant. I feel my faith has back-slidden over the last several years, having dealt with so many traumas since 2020. The numerous hardships had eroded my spiritual vitality. It has been a tough several years for many of us, but I am thankful for the wonderful gift of music. It has been a much-needed medicine for my mental health.

*Qui tollis peccata mundi* - for we have all sinned. The minor tone of this section was solemn and serious. I've wrestled with imposter syndrome for years, and sometimes I felt that I didn't belong in heaven. My sins were too great. But thanks to God's forgiveness in Jesus that I would be allowed to enter. I could never pay the price myself and earn my way, no matter how good my achievements were.

*Et incarnatus est* - he was made incarnate. This part is also minor and melancholy. This is actually the Christmas message, that Jesus came to earth in the form of man. Christmas holidays as a kid were jolly and bright with family, presents and Santa Claus. But Christmas in my later years has had a twinge of sadness. Elvis's "Blue Christmas" resonates in a new way - "I'll have a blue Christmas without you... won't be the same dear..." I am reminded again of the losses from 2020 when the holidays roll around. In the *Credo*, the words immediately following the Incarnation are about the Crucifixion. *Crucifixus, etiam pro nobis*. He was crucified, and later he suffered and was buried.

All hope is not lost, however - the *Resurrexit* comes immediately afterward. Although the *Credo* is so familiar, I get to experience a personal resurrection of hope every time we get to that part. And if that part of the music was not enough, there were even some of God's creatures joining us in the chorus. Several pigeons had flown into the cathedral, flying around the vaulted ceiling and chirping from high above!

Something about singing a reverent mass in Latin brings a timelessness to the work and God's words from Scripture. Social media these days is so fickle and fake news spreads like wildfire, easily uprooting any feelings of groundedness from years past. I feel society is a runaway train going the wrong way on a 1-way track, filled with rampant misinformation and disinformation.

Our next work was *Chariot Jubilee*. Swing low, sweet chariot. I had been made vividly aware of wrongs and feelings of being an imposter, and it was my prayer that the Lord would swing low enough to come get me when my time was up. I would never be able to reach high enough to come to God otherwise!

We finished with an encore of “*We Shall Walk through the Valley in Peace*” - every note rang with the music of heaven. Although the concert was probably nearly two hours, it went by in a heartbeat. All the practice, travel, and hard work had paid off. The audience gave us a lavish standing ovation that seemed to go on forever - in waves of applause. When it was all over, we hugged and walked off the risers nearly in tears. So much adrenaline had been exhausted.



### Day 6

The trip had just been about a week overall, though it felt like a whirlwind of activity. Breakfast was just a bagged lunch at the hotel as we checked out and got on the bus headed to the airport. Unlike my trip headed to Spain, everything was smooth on the return. The flight was on time and we had our boarding passes ready with no problems.

Connecting in Paris on the way back, I decided to have a spin through some of the duty-free shops in the terminal. Peering into one of the liquor stores, I came across a bottle of “Royal Salute” scotch whiskey labeled as a tribute to the coronation of King Charles III. A bottle right next to it, sporting a similar label is 52 years old, would set you back a whopping 34,480 euros. But the new bottle was just filled a couple months ago and was just a measly 28,880 euros (about \$30,000). How many people would actually purchase such a monstrosity of capitalism to drink? I might as well purchase a \$20 bottle of whiskey at Trader Joe’s, then invest the other \$29,980 in an NFT of some bored ape smoking a cigarette. Is society headed toward a revolution as we speed-run through this stage of late-stage capitalism?

The final leg of the journey was upon me - the long flight back to SFO. Although we boarded early, they were anticipating extra time to be needed for the full flight. In fact some paramedics had to be brought on board to check on a passenger. I anticipated the worst, but at least now, the trip was over and it was just a matter of time. The paramedics were soon finished taking care of the passenger and we were pushing back from the gate. The flight was smooth and uneventful as we crossed the Atlantic and into Canada before swooping down south into CA. The passenger next to me had a business and has met several celebrities in years past - he had stories of skating with Tony Hawk! I mentioned about singing with Andrea Bocelli. The people you meet when flying around the world can bring the most unexpected connections.

Pulling into our gate, I imagined Nisha and her parents looking out the window to see our 777 coming into the international terminal. Immigration and customs went smoothly, and soon we were exiting the secure area. I got a buzz from Nisha that she was waiting at the big map of the world in the arrivals area. I remembered the spot where her parents had come back from India in 2019. Indeed, there she was with her parents to welcome me back to America!



What a trip, and I can't wait for the next adventure!

## EPILOGUE

The week after the trip, we had a company "reunion" week where we were all back in the office (pre-covid) style, where we collaborated together, socialized together and ate out a couple times. One of the restaurants had a tile floor reminding me of the tiles in Portugal, and while drifting half-awake with jet-lag and food-coma, my mind was suddenly back in Lisbon! I had to snap out of it to remind myself I was actually in Campbell, back home in

CA!

I would have visions of some of our streets that had been converted into pedestrian zones during covid, such as Castro Street, getting laid with patterned tiles and cobblestones like some of the outdoor plazas in Seville. Similar thoughts would swirl in my head for weeks and the trip would take months to full process in my mind. The memories would last a lifetime.

*Photos are posted on Google at*

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/3Fgr8Ya8fDQP9xo26>

*and*

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/6GkpmnhwK5yBmwKe9>