

# Music, Mate & Mayhem: Musings on the 2010 World Choral Symposium



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In 2002 I attended the World Choral Symposium in Minneapolis having never heard of the International Federation of Choral Music. I sat in the audience with a dropped jaw, stunned by the unique quality of choirs from around the world. When the opportunity came to attend the 2010 Symposium in Argentina through a scholarship from Minnesota ACDA, I jumped at the chance. Little did I know that a little volcano would shape the experience of all Symposium delegates!

A week before departure we were informed that due to ash from a volcano in Chile no planes were flying to Puerto Madryn, the Symposium city, located halfway between Buenos Aires and the tip of South America. I flew overnight to Buenos Aires not knowing how exactly I'd maneuver the rest of the journey!

I spent a first day in Buenos Aires exploring the city, ingesting ample quantities of *café de leche* and enjoying a spectacular tour of the *Teatro Colón* opera house. I eventually figured out that the only way to get to the Symposium was to snag an overnight bus. After negotiating several dark streets, my colleague Iris and I found a designated smoky

bar where a guy with a laptop sat beside a stack of Symposium programs. Ten minutes later we had reservations for the overnight bus to Puerto Madryn with instructions to arrive for departure with 400 pesos, food, and TP!

We were assigned a "fast bus" in which we spent 20 hours with other choir geeks from around the world, including an ample representation of Minnesotans. The bus traveled an extremely straight and desolate road with nothing in view except scrub brush and dust. One of our Minnesota contingents described the adventure as "miles and miles of miles and miles!" At hour 18, the bus ground to a halt in the middle of absolutely

nowhere. There was silence – everyone's worst fear of engine trouble looming. Then Ana Marie from Venezuela quipped, "Here's where we pick up the bikes!" After some much needed laughter the bus ride resumed. I think they must have switched drivers.

We arrived in Puerto Madryn safe, sound, and eager to hear some great choral music. On day one, mayhem was evident as the entire Symposium schedule had to be revised; due to volcanic ash, most delegates arrived a day late and several choirs did not arrive at all. After finding the way to my first concert, the Estonian TV Girls Choir performed a stunning set. This chorus of young women sang with unbelievably low, vibrant voices alongside light, sweet angel sopranos. It was an ethereal blending of sound.

Evening concerts were held a 20-minute hike from the center of town down several dark streets. I saw "gymnasium" on the map and groaned at the anticipated acoustics, but a woman in our group assured me it must be the name for their performing auditorium. Not so. The venue was truly an old gym complete with acoustical tiles and hot air blasting from a large pipe overhead. Audience members sat on concrete bleachers and the luxury plastic lawn chairs on the floor level were reserved for honorary dignitaries. That night I sent a Facebook note likening the acoustics to listening to a concert in a well-padded coffin! That said, our ears and expectations soon adapted as we were treated to music by choirs from Europe, Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Asia, South and North America.

The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University Choir from South Africa stole the show one evening with their vibrant movement, costumes, and choreography. The Voices New Zealand Chamber Choir performed an entire program of new compositions combining indigenous Maori music with New Zealand "western" music. It was a fantastic melding of cultures. The Philippine Madrigal Singers were stunning, and I missed hearing some of the other Asian choirs who were not able to attend due to the volcano chaos.



In Buenos Aires with Argentine friend  
Marcela...under a 3M sign!



Left to right: Jane en the “fast bus” to Puerto Madryn



joying Mate at the sing-along; Local singers on the bleachers at the Sing-along; and with colleague Iris Levine aboard



It was a delightful surprise to experience the evening audiences packed with locals – adults, kids, babies, elders – from the neighboring towns. The Argentine people have rather embodied choral etiquette. Their musical appreciation included loud calls and spontaneous rhythmic clapping, along with cat calls when speeches got too long. This part of Patagonia became home to Welsh immigrants 150 years ago, so there is a strong Welsh choral tradition mixed with Spanish and indigenous music. Interestingly, all of the Argentinian colleagues that performed a combination of ppella sets. I partly due to the cost of hiring an accompanist and that many performance halls do not have a piano.

By far, the best element of the Symposium was the late-afternoon sing-along sessions where directors taught songs from their own culture. The “sings” included a written songbook, demonstrations of each piece by a visiting choir and then a chance for all of us to sing. Conductors Josep Prats and Michael Gohl were engaging and informative, and I came away with plenty of new repertoire to try with my own chorus.

The afternoon sings were attended by many Argentine locals and one afternoon I sang beside a man with his Mate thermos (a traditional drink in a ceramic cup stuffed with bitter, hay-like tea sipped through a metal straw). Usually the Mate cup is passed in a group, so I was invited to join him for a sip. Mmm, delicious – or not!

The planes were still not flying when the Symposium came to a close, so delegates again boarded buses and this time spent 20 hours with new friends and colleagues from around the world swapping stories, repertoire ideas, email addresses, and promises to be in touch as we planned our upcoming choral seasons.

Attending this Symposium was truly a South American experience. While not as polished as the 2002 event in Minneapolis, the exposure to South American choirs and local culture was

a highlight. In addition to the many photos and new friends, I came back with a suitcase full of new ideas for my June 2012 concerts, “Come Fly with Me” a travel-themed romp of music from around the globe!

*Jane Ramsey Miller is the Artistic Director of One Voice Mixed Chorus, Minnesota’s gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and allies chorus, and also serves as Artistic Director-in-Residence for GALA Choruses, an international network of over 150 GLBT choruses across the world. For the full travelogue of Jane’s Symposium trip visit [www.ovmc.org/out-in-the-community.html](http://www.ovmc.org/out-in-the-community.html).*

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