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Creating a Connection

Story by Joel Brigham '04

From exhaustion to exhilaration, Collegiate Choir members touring Spain experienced the power of performance.



The group admired Spanish architecture as they traveled, including a church steeple in Valencia's Old Market area.

The setting of the concert Illinois Wesleyan's Collegiate Choir gave in Barcelona, Spain, was breathtaking. But it wasn't the centuries-old Gothic cathedral that impressed choir member Bill Dwyer as much as the elderly woman who approached him, touching his hand.

"She said to me in Spanish, 'I can't understand a lot of what you're saying, but it's beautiful. I almost cried, it was so beautiful.' It was a powerful moment," Dwyer recalls.

Members of the 40-voice student choir were uplifted by many such moments during their two-week concert tour of Spain this past May. Led by J. Scott Ferguson, professor of music and director of choral activities at Illinois Wesleyan, it was the choir's third overseas trip in the past eight years, after tours of Italy in 2000 and Russia and the Baltic countries in 2004.

For students like Dwyer, a graduating senior, the Spain trip became a highlight of their Wesleyan experience. "Everything about this tour culminated my four years of hard work and dedication to this ensemble," he wrote at the conclusion of a journal he kept during his time in Spain. "It was the perfect way for me to say goodbye to the choir that I have been a part of for four years and to the University I have grown to cherish."

Their Spanish tour included eight concerts and stops in 10 cities. It was a grueling routine — but included plenty of traveling and sightseeing in between rehearsals and performances.

"I told the students to get ready for a completely different schedule," Ferguson says. "I told them to be ready to sing late at night without much food, to prepare for a number of acoustic environments, to be up till two or three in the morning, to have a day full of

activity and then sing at 10:30 at night, then drive an hour and a half to the next destination.”

“But their stamina was phenomenal,” he adds. “The program was demanding, and sometimes we didn’t have an intermission. The Poulenc Lenten motets are gut-wrenching to sing, and usually we’d have an intermission after those pieces. To go on can be very taxing, but they did it.”

The choir felt energized by the beauty of its performance venues. “It’s an incredible thing to sing in a 14th-century Gothic cathedral,” Ferguson says. “Our last concert was held in a church built in the 11th century.”

For Sociology Professor Jim Sikora, listening to the choir’s program was itself a sublime experience. “There were numerous times when my eyes would just tear up ... they were so good.” Sikora and his wife, Gwenn, served as chaperons for the choir, along with Professor of Hispanic Studies Mauricio Parra, who offered his skills to help translate and give cultural guidance. “We kept tabs on the students,” Sikora says, “but more importantly, we just enjoyed their presence and performances.”



A community choir joined with the students to perform in Seville.

Sikora was not alone in his appreciation of the choir’s talent. “People in the audience would remark, ‘You sound like a European choir,’” he says. “Sometimes Scott would have to bring in three encore pieces because the audience just wanted more and more and more.”

The performances also won great reviews in the cities where they played. A critic for the journal *7 Dies Actualitat de Vinaròs* wrote that the Illinois Wesleyan choir presented “a concert of maximum and extraordinary quality, of flawless dimensions, astounding vocal technique, and clarity and wholeness of the thirty-nine voices. The highs and lows marked the height of perfection. The choir was in perfect harmony with the conductor, Scott Ferguson. The musical interpretation was done all by memory; there was a high level of connection between the director and all members of the choir. This was, without a doubt, the best choral performance in Vinaròs in the past 10 years.”

Ferguson says of the reception his choir received, “It warms your heart because you’re performing selflessly — you’re not expecting anything in return. You share the music and the message of the music freely. And if it’s done sincerely you can give with love and receive with love. It makes you feel good inside.”

Much of those good feelings are generated by the quality of Ferguson's instruction, according to Sikora.

"The students watch his every facial expression, every movement of his body, and every direction in such a way that he lets them know whether he's happy with them about something or not happy with something," says Sikora. "I had two or three students come up to me and say, 'I want to be a director, and I want to be like Scott Ferguson.'"

In between challenging concerts and long bus rides, Ferguson made sure the students were able to take in a lot of Spanish culture.

"They saw castles galore and wonderful art by great painters and sculptors. They visited some great museums. They got to go to the beach in Barcelona, sing in wonderful cathedrals and eat some great seafood," Ferguson says. "It was a culinary delight, an aural delight, a visual delight, a spiritual delight — everything you could imagine, all rolled up into one."

Sometimes, the music and the sightseeing intermingled. In Barcelona, Sikora recalls, the group explored Park Güell, an garden complex designed by Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí that is known for its amazing stone structures. "We came upon this little cave," Sikora remembers, "and you could hear the sound resonating off the walls; it was like an echo chamber."

To take advantage of the cave's impressive acoustics, Ferguson arranged the students into their concert rows for an impromptu performance. As they sang *Vere languores* by the Spanish Renaissance composer Tomás Luis de Victoria and the African-American spiritual *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, people began to gather to marvel as "the sound just rolled out of that cave," Sikora recalls. "It was amazing to stand in the middle of that beautiful sound."

In 2012, Ferguson hopes to take his fourth trip with the choir, this time to Germany — home of Johann Sebastian Bach, and what will likely be the most critical European audiences yet. He looks forward to that challenge and to offering a new group of students the chance, in the words of Bill Dwyer, "to reach far beyond languages or personal barriers."

As Dwyer wrote in his journal, "Music is one of the biggest gifts we can share."