

Cantanti in Africa

Richmond-based choir Cantanti Camerati has just returned from a very successful tour of Sierra Leone (SL) from 25th October to 1st November, 2009. One of our choir is Rachel Cooper who is the current Deputy High Commissioner for Great Britain in Freetown.

Sunday 25th we arrived in Terminal 1 for the British Midland International flight which was excellent, except for the fact that the toilets failed in 'peasant class' and we all had to queue for the first class loos, right next to the Sierra Leone President! He was not amused.

Arriving at the Lungi Airport we were met by the expected chaos and we then flew to the city of Freetown by helicopter which had hammock seats down each side with our luggage down the middle – and we had a lot of luggage. Each member of the party took several musical instruments with them. About 45 had been despatched in July but the remaining 50 plus we carried. I had three violins, three tambourines, four recorders and a metronome in my suit case and I carried a guitar! Others were equally laden.

There was a great atmosphere in the party of 21, we were actually on our way after eight months of planning and fund-raising. We raised over £10,000 to enable us to get out there. The spirit of the group continued and grew throughout the week. On the aircraft Lynda Beament and Maura Swabey were going up and down seeing if passengers would like to come to our concerts and giving out leaflets.

Monday started well – we were all staying with members of the British High Commission in the British compound, and it ran out of water! So no showers that morning! After a brief tour of the city in our fleet of four chauffeur-driven diplomatic vehicles (we had pre-paid for the drivers, who were all working on their holiday week, and for the patrol) we went to the SL Television Studios where we sang several songs from our repertoire which was transmitted later that day. A great advert for our concerts on the Thursday and Friday.

In the afternoon our Musical Director, Patrick Martin and others went to St. Georges Cathedral for a master class on organ playing. Though out the week, we conducted these 'master classes' on Violin, Clarinet, Recorder, at the Ballanta Academy of Music. We then had our first rehearsal with our African colleagues for the Friday joint concert. It was during this rehearsal that we all realised that although Cantanti Camerati is not a bad choir, we are not the best in Britain, but we were singing alongside the very best voices in SL! They were very good and we knew we were going to raise our standard to hold our own on Friday! This rehearsal was going well until part way through a song Mike Wigney's wheelchair tyre blew in spectacular fashion!

Tuesday I went with Rebecca Bevan, Robin Goodgame and Mike Wigney (with wheelchair tyre temporarily repaired) to visit the Police Band. A formal introduction was followed by a brief history of the band. I was amazed that we were the first visitors to the Police Band since their formation in 1946! Their band room was sad as many of their instruments had been damaged. On euphonium had sustained a bullet hole during the civil war and they had patched it up with cardboard and cello tape! Such ingenuity! A Bass tuba looked as if it had been run over by a truck and they had spent hours carefully making it playable! Such determination! Their Dance Band room was no better. Their keyboard had fallen apart and they had to hire one for gigs. I promised them at least one keyboard and they burst out with applause and then treated us to an impromptu concert on these decrepit instruments, many had valve covers missing. There was no doubt they had talented musicians, they just needed better instruments.

Wednesday included a visit to the chimp sanctuary for those who had not already been. Patrick Martin, Kathryn Hone, Daniel Perry and Louise Jones went to the SL Broadcasting Service for a live radio broadcast, again promoting our concerts. Maura Swabey, Clair Cooper, Phil Morris, Malcolm McAlister and I went off to visit the RSLAF (Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces) Band. When we arrived they were lined up and waiting for us. Their Captain Sesay greeted us and we were treated to a short concert. This was followed by a tour of their band room where

instruments are kept and the music room where they keep their sheet music. A big problem here is rats eating the music at night. The RSLAF band has a wider range of instruments which are in better condition but even here four players were sharing one music stand and many of the brass valves were damaged. Again our welcome was nothing short of regal and we enjoyed the reception we got from the enthusiastic players.

Others had gone to a local school to talk about music and others went to the chimp sanctuary. There is a very strong post-war message to children that they are the country's future and this strong message was often delivered in song. Midwife Anna Bosanquet went off to visit a refuge and counselling service for women in trouble from either violence or unwanted pregnancies. She was enthused by their work. That evening we were the guests at the British High Commission where the High Commissioner and his wife threw a reception for us and over 100 invited guests, including representatives from both bands and Ballanta Academy of Music. The evening's entertainment was by the Ballanta Academy's Dance Band, supplemented by two young and talented players from the Wells Cathedral School on saxophone and electric guitar. Our own Chris Fuller was occasionally seen on the keyboards! The High Commissioner welcomed us and I was volunteered to do the response and was able to present a trumpet to Sgt Francis Anthony of the Police Band. Unfortunately RSLAF's Capt Sesay had already left.

Thursday I was up at 0630 for a live broadcast on UN Radio at 8am with Daniel Perry and Louise Jones with Rachel Cooper. This went well but poor Danny never got to speak. Back at Rachel's the choir prepared for another rehearsal before lunch. I escaped by going to the Rotary Club of Freetown for lunch at the invitation of Dr Adonis Abboud whom I had met the night before at the reception. A lovely lunch of Bongo fish together with some good company and during the meal I presented their President with a set of Cantanti's CDs.

We then went to St George's Cathedral to rehearse for the Evening's concert. This included three young ladies from Wells Cathedral School who were celebrating their 1,100 year having been opened in 909AD! This certainly beats Cantanti's 41 years. During the rehearsals there was a power failure, a frequent occurrence in Freetown, and the heat and humidity became very uncomfortable as the fans stopped. Some of the choir had to stop singing and came close to passing out! After about 30 minutes power was restored and were flagging spirits. The concert went very well with over 400 people attending. The Wells trio were magnificent as were Cantanti. I found myself volunteered to do the introductions and compere the show! A collection during the concert raised around 1,500,000 Leones for Ballanta, (the exchange rate is something like 6,800 Leones to the pound).

Friday was a day of contrasts for the team. Some went to the railway museum only to find it closed so they went on a magical mystery tour thanks to some quick thinking by one of our superb quartet of drivers. Others went to the big market in town and got swamped by all the stall holders trying to sell them their goods as opposed to anyone else's. Again the drivers came in handy to barter for the many items bought.

Rebecca, Lynda and I went first to the RSLAF Band to deliver the first set of instruments. To say they were well received is an understatement. They were like children at Christmas queuing up to open their presents. Capt Sesay kept order, but only just and they happily posed with a selection of the instruments for a photo. Many even started to play them. Next we returned to load up with instruments for the Police Band. They had a band booking that morning but they regarded our visit so important that Sgt Anthony, Inspector Webby and their Musical Director, Chief Inspector Prince Kingston remained to greet us. The MD had been away when we visited earlier in the week at a conference and insisted on meeting and thanking us personally.

After lunch we went to the British Council to prepare for the evening concert with our African colleagues. The concert was a great success with a packed house and another fruitful collection for Ballanta. The local singers were magnificent as we had learnt from our rehearsals, and there was a good balance between Cantanti and the Combined choir of the best singers in Sierra Leone! I was asked five minutes before the concert to compere so I had to wing all the introductions but the audience were very appreciative, particularly of the G&S Three Little Maids – Anne Gooding, Chris Fuller and Lynda Beament. This was followed by Daniel Perry's wonderful individual performance of the Czadas on violin with Chris on piano. His comic interpretation was superb particularly during the doleful section when Chris started to sob loudly and uncontrollably. It brought the house down. After a rousing

rendition of the Hallelujah Chorus Cantanti sang to one of our Ballanta hostesses who had helped to make our tour so smooth and enjoyable – Kitty Fadlu Dean - “Kitty My Love Will You Marry Me?”. This and the rest of the programme brought a standing ovation started by the German Ambassador and his wife in the front row.

Rachel and Patrick were presented with four local percussion instruments – a large bongo drum, a cylinder which is played with sticks, a gourd with beads and another home-made instrument made from an old oil can - an example of their ingenuity.

One lovely touch for this concert, where all singers were in white tops and black bottoms, was that we all had a strip of coloured cloth to wear as we pleased, so these appeared wrapped around head, waists, necks and in shirt pockets. A super unifying factor.

Saturday saw another early start after a late night for a rehearsal at the Cathedral for the Sunday service. I opted to rest my voice and Clare Cooper and I delivered the last of the instruments to Ballanta and its Director Joseryl Beckley was very grateful.

From the Academy and the two bands we have a shopping list for Christmas to provide spare strings, replacement drum skins and sticks, reeds, valves and valve oil etc. These will be transported by Rachel and Clare in December. We had requests for many other items including amplifiers, photocopiers and laminators but these items are beyond our ability as there is a weight limit on the aircraft!

After the rehearsal we went to the beach and ate at the Hard Rock a superb lunch of lobster, scampi, barracuda with rice and chips! During the wait for lunch there were many sellers of souvenirs and they did a roaring trade from us. Then to swimming in the warm rain and in the powerful breakers.

Sunday was another early start for the Sunday Harvest Festival Service in the Cathedral which lasted almost three hours and had 30 singing items! The locals rate Harvest Festival their most important of the year, even more than Christmas! The all male cathedral choir was superb and helped our ailing voices. After a beach-side meal we went back to pack.

At the appointed hour we were taken to the heliport where many of our hosts had gathered to see us off. A Drum Band and dancers were there to add local flavour and made many of us join in! Our flight home was uneventful and we were all delighted to see our bags at the carousel in Terminal One.

The country is 60% Muslim and 40% Christian but both mix well and enjoy each other's public holidays etc. The people here are so afraid of another civil war that no one wants to 'rock the boat'.

All in all, a superb tour in Sierra Leone – well organised from both ends, well hosted by Rachel and her High Commission colleagues, the drivers and other staff. The concerts were wonderful, full houses and appreciative and the Sunday service was a fitting end to a great week. The assistance we received from Rachel's sister Clare both in the UK before we left and during the visit was invaluable.

Although the singing was wonderful, meeting such wonderful, hospitable people, the highlight for me was the collection, transportation and distribution of the musical instruments and music you all donated. We have now left a legacy for many Sierra Leonians to enjoy all thanks to you and your generosity.

For this Cantanti Camerati and I would thank you all most sincerely.

Barry Buttenshaw

PS. There was an excellent article about our visit in The Times on Friday 13th written by Kathryn Hone.

PPS. At our Christmas concert on Saturday 19th December at Richmond Parish Church, we will be singing some of the African songs from Sierra Leone.

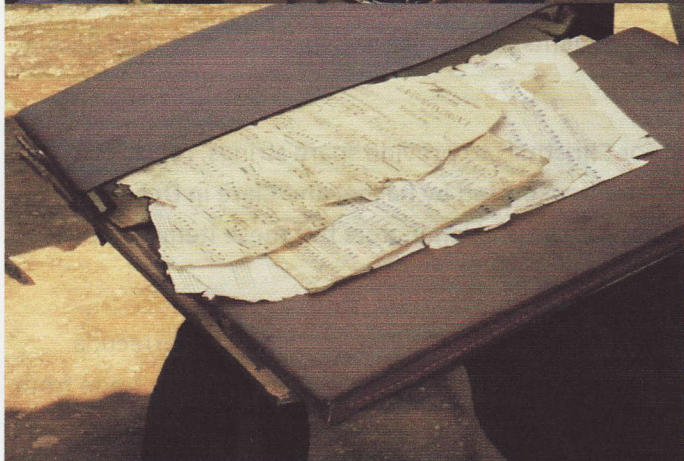


Photo 1: The Police band gave us an impromptu concert with Mike and Robin in the background. Just look at the condition of the bass in the foreground!

Photo 2: The Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces Band receive their new instruments with Music Director, Captain Sisay (right). Also pictured are Rebecca Bevan (left), Lynda Beament and me in the centre.

Photo 3: Much of the RSLAF band's music has been eaten away by rats!

Photo 4: Just one of the lovely meals enjoyed by us all. Losing weight was not an option!

Photo 5: Just one of many beautiful beaches in Sierra Leone.

Photo 6: The Ballanta Academy of Music welcomes Cantanti Camerati and Wells with Mike in the foreground.