Planting a Flag
by Dr. Tim Summerlin
June 17, 2007

There we were, a choir of 30, walking through the immensity of St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, seeking the location where the mass for which we would provide music would be celebrated. Our assumption was that it would be in a quiet side chapel, but we were met and hastened past the great Bernini altar piece to the grand apse chapel, where the service was opened with special prayers led by the bishop. Above us, the afternoon sun shone through a translucent dove in the central window above the altar. How could one not be awed by the experience of singing Schubert, Rutter and Palestrina in this majestic sanctuary with its ties to the earliest days of Christianity?

Singing in St. Peter’s was one of the many highlights of a recent Schreiner University Choir tour in Italy, one which provided opportunities to make music and to absorb the art and history of another culture. For 10 days, choir director Michael Kahl, accompanist Terri Henneke-Theis, the choir and a group of students and community members lived and traveled together. Of course, Schreiner students participate in a variety of travel abroad experiences, from shorter spring break, or summer terms to full semesters, but this was a different sort of trip. For the first time ever, a student performing group was formally representing the university. This was our first opportunity to say overseas, “Let us introduce you to Schreiner University.”

Events like these don’t take place without careful planning, hard work and generous friends. Well over a year ago, Kahl had drawn on his previous experience in choir travel to put together a solid package, including excellent performing venues. Then the finances had to be provided: students washed cars, sold discount cards and put on musical theatre to raise funds. They and their families saved. The Schreiner development office spoke with individuals and foundations which provided much-appreciated assistance.

A different challenge, of course, was to develop the product. Regular choir members, joined by four community participants, had practiced a varied repertoire, from traditional church music to the American genres—Appalachian, gospel, spirituals—that European audiences clamor for. Kahl has a special gift for extracting the best from his singers while promoting their enjoyment of disciplined choral performance. Since most of the works were performed from memory, the choir could, under Kahl’s leadership, focus its attention on creating music.

Where did the choir sing? First, we participated in two choral festivals in the region of Verona. At both events, we were joined by a men’s choir from the city of Soave. Their thirty two voices combined operatic power and careful blend. As we listened to them open with music from the Orthodox liturgy that first night, we were bowled over by the power and harmony resonating in an acoustically lively setting. Their mesmerizing sound prompted us all to swallow hard and determine to do our very best!
After these concerts, we shared late evening dinners with the other participants. These events became fine opportunities for communication, even though in most cases we had to rely on means other than fluent Italian on our part or fluent English on theirs. However, you can say a great deal by trading off songs or by joining together in spirited choruses. The second night, we were joined by a German girls choir, and the song interchange was even livelier. The common observation among our students was, “These Italians are really warm and welcoming!”

We also provided worship music at the Abbey of St. Antimo, set in the Tuscan countryside, surrounded by vineyards, olive groves, wheat and poppies. The twelfth century abbey, located on a pilgrimage trail, is the home of serious liturgical study in Italy. It was full on a sunny Sunday morning, and we joined in Gregorian chant for service music as well as with our other pieces. Here, and on other occasions, Schreiner’s artist-in-residence, Basel Sarweh’s depth of liturgical experience proved invaluable.

There was plenty of time to absorb the wonders of Italy, of course. We took in the winding canals and lanes of Venice, the ancient arena of Verona, the quiet streets of Lucca, Florence’s art and the astonishing tale told by the ruins of Rome. Our guide was no bland leader. Rather, Giuseppe (“Call me Joe or Pepe, but not Giuseppe!”) was a bear-like ex-rugby player with a growling voice and a great deal of knowledge of his nation’s history. We all learned that burly ex-athletes can be sensitive too—when Pepe made it very clear that he didn’t enjoy hearing anyone mock his deep growl. Meanwhile, group members maintained their own personal journals to retain special memories from the tour.

The trip offered so many highlights that it would be foolish to attempt to list them, but I suspect that all of us would include our last evening as one of the best. After a full day of soaking up Rome, we retreated to our hotel to shower and put on our tuxedos and gowns for a final concert at Sts. Alessio and Bonifacio. This turned out to be a modest-sized church in a prosperous residential area atop the Aventine Hill. After a spirited practice session, we walked out to the piazza behind the church to eat. Here, amid umbrella pines and a grape arbor, we looked down at the city below in the late afternoon sun—St. Peter’s on the left across the Tiber, the Pantheon and the distant Spanish Steps in the middle and the grand “wedding cake” of the Victor Emmanuel Palace to the far right.

What lovelier setting could you find to enjoy pasta and to prepare yourself for a final concert? The photographs clicked furiously as each of us sought to preserve some images of the special moment. Without exception, I believe, we felt a determination to give our best at the concert that followed, and if the audience response is any measure, the results were appreciated. Emily Dickinson speaks of “internal difference, where the meanings are” in one of her poems. The music we gave to those gathered at Sts. Alessio and Bonifacio left many of us with just such a glowing internal difference.

What a surprise when among those who stayed to compliment the choir were a couple from Denmark named Schreiner! They had made a special effort to attend when they saw our name and showed us materials on the university that they had printed off the Internet.
Whether they have any close sanguinity to old Captain Schreiner’s family or not, they were pleased and happy to join a namesake group that evening.

The values of an experience such as this choir trip are many. Begin with the enlargement of one’s consciousness that arises from exposure to the riches of another culture. Add the lessons that come from self-discipline and stretching one’s talents beyond the usual parameters. And don’t neglect the transcendent experience felt by individuals who commit themselves fully to a common purpose none could accomplish alone. Given Schreiner’s youth as a baccalaureate institution, we can also add the reward of having done something new for one’s alma mater. Together this group, freshmen to recent graduates, represented their university halfway around the world as it had not before been represented. And they did so with skill and class. They took the flag of their university and planted it where it had not been before. That accomplishment now provides incentive to other individuals and organizations to make their own statements, and it offers a true measure of learning.