

MUNICH, STRASBOURG, PARIS, LONDON TOUR REPORT

It isn't too often that the weather has impacted our tours but this year a wet spring and early summer in Europe as in Canada, certainly had an effect! We arrived in Munich to heavy rain which affected not only Bavaria but all of Central Europe – and heavy it was! Those of us who arrived a day ahead of the start of the tour spent the day on the “Hop On Hop Off “ bus tour around Munich but while we “Hopped On” we did not “Hop Off”. We went on the two routes around the city so we did see most of it as best we could. However during our walking tour the following day and our visits to the opera it did not rain so we were spared that.



We stayed at the Hotel Plazl which is in the restored old city centre so we were able to walk everywhere. The hotel was across the street from the Hofbrauhaus and several other very good restaurants. It was a five minute walk to the Bayerische Staatsoper which performs at the National Theatre which is part of the Residenze, the former Royal Apartments in the city. We met the group and our tour manager, Bernhard, at the reception in the hotel bar on Saturday evening. We were a mixed group, with several couples and singles hailing from BC., Ontario, the US and the UK.

We saw two operas in Munich. The first opera was *Norma* staged as rather minimalistic, but effective generally. We heard three fine voices in **Joseph Calleja** as Pollione, **Sonya Yoncheva** as Norma and **Tara Erraught** as Adalgisa. The opera had an early start as it was Sunday so some of the group located the refreshment area where wine and sandwiches were sold. The following evening we saw a *Tosca* which demonstrated what happens when the director takes control! *Tosca* was a film star and Cavaradossi was a film director. The First Act had so much going on as it was a film set filled with nudes, a transvestite wedding and probably lots of other things as well. It was so confusing that Cavaradossi's first act aria sort of went unnoticed. At the end of the First Act when the Te Deum is sung, a statue of the Virgin Mary was dragged into the scene amid boos from the audience. The following acts weren't quite as confusing but, nonetheless, the music and singing took a back place to the direction. The director did give space to allow Scarpia (an autocrat) to deliver his blistering



thoughts and Tosca sang her Visi Arte without distractions and it was very good! This did not happen for Cavaradossi, though, in either his First Act aria or Act Three aria. Scarpia was sung by **Luca Salsi**, Tosca by **Eleanore Buratto** and Cavaradossi by **Charles Castronovo** – all well-known singers but the direction and staging certainly detracted from the music and the singing. However, to be fair, it was a packed audience of much younger people than we are used to seeing at the opera and they applauded!

We left the following morning for our journey to Strasbourg and it was at this point that the weather impacted us. Our bus was late! We expected a large 56 seater touring bus but what came were a van to take the luggage and a new, but much smaller 27 seat bus, to carry 25 people! We were told that the bus allocated to us had broken down the previous day and despite a search for another bus there were none available due to the River Cruises. The rivers were so high because of the rain that the river boats could not get under the bridges so passengers had to be moved by bus and there were no large buses available for us! Off we went to Strasbourg.

We arrived in Strasbourg during rush hour after a two-hour stop in Ulm for lunch and a chance to see Ulm Minster with the highest spire in Europe. Our hotel the Hannong was located in the old town close to the river and being in a small bus was certainly an advantage in driving down the narrow streets. When we arrived our luggage was already in our rooms – a nice thing to find. We were close to the river where there were many restaurants from which to choose as well as local small shops as it was generally a residential area.

We had little time for food though, as we were due at the Salle Erasmus at the Palais de la Musique which has 1876 seats and is part of the European Parliament area in the north of the city. It was an interesting concert hall as it was one of many in the complex and seemed to be a pyramid shape lying on its side! The walls were red and had

geometric shapes sticking out along the sides – were these for acoustic purposes? To a packed and enthusiastic audience we heard a wonderful Brahms Requiem with the **Orchestra Philharmonique de Strasbourg** and the Choir of the **Orchestra Philharmonic de Paris** with 180 singers and two soloists, **Pretty Yende** and **Ludovic Tezier**. It was a thrilling performance indeed.





The following two days were spent sightseeing in the Rhine Valley area and the city. The first day we drove to Chateau du Haut-Koenigsborg which dates from 1147. In 1475, the castle became the property of the Hapsburgs, but it was destroyed by Swedish artillery in the Thirty Years War. In 1899, the ruined castle was offered to Kaiser Wilhelm II, who restored it. It was returned to France in 1909. The drive to the castle, which is about 50kms south of Strasbourg, goes along part of the Route du Vin, which wanders through the vineyards on the French side of the Rhine Valley. From the castle, there is a view of the whole Rhine Valley area. We had a guided tour of the

castle and then had lunch in the refreshment area. After the castle visit, we returned to Strasbourg through the small wine villages. One of these villages is Riquewihr, which is walled and looks just as it did in the 16th C. We had a wine tasting visit at one of the old wineries just outside the town and several of us bought wine.



The following day we travelled about the same distance but back into Germany, to visit Baden-Baden which dates back to Roman times. B-B has attracted the rich and famous for at least two centuries to its famous spa facilities. Some of our group visited the Romerbad for a session while others visited Fredericksbad to look at the pools. Others walked in the park to see the Casino (closed until 3pm) and the other elegant buildings which line the streets of the town. We had booked a backstage tour of Germany's latest and biggest opera house which had transformed itself from a disused train station to a "state of the art" theatre

with 2500 seats. It was impressive from top to bottom but what is possibly more interesting is that it is Germany's only private theatre and is not subsidized by the government as all the others are. It exists because of financial support from the



town and private companies yet the opera tickets are no more expensive than the state -run theatres.

The problem of the smaller-than-planned bus was resolved by the time we left on Friday for the long trip to Paris. Ten of the group travelled by TGV train from Strasbourg to Paris enjoying the afternoon and evening in that city while 15 of us travelled on the bus with all the luggage. Our bus journey took us to Rheims for a visit to Mumm's Champagne Caves which were fascinating. Our arrival in Paris was early Friday



evening at the Hotel Chouchou two blocks from the Opera Garnier in the heart of Paris and within walking distance of most of the places we wanted to see. The hotel

was a little surprising as for two evenings a week, Friday night and Saturday night, young people gathered in the central room we used for breakfast and the bar, and danced – including on the tables! The noise was a surprise to us but actually the rooms were quite soundproofed and very comfortable. Apart from the fact that we couldn't meet

there after the opera on Saturday night, it didn't really affect us at all. President Biden's visit to Paris also coincided with our arrival and he stayed at the Intercontinental Hotel which was right beside the Opera Garnier. Several times as we walked in the area we discovered closed roads and a very heavy police presence. We set off for the Opera Bastille on Saturday using the Metro line from the Opera. As it was Saturday evening it was crowded and we had to push our way onto the train. The advantage of the Metro is that it comes up right to the door of the Opera Bastille, the opera house designed by Carlos Ott and opened in 1989 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. It is a modern but well-designed building with lots of glass walls. We saw a very interesting performance of the rarely performed (outside of France) Massenet's *Don Quichotte* with **Gabor Bretz** in the title role, Canadian, **Etienne Dupuis**, as Sancho Panza and **Gaëlle Arquez** as Dulcinee. It was in modern dress and, to lovely music, followed the mental decline of the hero. At the end of the opera our



guide was waiting to tell our bus we were ready to be picked up as the Paris traffic was ...well Paris traffic plus President Biden's visit! It took 20 minutes for the bus to finally be able to come to the Place de la Bastille and we returned to the hotel.

Our next opera was on Monday at Opera Garnier but the weather was sunny on Sunday and people went off to do a variety of things from walking in various areas , visiting museums and galleries to cruising on the Bateaux Mouche and using the Hop On Hop Off buses. The Opera Garnier was so close that it took less than 5 minutes to walk there from the hotel. We had seats in the orchestra and were able to enjoy the wonderful building. The opera was Mozart's *Così fan tutti* with a wonderful cast: Fiordiligi was sung by **Vannina Santoni** , Dorabella by **Angela Brouwer** and Despina by **Hera Hyesang Park**. The two suitors were Canadian - **Josh Lovell**, who was in Don Pasquale in Vancouver recently, sang Ferrando and **Gordon Bintner**, recently at City Opera in Vancouver, sang Guglielmo. **Paulo Szot** was Don Alfonso. It was an interesting modern production. There was no set just the bare stage painted white. Each singer was paired with a dancer, who was identically dressed, and as the character sang, the dancer danced to show the emotions being revealed. It seemed to be the first performance of the opera production and it was enthusiastically received. The singing was lovely and the staging/dancing didn't interfere with the music or the plot. It was an interesting way to perform an opera that has a problematic plot and we enjoyed it.



The following morning we left our Paris hotel for the Gare du Nord and the Eurostar to London. Once again our trip planning was thwarted by unforeseen circumstances. First of all the bus sent to pick us up was too big for the narrow street which in the morning was lined with delivery trucks. We had to take our luggage to the end of the street and cross the Boulevard Haussmann to load it onto the bus. Then we arrived at the Gare du Nord group check in to drop off the luggage as we have done before and the luggage people refused to take it unless we paid 60 Euros more for each suitcase. No one wanted to do that! It would have made the price per suitcase over \$100! When this was decided no one knows for no announcement had been made. Perhaps it had something to do with the Olympic Games – who knows? We had to pull/push our suitcases to the elevators at the front of the station to check in. That we accomplished all of this with minimum disruption was due to the accommodating nature of the group and kindness of those who helped those who needed it. That included a group of Americans who helped some of us to lift the suitcases on/off the train. The journey went quickly and we were served a simple but very nice lunch with wine.

When we arrived at St Pancras we were met by our London guide who took us to our bus. The traffic here too was heavy and the route to the Strand Palace Hotel was more difficult than usual because roads were closed for repair or building construction. We were entertained on the journey which was longer than usual, by the guide who pointed out useful shops and restaurants we might find useful. That evening we attended the final performance of *Andrea Chenier* with **Jonas Kaufmann** and **Sondra Radvanovsky**. The Royal Opera was SOLD OUT for, not only the artists, but this was the last conducting performance of **Sir Antonio Pappano** who has been the leader of the Royal Opera for over 20 years.



The opera was traditionally staged. The First Act looked sumptuous and it was a treat to see **Rosalind Plowright** as the Marquise. The Second and Third acts have more drama and the two artists that most people wanted to see did not disappoint. **Amartuvshin Enkhbat** sang Gerard and was impressive in stature as in voice. At the end of the opera there was thunderous applause for the cast and Sir Anthony, and flowers and gold confetti sprinkled down from the “Gods” for some time. There were short speeches and more applause before the audience finally started to leave. Listening to some of the conversation of people

around us it was obvious that there was going to be a party on the stage but we decided to have our own Finale in the Gin Palace at the Strand Palace Hotel.

The final day of the tour was a free day although some people did manage to acquire tickets to Swan Lake that evening. It was a memorable tour for many reasons: places, artists and experiences. We saw five completely different operas and one incredible choral performance, all of which gave us lots to talk about. The group of 25 is to be commended for their patience, understanding and flexibility when things didn't go the way they were planned and for the thoughtfulness and kindness to each other.



Lis Dawson, Genny MacLean – Tour leaders