

Final Post – Jim Hild

FROM THE SOBERING FACTS OF OPPRESSION TO THE SERENITY AND BEAUTY OF THE FIELDS OF AFRICA:
Reflections on the MN Orchestra and MN Chorale Tour

As we fly from Johannesburg to Atlanta, I am aware that this final entry to my journal may be the hardest to write. First, we have been moved by the effects of the abuse, oppression, dehumanization to which the blacks and people of color were subjected. We have also had the privilege of singing with the wonderful people of South Africa. As a result, we come away profoundly changed

It was an exceptional experience singing with the Gauteng Choristers and 29:11. From our first rehearsal at the National School of the Arts to the march out of the City Hall auditorium in Johannesburg singing "Koloyi Ayeme" after our final concert we felt solidarity. We were bonded by our love of music and our belief that music touches *everyone*. Music has a healing effect. The choristers were very welcoming, extending themselves as we rehearsed the South African songs, which are now synonymous with the anti-apartheid movement and the walk to freedom. In turn they asked us about the pronunciation of the German words in the 4th movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It may sound cliché, but it was more than learning from each other the pronunciation of words. They were as excited and nervous to be singing this classical piece as we were to sing the songs of South African freedom. The exchanges, the smiles, the trust in one other deepened our respect for each other as musicians.

When we were not rehearsing, we were learning about apartheid in South Africa. The Voortrekker is a monumental glorification of the whites who conquered and killed the black people. When the whites met death, it was called "murder." When the blacks and colored people met death, it was termed a "battle." It disturbed me to my core. At the Nelson Mandela Museum the day before, we had learned about the centuries of struggle experienced by the blacks and colored people. There was more violence than I can or want to describe. I found most disturbing the physical removal of the blacks and colored people from their homes in Johannesburg, and their resettlement in Soweto. I can imagine the pulling of people away from families, people being killed, and families being separated. The parallels to what are happening to undocumented parents and children in our own country is chilling. Thousands of people live in squatter cities in Soweto in abject poverty. The children are adorable and at their young age are still smiling, welcoming and trusting. I fear and know many of them will lose this forever as a result of their lives in this place.

In sharp contrast, the concerts were magical. The person who envisioned this trip was Osmo Vänskä, the conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra. It is a privilege working under his baton. He knows what sound he desires and patiently guides us to that end. We might practice two bars until we sing it accurately. When we sang it correctly in the concert, he demonstrated his satisfaction with his smile.

The other person who was responsible for our preparedness and accuracy was our director, Kathy Salzman Romey. She is an exceptionally gifted musician. Even after 7 years under her direction, I am mesmerized by her talent, her command of music and her skill at teaching. She hears every note and will tell us if our B-flat is "flat" enough or our F-sharp is "sharp" enough. She prepared us exceptionally well for singing in general and for performing under the orchestral conductor. It has been an honor to sing under her direction.

Sunday and Monday were days for our personal enjoyment and for recreation. We needed the leisure time. We departed from the hotel, were driven to a park for our morning Safari drive, seeing giraffes, zebras, impalas, a rhinoceros, wild dogs, white and brown lions, cougars and other animals of the wild. From there we went on to a Safari lodge where we could participate in numerous activities or do nothing. Another Chorale member and I decided to walk the 5K route, which was closer to a 10K. At one point on the trail, we saw the head of a Hippo come to the surface of the water. After about 20 more minutes we became anxious as the sun was setting and we knew that we needed to make it back to the lodge before dark. And, of course, my cell phone was losing power! Finally, a Good Samaritan on a bicycle ran to our aid. After getting back on our trail where we were rewarded by the sight of a dazzle of zebras and shortly after, the sight of our lodge. We had a leisurely last morning on Monday then we checked in at the Tambor Airport. I was ready to go home.

The MN Orchestra's Mandela Project was a once in a lifetime opportunity. I am grateful to Kevin Smith, Beth Keller-Long, and the MN Orchestra administration, for being on the roster for the project, for the opportunity to learn about Nelson Mandela's walk to freedom, for the introduction to the Kliptown Youth Program and the children served by the program, for the collaboration and camaraderie with the Gauteng Choristers and 29:11, for my friendships with the other Chorale singers.

I will cherish these 10 days for life and commit to the fight for the freedom of *everyone*.