

## Post #4 – Jim Hild

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### THE FIRST BIG EVENTS: THE SOWETO CONCERT

Friday August 17

We have reached Day #6: the first concert with the MN Orchestra.

The "running singers" were able to "put in" three miles and then have a leisure breakfast. The run felt harder than either of the first two! And it invigorated us for the upcoming events of the day.

We traveled to Soweto Friday afternoon for a rehearsal with the MN Orchestra, the soloists, and the Gauteng Choristers. When we arrived at Regina Mundi Catholic Church, I was struck that it a relatively modern structure similar to the parish where I worshiped as a child and adolescent: St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church in Canton Ohio. It was erected in 1962. As I departed from the bus, I immediately felt a deep sense of reverence, "heaviness", and holiness. The church opened its doors to anti-apartheid groups, providing shelter to the activists. During the student uprising of 1976, the protesters/ activists fled to the Church to escape the bullets and tear gas of the police. However, the police followed the students into the Church firing their guns, damaging the marble altar and the crucifix. The bullet holes are still visible. It is also the site where Archbishop Emeritus presided over the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 1995-1998.

The activity within the Church detracted from the "holiness": the MN Orchestra was setting up on the specially constructed stage, the seating chart for the MN Chorale needed to be altered drastically because of space constraints, the media people where everywhere. Dessa was even there! Once we were in our places on the elevated stage in front of the bullet ridden altar, our rehearsal began. It went very well: one can tell that things are going as desired when Osmo Vänskä smiles after we 'nail' a particularly troubling spot for the singer (ff to p: singing loudly and forcefully to singing softly in two measures or holding "Ihr" long enough before we sing "stürzt" on the correct beat).

After rehearsal all musicians, technical personal, the Board members of the MN Orchestra who were guarantors of the project, and local guests were served a delicious dinner with music provided by a jazz group from Soweto. There was much mingling between Chorale members and MN Orchestra members.

When we arrived back at Regina Mundi Catholic Church, there was a large number of people being admitted to the Church. I was overwhelmed with emotion by the diversity of the crowd, the majority of whom were dressed as if they were going to the opera. (Folks, Soweto is a city which houses generations of people forcefully removed from Johannesburg because they were black or colored. There are a number of large squatter cities within the city.) We handed out MN Chorale pins to as many children as we could and the programs to the adults. Their smiles touched my heart. I was proud to be an ambassador of the USA yet ashamed of living in a country which currently has a government which is, at the very least, suspicious of minorities. The MN Chorale sang in the second half of the program. We began with the 4th movement of Beethoven's Ninth (Ode to Joy: a call for universal Harmony). The crowd gave us a rousing standing ovation, the remaining pieces of music were South African, two of which prompted people to "stand immediately and to join in singing and dancing." As I mentioned in an earlier entry, "Bawo Thixo Somandla " and "Usilthela Uxolo" are songs strongly identified in the fight of Apartheid and for freedom. It is difficult to express the feelings which I experienced as I saw this very

diverse crowd, stand spontaneously applauding that we included these pieces of music in the program AND singing along and dancing in this historical and HOLY place.

We knew that we gave excellent performances and we sang well. By their reaction, the people were touched by our sensitivity to their "Long Road to Freedom". Yet it was them who gave us a gift welcoming us into their community and permitting us to see their suffering, pain and joy and freedom. I truly believe that this audience was the best group of people for whom I have ever performed.

I need to end for today: I am too emotional to continue writing tonight. I will share the events of and my thoughts about Day 7 tomorrow. It deserves a stand-alone section.

Thank you for reading.

Buona giornata!