

A Glimpse Across the Ocean

It is a very long way from Annapolis, Maryland to Nitra, Slovakia. But it is only a long way when you measure the mileage. From one Orff soul to another, it is indeed very close. For a short seven days in July of 2001, I had the opportunity to peek into the window of Orff Schulwerk in that corner of the world, and my vision and understanding will never be the same.

In the fall of 1999, Dr. Regner, Executive Director of the Carl Orff Foundation invited Coloman Kallos, a teacher at the Orff Institute, to arrive in the United States a few weeks before the Phoenix Conference to visit American schools. I had previously met Coloman when I was a student at the Institute, so he came to Maryland and Key School, where I teach. During his stay, he even witnessed an American Halloween....quite a sight! In the course of his short visit, he shared his successes and future ideas for Orff Schulwerk with me. Back in 1996, with the support and backing of the Orff Foundation, Coloman and his wife began an International Orff Schulwerk course in the Czech Republic. This course was very successful and ran for three summers. So inspiring was this course that one of its participants, Mirka Blaselova, a music education faculty member from the University of Nitra (in neighboring Slovakia) asked Coloman to consider organizing a future course with her in the city of Nitra. It was of this future course, to be held in the summer of 2001, that Coloman and I began to speak. What would the needs of the teachers be? From which countries might they come? What might an American teacher offer to these students? How would faculty members arriving from four different countries be able to work together? Would AOSA consider supporting such an effort? How could it all be arranged?

With the help and financial support of the Orff Foundation and AOSA, all the pieces came together. In July of 2001, with my 15 year daughter at my side, I traveled first to Vienna. There I met Mirka and her sister Maria Mandakovo who, along with Coloman, had organized this course. A short two hours later I found myself in Nitra, Slovakia. I immediately met the other three marvelous people who would be instructors with me. Although they were strangers to me at that moment, just a short week later I would remember them as creative, artistic Orff Schulwerk teachers who I would feel honored to know. Sonja Kern looked familiar to me; we remembered each other from the Orff Institute in 1999. Werner Beidinger came from

Potsdam University in Germany, where he teaches both college students and children. Finally, there was Lenka Pospisil, a beloved and well known teacher from Prague, who, like me, had brought along her fifteen year old daughter. (How quickly those teenagers discovered that toe rings and hair braiding are international!)

Coloman and we four instructors quickly gathered on that first day to share ideas. Since this was a one week class, each of us would offer our own area of strength to the participants. The schedule would be a little different from that of our American teacher training courses. A group breakfast would begin the day, followed by morning sing, morning classes, and long midday break (two hours!), afternoon classes, dinner as a group, and finally, an evening dance session beginning at 8 PM. The evening session went until *whenever!* I quickly learned that “whenever” simply meant when the participants ran out of steam, or the instructors ran out of songs and dances for the evening. Having led a few folk dance sessions in the past, I wondered what that would be like!

The course was held on the lovely grounds of the Priest Seminary House of St. Gorazd. Although the buildings dated back to the late sixteenth century, they had been recently renovated and offered us dormitory rooms, large classrooms and lovely gardens. There would be many wonderful locations where we might have our morning sing. One morning we could sing in the gardens, another morning on the three story winding marble staircase, yet another morning in a quaint courtyard. All this would be to the delight of the young seminarians and nuns who were sharing their lovely home with us.

There was great excitement in the air the evening before the course began, as participants started dribbling in and occupying their rooms in the seminary. There were loud reunion hugs and more formal introductions taking place in the hallways, similar to what we might see and hear at our own summer courses. The only difference.....seven languages! The trick was to learn who could understand and translate for whom! All in all, teachers arrived from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Germany and Austria. There were over seventy teachers, some who had never been away from home before, and many who had never traveled outside of their previously Communist-occupied country.

The first morning of class began with a flurry. My wonderful translator was Mirka's sister, Maria, who had participated in Coloman's course in the Czech Republic in 1998. Organizing a similar course in their hometown in Slovakia was the culmination of their joint three-year dream. I discovered that the participants ranged in age from only nineteen to nearing retirement. There were beginners as well more experienced teachers. My heart was racing, but I took a deep breath and started teaching.

We sang. We moved. We played. So many of the students were interested in hearing about American children, pedagogy, materials and ideas. I did my best to answer all the questions. I tried to communicate that there isn't one *American* way of learning, but rather, each teacher brings the sum total of all of her gifts and experience in that very moment, to each child. As the days went on, it was clear I was learning every bit as much as the students. I discovered that a simple gesture goes further than fifty words, that good music and movement brings people together, and that laughter and playfulness transcend any language.

The evenings were my favorite part of the day. It was a less formal time, a chance to unwind and to participate in the blending of all the cultures. I especially loved singing the beautiful Czech folk melodies that Lenka shared. Her husband, with guitar in hand, helped to bring this music to life. I could never express the feeling I had when, after she taught a simple melody, most of the people in the room broke into singing that melody with the traditional harmonies never written down, but all just seemed to know by instinct. Everyone relaxed and enjoyed the casual evenings.

During part of two days, the students worked out a thematic project. The theme was the poem *Sunegl (Dances of the Sun)* by St. Francis of Assisi. These projects were to be shared on the final evening as part of the final concert. The amazing and unique part, was that in developing this theme, there was even a visual art component! On Wednesday evening we went as a group to the beautiful local art museum. There, the students were divided into six groups- earth, sun, water, etc. Each group was given part of the poem to develop visually, using mural paper, paint and large pieces of fabric. As I walked through the rooms of the museum, watching and listening to the students as they worked, I was struck by a multi-lingual buzzing of ideas. In one corner I would hear a bit of German, with someone translating into Czech. In another part of the room, there might be Polish, being translated into German! Somehow, in only an hour and a half, each

group had a piece of art that would represent their ideas. The next day they would develop those ideas using music, movement and speech.

On the final evening there was a unique concert. It began in the Cathedral at the top of the hill. We walked there singing, lighting our way with torches. Once in the Cathedral, we sang *Jubilate Deo, Spirit of God*, and a beautiful choral piece, *Canticle of Brother Sun* written by Wilhelm Keller. Professor Keller was the first director of the Orff Institute and longtime close friend of Carl Orff. The final choral piece was written by the Czech composer and teacher Pavel Jurkovic was based on the roots of Bohemian and Moravian Czech music-tradition.

After the concert, we processed down the hill, pausing at the six places where the various groups had set up their mural and whatever instruments they would need. Then, each group performed its musical creation in the warm evening air by the light of torches. We ended in the circular garden in front of the seminary building. The young seminarians who had enjoyed our music all week, attended the concert, and following the lead of the Monsignor, joined us in our solemn ending circle dance. It was magical.

The final morning there was a joyful dance session, held not at the seminary, but rather in the middle of the main street of the town! Casual observers joined in and applauded. Shop owners opened their doors to listen and watch. It was quite a sight, over seventy people “skipping the willow” right down the middle of the street. At the end, everyone hugged and said their goodbyes.

I believe that in the United States, we are fortunate to have so many strong teacher-training programs, and so many talented teachers with whom to study. But there are other areas of the world where Orff Schulwerk is less known and familiar, or where it is in its infancy, and there are many teachers here who could share their gifts. The Carl Orff Foundation has been supporting and financing many of these courses over the past many years. I feel so proud that AOSA has joined the Foundation in its mission to support Orff Schulwerk on an international level. By forming the International Outreach Committee, AOSA now has established a small fund designed to assist teacher trainers in countries that demonstrate educational and financial need. I believe it is well worth our investment.

When it was time to pack and leave for home, I felt proud that I may have generated a spark of learning or interest in teachers I might not otherwise have had the opportunity to meet. But mostly I felt privileged to have witnessed first hand just how powerful the work we do every day really is. Beyond our own classrooms, beyond our local chapters and our wonderful AOSA Conferences, I was fortunate to witness that the identical work that we do is equally powerful and soul-moving all around the world. It still amazes me that a seven year old in a small town in Slovenia may actually be playing the same canon from Music For Children, or may be practicing his English by singing “Little Liza Jane”, in much the same way that my very own students are doing right here in Annapolis.