

In the Footsteps of the ACO - New York and Boston 1 - 14 April 2019



Budapest Festival Orchestra- Carnegie Hall

Monday 1 April

Our group of 14 first met in the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel Times Square on 53rd and 7th Avenue New York. It was like meeting in the concourse of Sydney's Central Station complete with echoing PA. It is a very large mid-town hotel with a huge lobby, bright surfaces and masses of people, guests and hangers-on, all communicating by shouting. A very exciting, not to say intimidating introduction to this heaving city. The tour was organised by Rob Lovell and Clare Bridge of Alumni Travel in association with international travel agency Globetrotters. As leader of the tour, in addition to choosing the program of performances, museum visits and excursions, I was responsible for organising the itinerary of getting from one place to the next in the allotted time, finding the right subway entrance, and choosing and finding the right line to get to our destination. Once our little group hit the street, it was like herding cats through the thronging sidewalks, grid-locked streets and ubiquitous scaffolding. It was a constant adrenalin rush for us all!

Tuesday 2 April

Our first full day included a walking tour of mid-town centered around the endlessly fascinating Rockefeller Center, led by a charming Italian guide Enrico, relaxed,

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humorous and expert. After our walk, Enrico delivered us to Applebee's for the Welcome Lunch. This was a mis-judgement by Globetrotters. While it is a popular chain of restaurants, we were led up dirty stairs to a large empty room like a canteen to a long table set with plastic glasses and jugs of water. The set meal was quite tasty, but the setting and ambience was a real downer, the opposite of what the Welcome Lunch should be for a costly, up-market classical music tour.

In the evening we attended our first performance, a short walk from the hotel to the Sondheim Theatre for the long-running Broadway musical *Beautiful*, the story of the tremendously successful singer/ songwriter Carole King. The whole audience loved every minute of it and stood and cheered. I think I was the only one in the theatre who didn't know every song backwards.

Wednesday 3 April

The next day took us to the wonderful Guggenheim Museum on upper 5th Avenue, where we were greeted by the guide Ellen. She started by pointing out the spiral shape of the museum and Frank Lloyd Wright's constant references to the spiral in the furniture and decorative elements of the place, uncannily echoed by the predominant symbols of the main exhibition we were shown. Ellen was the ultimate highly trained guide who was able to point out the full extent of the artist's ideas and process by asking us questions and drawing conclusions from our responses and her own insights. Most of the museum was taken up with an extraordinary exhibition by a largely unknown Swedish artist Hilma af Klint, born mid-19th century and unwitting precursor of much Impressionist and Expressionist art she never knew, drawing upon her deep intuition and spiritualist influences.

In the evening, on a balmy night, we walked up Broadway to the Metropolitan Opera, approaching the elegant 5 arched facade of the Met in Lincoln Centre Square flanked by the Koch Ballet theatre and the Geffen Concert Hall. It's always a breathtaking experience approaching this emperor of opera houses with its two great Chagall paintings lit up behind the columns. We saw an old 1984 Ponnelle

production of Mozart's last opera *Clemenza di Tito* in its 4th revival. It was anything but a tired old production, invoking a splendid Ancient Rome in a dramatic, beautifully sung performance led by Joyce di Donato and featuring wonderful clarinet and basset horn obligatos for some of the arias. As always the Met



Painting by Hilma af Klint at Guggenheim

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offers a peerless operatic experience despite its huge 3800 seat size with excellent sight lines and balanced acoustics.

Thursday 4 April

It was another lovely spring day for a walk on New York's HighLine, the remarkable conversion of an old disused elevated railway line in downtown New York. We started the walk at the trendy new development at the old shipping yards on the Hudson River called Hudson Yards. Featuring skyscraper residential towers, huge shopping malls, an arts centre, and a massive multi storey open catwalk type of building called the Vessel, it is clearly the place to be for monied younger New York style setters. The HighLine walk is a leisurely 3 kilometre stroll and finishes up in the Chelsea district. We had lunch in the well known Chelsea market which contains every kind of fast food outlet and a plethora of out of the way shops. After lunch, we were taken for guided tour of the nearby Whitney Museum of American art. This was interesting but our young guide, though knowledgeable, had none of Ellen's ability to light up the works of art. I had a strange deja vu experience at the Whitney. I saw a glimpse of an outside balcony through the door of one of the exhibition rooms, and it seemed familiar. I walked out on to it and immediately knew I had been there before, even the familiar outside steps leading down to the next level. But I have no recollection of ever having visited the Whitney before. Trawling back in my mind of previous visits to New York, I can't recall any circumstance where I would have been at this museum before.

Our second Broadway musical took place the same evening, this one called *The Band's Visit* about an Egyptian band of young and old characters all dressed in absurd pale blue military style uniforms who are on tour and wind up by mistake in a small Israeli village where they have to spend the night. It is based on a film of the same name made 20 years ago that I remember seeing. The musical has been running nearly three years

on Broadway, and though quite small scale it has won a whole stack of awards and ours was the 3rd last performance. I found it absolutely delightful, charming, very funny and spot on in its eccentric characterisations.



Curtain calls for the Band's Visit on Broadway

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The music was gentle and nostalgic - full of a range of middle eastern sounds and styles, absolutely my kind of musical. me I just wanted to stay in the theatre and have them perform it over again. A real highlight of the tour.

Friday 5 April

On the Friday we struck another splendid guide for our visit to the fabulous Met Museum. His name was Austin, a very preppy 70 year old retired architect with an encyclopaedic passion for the Met's collection. The charm and knowledge of guides like Austin, and Ellen at the Guggenheim, transform our experience of these great collections. His detailed explanations of key Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures and the background to the Chinese pavilion were especially fascinating to me.

In the evening we returned to the Met opera, for their lavish new production by Michael Mayer of Verdi's *La Traviata*. This was the Met at its most typical and most splendid, and I predict a long and happy life for this production, unlike its austere predecessor. An opera house always has to have an attractive production in hand for this most popular, sentimental and glamorous opera. It gave us a huge semi-circular set with Violetta's deathbed centre stage throughout. The set was decorated with almost claustrophobic floral and vinous arrangements twisted around the walls and for the opening prelude a huge rose over the top with Violetta in her death bed, an ingenious idea well suited to the sad music of the prelude, normally played before the curtain rises. The same set was used throughout with changing costumes, furnishings and especially lighting creating the moods and situations. The big name singers had departed in the first outing of this production a few months ago, but the leading roles for our performance were superbly sung by Stephen Costello, an excellent lyric tenor looking suitably spoilt and immature and Anita Hartig as a dignified and well sung Violetta, and Arthur Ruzinski as Germont.

Saturday 6 April

Saturday was a beautiful day and we walked up Broadway to the Lincoln Center to visit the American Folk Art Museum. It was a small collection of largely amateur or primitive paintings, posters and objects, mostly relating to the history of New York. In the evening we had a our first tour concert at Carnegie Hall. Despite its rather cramped foyers, the hall itself is a spectacular space with its sweeping curved lines in white and cream and red plush seats. The acoustics are lively and orchestral music always sounds lush and exciting. We had the Budapest Festival Orchestra under its famous founder Ivan Fischer in an all- Bartok program, perhaps on paper, not the most inviting prospect, despite being Hungary's most famous composer. It was a truly fascinating concert starting with Bartok's Romanian Dances and Peasant Songs, based on his life-long collection of Eastern European ethnic songs and dances. We heard a violinist,

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violinist and bass player, all from the orchestra play many of these dances in their original peasant form, and a singer sing many of them in the way they would have been heard originally. Then the orchestra played them as arranged by Bartok, a fascinating contrast with members of the orchestra often singing along. A truly unique musical experience we and the audience loved. After the interval, we had a concert performance of his short opera *Bluebeard's Castle*, superbly sung by Hungarian soloists. I thought it the best performance I had heard of the opera and the large Hungarian contingent in the audience cheered to the echo at the end.

Sunday 7 April

On the Sunday we embarked on a big outdoor day: first a walk across the famous Brooklyn Bridge, then a walk around Brooklyn Heights and Brooklyn Heights, and finally a subway across New York to take the Liberty Ferry on a cruise around the waters at the south of Manhattan. All a lovely idea, but it didn't quite work out. Our Italian guide Laura was very slow and seemed to have trouble with her English. We fell behind in the schedule, had to hurry around the Botanic garden, and she finally delivered us to the wrong cruise terminal, a mile away from the correct one. Despite an exhausting rush for everyone to get to the right terminal, we missed the ferry. Despite re-scheduling the cruise to the next day, it was a very disappointing finish to the day. A learning experience for me to make sure new destinations are pre-reconnoitred.

Monday 8 April

Monday, being a day when most theatres and museums are closed, was a rest day with only a visit to the nearby MoMA scheduled, apart from the re-scheduled Liberty Cruise some of us decided to do.

Tuesday 9 April

Big day today: Carnegie Hall tour > Dixieland Jazz at Lincoln Center > ACO concert at Rose Theatre > ACO after party! We had a guide called Jeffrey at Carnegie Hall who knew all the old stories of the hall and its artists over the years and was a real enthusiast to boot. Some of us found the signed and framed photos on the foyer walls of former famous artists absolutely fascinating, many going back 50 or more years. He took us to a box close to the stage so we could look back and photo the tiers, then into the museum full of strange memorabilia. He would have gone on all morning, but we had to get to the Performing Arts Museum in Lincoln Center for a free jazz concert in the Bruno Walter Auditorium. It was wonderful. The ancient compere/pianist looked up from his piano and told us the drummer couldn't make it, so we had to do with the rest who filed slowly on stage, a clarinet, cornet, a bass player who looked positively youthful, not a day over 70, and finally a trombonist in bedraggled corduroys staggered on.



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On average they must have been in their mid-eighties, but they knew their Dixieland and they belted it out for an hour with arcane comments from the pianist about the provenance of each piece. When they dragged themselves off the stage, I thought they would have to go home to rest for a week, but no, in 15 minutes they were back for another hour.

The ACO concert oddly was in the Rose Theatre in the Time Warner building, New York's leading jazz venue, but it was a suitable enough mid-sized hall with decent acoustics. They played a very classical program with Richard's arrangement of four of Bach's Contrapuncti for the Art of Fugue, followed by Mozart's little A major piano concerto K 414 and after the interval the late B flat Beethoven Quartet op 130 also in Richard's arrangement. I enjoyed the Mozart the most with the ACO's funky but delicate phrasing and strongly contrasted dynamics making it so different from the typical approach to Mozart concertos. The Bach pieces were also highly unconventional, sometimes almost inaudible, sometimes seeming like 21st century music, especially with the players humming along in the last pizzicato piece. The Beethoven was played with the Grosse Fuge as the last movement, Beethoven's original intention, instead of the usual last movement, altogether lighter in mood that he composed later, his very last composition. Again the rendering was highly unconventional, particularly the short middle movements with fierce dynamic contrasts and angular phrasing sometimes making the key melodic themes unrecognisable. Richard is quoted in the Program notes as saying while he is rooted in authentic performance practice in music of his period, he feels the music responds to completely new interpretations.

After the performance our whole group was invited to the party for the ACO in the Landmarc restaurant in the same building. Typical after party with masses of excited guests, the musicians and assorted VIPs crowded into a small room with an incredible noise level. I found myself in a deep conversation with the English composer Nico Muhly, whose opera *Marnie* has been successfully mounted at both the Met and English National and is now commissioned to do a major work for the ACO later this year. I also found that no known US critic had been at the concert and chastised a couple of members of their New York committee that getting the critics along was surely their most important task.

Wednesday 10 April

Our last day in New York took us first to the new World Trade Center for a guided visit of the Memorial that features two huge sunken pools with seamless waterfalls around all edges on the precise sites of the two destroyed buildings. Our guide told moving stories of people who died on 11 September 2001 and whose names are carved in steel around the periphery of the pools.

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In the evening we all gathered at Remi's Italian restaurant across 53rd St from the hotel for a delicious dinner to farewell Sue Berners Price and Yvonne Chang who sadly both had to leave the tour at the end of the New York leg. After the dinner we walked the four blocks to Carnegie Hall for the recital by Gautier Capucon and Yuja Wang who played the Franck Violin Sonata arranged for cello and the Rachmaninoff Cello Sonata, two huge chamber works that both players attacked with enormous gusto. As a total star young pianist, Wang was to a degree the main attraction and her phenomenal technique and glamorous presence didn't let her down, especially a couple of terrific encores including a wonderful version of Saint Saens *The Swan*.

Thursday 11 April

This was farewell to New York on a comfortable coach driven by the genial Rolando. We arrived early afternoon in Boston at the Logan Airport Hilton, and after settling in, most of us took the hotel shuttle to the Airport train station and went in to the centre of Boston. We walked around the Public Garden and Boston Common and up Charles Street to Beacon Hill and its elegant old shops and houses as far as magnificent Louisburg Square. Then back along Beacon Street until we finally came to the Public Library where we looked in to the splendid reading room and its other frescoed public rooms. Twice we were approached by locals offering to help and guide us where we wanted to go, once by a most helpful middle aged woman and secondly by a young man who went out of his way to advise where to go. Perhaps we looked like a group of lost sheep, but I was impressed with their friendly helpfulness.

Friday 12 April

Nothing was scheduled until our visit to Symphony Hall in the afternoon and some of our group expressed their frustration with the location out at the airport of our hotel. Certainly it catered primarily for overnight business travellers and required transport by periodic shuttles and trains (or taxis) to get anywhere. I explained that the clash of our visit with the Boston Marathon meant most hotels were booked out well in advance so we had little choice. However our frustration was nothing compared with that of the Hilton staff, who that very morning, filed out into the middle of the huge hangar-like multi-level lobby, and for the next 20 minutes chanted at the top of their lungs; "WHAT DO WE WANT? CONTRACTS. WHEN DO WE WANT THEM/ NOW!" In the huge resonant space the noise was deafening. The management was too lily-livered to appear, so the 60 odd staff filed off shouting they would be back the next day. It was a spectacular protest and we doubted such an event could ever happen in a hotel in Australia or Europe. It really highlighted the huge gulf between the haves and have nots in the US and goes some way to explain the aggressive demands for 20% tips by all US service staff who are paid so poorly and have such inadequate conditions.

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In the afternoon we went to Symphony Hall, the headquarters and concert hall of the Boston Symphony, the wealthiest and most hallowed symphony orchestra in America. In their board room we met their Artistic Manager of 25 years, Australian and ex-ABC pianist Tony Fogg who gave us a fascinating run-down of the history and practice of the BSO. Their annual program is effectively divided into three segments both chronologically and in terms of their program and planning. First is the BSO's main subscription concert season from late September to May, interspersed with tours of the orchestra within the US and overseas. Then is the season of the Boston Pops, its long running and incredibly popular concerts for the general public, and finally in July / August everyone reverts to Tanglewood, a large estate owned by the BSO in upstate Massachusetts where the Tanglewood Festival takes place, the most prestigious music festival in the US. Tanglewood attracts great musicians and ensembles from around the world and features innovative development programs to take talented young musicians into the professional ranks. A charming lady called Carol Brown then took us on a guided tour of the famous hall. It has the aspect of a fussy 19th century Victorian hall, which indeed it is, but its acoustics are so revered, no one dares to make any alteration.

After a nice dinner at the nearby Westland Restaurant, we attended the BSO concert. It was rather disappointing due to the indisposition of the conductor the charismatic Venezuelan Gustavo Dudamel. He was replaced by the BSO's assistant conductor and their chorus master who between them shared a re-jigged program. We heard a lively performance of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G, and an atmospheric piece for orchestra chorus and soloists called Cantata Criolla by the Mexican composer Estavez, where perhaps the Devil had the last word.

Saturday 13 April

Our last day of the tour gave us great variety. Starting with an introduction to our patient coach driver Noel, he was with us the entire day until delivery back at the hotel after the ACO concert. First we visited the Boston Tea Party and Ships Museum and went through an ingenious pantomimed presentation of the Boston Tea Party aimed primarily at kids and parents. There we met our guide Charlie, a grizzled character whose patter followed a much-practised script. Our coach driver Noel took us with Charlie to Harvard Yard where he explained the origins of the elegant old university buildings. After a splendid farewell lunch at Parker's Hotel in a spectacular dining room - all on our own, Noel drove us back to the Logan Hilton for a rest before returning us to Jordan Hall (close to Symphony Hall) for the ACO concert.

Jordan Hall is another traditional concert hall, somewhat smaller than Symphony Hall, but again featuring excellent acoustics, and the ACO played the same program as we

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heard in New York. However the warm acoustic and excellent sightlines of Jordan Hall gave me at least, a much more enjoyable experience of the ACO's program. We also had the great British pianist Paul Lewis playing the Mozart concerto. I thought his performance was more expressive and authoritative than Inon Barnaton in New York. The concert was a terrific way to finish the tour.

Antony Jeffrey
29 April 2019

