

Recipe for a magical music tour

Loreto Mandeville Hall Toorak leaves nothing to chance



The tour took in Germany, Austria, Ireland and England

If organising a school camp is a major exercise, imagine the work that goes into taking 43 musicians and vocalists, aged from 13 to 18 on a three-week concert tour across Germany, Austria, England and Ireland. It's a labour of love that Mary O'Driscoll has undertaken three times over 10 years. She is Director of Music at Loreto Mandeville Hall Toorak in Melbourne, one of the many Loreto schools around the world. This year's tour was particularly significant because it marked the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Loreto Sisters by Englishwoman Mary Ward in 1609.

The 2009 European Music Tour left Melbourne on 6th January and returned on 27th January. Over the three weeks, the group gave performances and participated in celebratory Masses in the four countries visited.

Six teachers accompanied the girls, for a staff to student ratio of 1: 7. Ms O'Driscoll says having an extra accompanying adult is well worthwhile, allowing time off when someone needs a rest.

Overnight accommodation on tour is a combination of home stays with the families of schools where the tour is visiting, and youth hostels. Younger girls are paired together when they stay with a host family. The teachers stay in nearby hotels during the homestay nights.

"The girls absolutely love homestays," Ms O'Driscoll says. "They enjoy meeting the families of girls from their 'sister' schools; many have made friends for life."

The experience of previous tours has taught the school that touring groups should visit and perform in no more than five places. To attempt to do more would turn the tour into a grind of airport check-ins, bus rides, deadlines and exhausted performers.

For many girls, going on a Loreto tour is their first time away from parents and home comforts. Looking after their own uniforms, casual clothes and laundry can come as something of a surprise.

"They quickly become very self sufficient," Ms O'Driscoll says. "They come back home

much more mature than when they left."

Being self-sufficient includes each girl carrying her own passport and managing pocket money. The school makes sure to have a photocopy of everyone's travel papers and a recent photograph, in case of emergencies.

Discipline has never been a problem, though the school sets sensible boundaries and expects the girls to respect them. By the end of each busy day, they are looking forward to bed and ready to turn the light out.

In many of the places the tour visits, the girls are given time to explore, in groups of four to six. Girls that have relatives in the locality may meet up with them, but are not allowed to leave their group. Overnight stays away from the group are not allowed under any circumstances.

Given the girls' common interest, many of the sites visited and excursions are music-focused. Highlights of the 2009 tour included The Sounds of Salsburg Show, a chamber music concert and seeing a West End musical while in London.



Clockwise: Time out in London; chilly in Germany; accompanying teachers; polished performances

Musically, Ms O'Driscoll says, touring improves the girls' playing and singing. "Music is part of their week during school term, but with so much going on, practice and rehearsal time is limited. At the end of three weeks, they are playing and singing at a different level."

Planning for each Loreto music tour starts two years in advance of the departure date, with an announcement of the tour's itinerary and dates. Families interested in having a daughter go on tour are advised of the expected cost and can make progressive payments over 18 months.

But the family's ability to pay for the tour doesn't mean an automatic seat on the bus. Every applicant is auditioned and Ms O'Driscoll and

the music teaching staff have the often-difficult task of not being able to take every would-be participant.

Instrumentalists are also encouraged to sing. By combining their skills, the tour group presents a variety of ensembles; this year, a 38-voice choir, a 16-voice chamber choir, a 26-instrument orchestra, a string quartet and a clarinet quintet.

Having coped with the difficulties and risks of bringing double basses on tour, the school now borrows large instruments at each destination. "Airlines are becoming more and more strict about check in and hand carry baggage weight limits," Ms O'Driscoll says. "We're always concerned about the safety of

instruments so we hand carry the smaller ones and use a lot of bubble wrap."

Eighteen months before the 2009 tour departed Ms O'Driscoll travelled to Europe on an inspection visit to most of the places on the itinerary. She inspected youth hostels, checked out tour buses and tourist venues, and visited with the schools that would be hosting the tour group. She emphasises that this is an absolutely essential part of a smooth tour.

Is touring a group of musicians worth the stress and hard work? For Mary O'Driscoll it's an emphatic 'Yes'. "The girls benefit in every way, musically and in their personal development. As a group, we bond, this time as a family of 49," she says.