

A LITTLE NIGHT MOOSE (sic)
A Groupie Report on the Swedish Tour
by Ed Schultz

*The sun won't set
It's as low as it's going to get.*

So wrote Sondheim and so right he was.

Six each of sopranos, altos and tenors, plus four bassos, one bell ringer, one conductor, and ten groupies (later twelve when a former NASer and his wife flew over from Moscow to join the jaunt) descended on Sweden early on the morning of June 26 1999. The sun never completely returned the favor for the nine days of a triumphant trek from Stockholm to the Arctic Circle and back. Nine days, four towns, six scheduled concerts and three “quickies.”

*Pack up the luggage,
La, la, la.
Unpack the luggage,
La, la, la.
Heigh ho, the glamorous life!*

This being your reporter's first NAS tour, he was much impressed with the good will and willingness of the troop to cope with “flexible” arrangements...

“There'll be no home stays or concert at the church. The pastor was fired.”

... and conflicting instructions...

“Clara said to get on the last car of the train.”
“No, the last car gets the luggage and the second car is for us.”
“But the second car is full!”

Zen moment: Perhaps if all artists had to pay out of their own pockets to tour they would behave better and have more fun.

We open in Stockholm....

Stockholm, the Venice of the north and well-named. Still rising one centimeter per year from beneath the pressure of 14 kilometers of an ice age glacier, the entire country is laced with lakes and rippled with rivers. (Likely the nurseries of the mosquito swarms that descended upon us with Viking-like vigor in the venues north of Stockholm.)

The Maria Magdalena Church on one of the fourteen islands that are Stockholm hosted the opening concert on our first Sunday. In spite of jet-lag and darkness-deprivation, our valiant corps de chorus pleased a very appreciative audience.

(Swedish audiences -- ours at least -- seemed at first implacable, applauding politely, becoming a bit more enthusiastic with the rendition of the Swedish folk tune on the program, and finally getting unSwedishly “with it” when the chorus swung into the Negro Spiritual “Ain’t Got Time To Die,” including at one concert a standing ovation! Interesting folks the Swedes. The Danes and Norwegians think of them as stiff, formal, and given to making long speeches at the drop of an aquavit. A stodgy impression belied by your reporter’s discovery of a *very* personal Swedish personals catalog with eye-catching photos in his Stockholm hotel desk drawer [while seeking the Gideon bible]. As you might have guessed, the Swedish tell Norwegian jokes.)

*We opened in Stockholm
Then on to Ostersund...*

In the lake upon which Ostersund sits there dwells, so says the local tourist board, a Swedish Loch Ness monster, and wooden scale models of “Ossie” on sale in the hotel lobby bear witness to the truth of it. And bearing witness to the boundless hospitality of the city were “The Singing Brothers” -- a group of men of varying occupations belonging to an amateur chorus with a history dating back to the 1920's -- who quite literally adopted us. Chauffeuring us to and guiding us about the Jamtli Historieland living museum where our chorus performed a “mini-concert” (for a mini-audience), the Brothers made it their business to be sure that at no time during our two-day stay would we ever feel like strangers.

Our final night in Ostersund we performed as part of the Musik vid Storsjon Festival, once again to a very appreciative and almost full house. A review surfaced the following day as we were on our way by train to Arjeplog.

*Pack up the luggage,
La, la, la!*

Our Swedish guide, guardian angel, and roadie, Ake (Ahkay) Gille (Ghee-lay, related, he pointed out, to the French Gillette, but alas not to the razor blade fortune) attempted an on-the-spot translation. It was “mixed,” and we never were sure if “exploding sopranos” was an accurate translation.

*We open in Stockholm,
Then on to Ostersund.
Our next stop is --*

Arjeplog (Aryiplohg), the mosquito capital of Sweden. Reporting to Ake that I killed a mosquito three inches long in my room, he replied without missing a beat, “Norwegian.”

The first evening’s concert was in a beautifully reconstructed 18th century church, once again filled with appreciative concert-goers. The next day, up to the Arctic Circle to see what it looked like in 60° weather. Those in shorts were appropriately dressed for the occasion, having acclimated themselves to temperatures that rose as high as 80° in Stockholm and never fell below 55° anywhere.

That evening the inaugural concert of The Lapland Festival and another first -- a vocal group opening the premiere chamber music festival of Sweden. The reception was enthusiastic and warm. And late that night -- a fact observable only by clock -- a Reindeer Roundup! To find the cow that goes with the recently born calf, the Laps run their mixed herds in a circle until cow and calf find each other, at which point the calf is gently roped and its ear notched with the family mark. (The source of “ear-marked”?) To some it seemed more like a human roundup for the mosquitos. No one left unfound and unmarked. The definitive audio icon of the event -- “The Reindeer Honk” -- is available on request from anyone who was there. (For the most accurate performance an infusion of aquavit is recommended.)

Fortunately, the next day was free to scratch and enjoy Arjeplog. But the Reindeer Barbecue that night caused some to wonder which of last night calves was now an orphan. Outside our hotel room windows the barbecue spit turned...

Rudolph, the dead-nosed reindeer!

Even unrepentant carnivores were getting a little weary of the salty, over-cured flavor of the Lap favorite. Think smoked pork tenderloin.

*Pack up the luggage,
La, la, la!*

July 4th and the final concert in historic Luleå. Historic, in part, for a Pope's influence on its economy when he decided fish should be on every Catholic menu 180 days a year. Luleå on the Baltic boomed. Then came Martin Luther. In the magnificent Gammelstad (old town) church, our performers received a standing ovation, and for an encore sang simply, but very movingly, "America, the Beautiful."

The final banquet (no reindeer) featured the traditional groupie parody written by Gail Duncan and, in keeping with tradition, performed atrociously, complete with The Reindeer Honk. A rousing and well-deserved salute went to John Duncan for his organizing and managing the tour (and the tenors).

The tour boiled down to a few words? Spirited and spirituous. Skoal! And where to next?!

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La, la, la!
Heigh ho, the glamorous life!*

-- Ed Schultz, July 1999