

THE CHORISTERS' TOUR: TO JAPAN AND BACK!

4.00am is an obscene time to report to an airport! But it was all in a very good cause. The Cathedral Choristers were on their way to Sydney and on to Tokyo and Kyoto in Japan.

Almost two years ago, the Choristers were invited to sing at the celebration for the 45th anniversary of the sister city relationship between Kurashiki and Christchurch. That invitation was accepted and a heavy programme of fundraising commenced.

Sadly, about two months out from departure, major flooding affected the part of Japan to which we were travelling and the Kurashiki events were cancelled. It was too late to make major changes to our itinerary, so we booked Kyoto instead, changed trains, added a few more days in Tokyo and a few more yen to the budget and kept up the preparations. It was a big ask, but the target was reached.

On that early morning in late September, it was hard to believe that the trip was actually going ahead. Actually, at that time of the morning it was hard to believe we were awake!

Sydney was our first stop – somewhere with a familiar feel to start the trip. That first day was a busy one – early flight and arrival, sight-seeing around the central city, checking in at the YHA, getting changed and singing a Choral Mass with the choristers of St Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral. A magnificent venue, reminiscent of the big English Cathedrals and with an acoustic to match, it was the boys' first experience singing in a vast building not made of cardboard. Despite, or perhaps because of us breaking their digital choir organ and having to take a walk into one of the transepts to use the main Cathedral organ for the anthem, it was a memorable way to start the tour.

It was time to be tourists for a while. Visits and tours had been arranged for



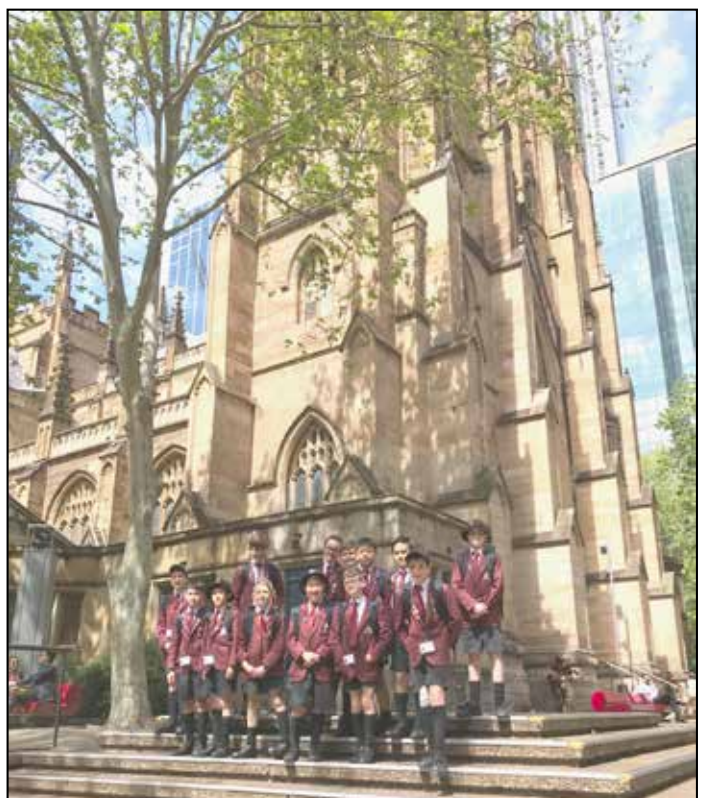
the Sydney Cricket Ground (questions were asked about sandpaper), Taronga Zoo (everything from creepy-crawlies and slithery things to the great apes – everyone felt right at home and Toto the stuffed lemur joined the group), the National Maritime Museum (there was surprise that submarines do not have ensembles) and the Sydney Opera House (looks like a couple of nuns on steroids). All this interspersed with shopping (The Queen Victoria Building was a bit out of our budget, but the Apple Store allowed us to play with the latest devices).

We came to grips with some serious public transport, using opal cards on trains, ferries and buses and only once popping out of the wrong station exit like a surprised rabbit in the wrong hole.

Then it was back to work. A lunchtime concert and Choral Evensong at St Andrew's Anglican Cathedral allowed their choir the night off to prepare for their own trip away. However, our boys did mingle with the St Andrew's Choristers, the only other choir

school in the southern hemisphere – which is located in a high rise building with a roof-top playground (and roof-top chickens). We bumped into one of the Cathedral bellringers who took us up the tower and showed us how the bells were rung. This came as a relief to some of the group who were getting a guided tour of the Cathedral that was concentrating more on evangelism than information!

We later experienced the catholic end of the Anglican spectrum by singing Choral Evensong and Benediction at Christ Church St Laurence. To quote Stainer, "The house was filled with smoke!"



A day off at the beach at Watson's Bay (with fish & chips from Doyles of course) and the familiarity came to an end. We headed off into the unknown! Japan was a first for everyone in the group. There was a degree of apprehension, but a post-graduate degree in excitement!

Japan started with a queue. The plane landed at 5.10am. But by the time we had negotiated immigration, made a claim for a lost bag and purchased several bottles of clear coke (you can't get it in New Zealand, and having drunk some we understood why), it was a good two hours later before we finally made it on to a bus. We left our bags at the Hostel (and 'hostel' does not describe it – modern, comfortable, curtained bunks, complimentary robes, toothbrushes and slippers (although some of our feet were too large), a great restaurant and bar, a huge balcony overlooking the river with the Sky Tree Tower in the distance, and an incredibly warm welcome) and headed off for a trip round Tokyo stopping off at the Sky Tree Tower (the world's tallest single structure, and actually a transmitting tower for Tokyo's TV and radio signals). The top floor, at 451 metres, had a glass floor, so we soon discovered who was not so keen on heights!



Having descended to the safety of *terra firma*, a food court was found covering 3 floors. Everyone was given money and told to go hunter-gathering. The hunters gathered a wide variety of Japanese food, discovering that the locals don't just eat sushi (in fact sushi is not a regular meal for most Japanese). No one went hungry – a tradition that was maintained! The first Pokemon store of the trip was visited and a bewildering array of items purchased. The fact that you couldn't buy Pokemon cards (whatever they are) apparently caused some frustration.

At the Toyota exhibit, the boys climbed into every late model car they could and experienced a 4D rally ride. Again, there was shopping too, at the equivalent of the \$2 shop – the ¥100 shop – where everything actually cost ¥108.00 because of tax!

Unusually, toilets featured as a Day One highlight (and, in fact for the rest of the trip too). Instead of a single flush button, there was a control panel, similar to that required to pilot the Starship Enterprise. At the push of a button, you could heat the seat, have music played at you and have hot or cold water squirted into places best not considered.

A blast of hot air could follow. Jokes abounded as to the potential for personal injury, but none will be repeated here! What is said on tour stays on tour! Although one intrepid traveller was so taken with the convenience, that he was overheard saying he would be in there watching Netflix and may be gone some time!

It was back to work. Well, not exactly work, but an important day for the boys to represent their School, Cathedral and City. Yokohama Jogakuin School (a Christian Girls' High School) has been visiting the Cathedral in Christchurch for 25 years. This was the first time we had been able to make a return visit. The school had completely re-arranged their day for us. One of the memories that will stick for years is presenting a short concert to 800 girls, who shrieked, giggled and waved at the boys between every item. Justin Bieber would not have had a more appreciative audience! The adulation continued as the boys walked through the school, with girls hanging out of classroom windows. The stars revelled in the attention and the Headmaster was bemused at the complete breakdown in discipline our group was causing! The boys spent a few hours in the English classes learning Japanese games and letting the girls practise English.

It was a great pleasure, two weeks later, just a few days after our return, to welcome those same girls to Christchurch on their own visit. Friendships were renewed and the giggling continued! Already some parents are considering



not allowing their sons to travel to Japan as teenagers!

From Yokohama it was straight to St Alban's Church in Tokyo (the English-speaking church adjacent to the Diocesan Cathedral) to sing Choral Evensong, another food court, this time with an emphasis on noodles, then back to the hostel navigating the Tokyo subway – and, despite our best attempts, not losing a soul!

Time for a rapid change of scene. The 500km between Tokyo and Kyoto was completed in just over 2 hours by Bullet Train, certainly an efficient way to travel. Even with only about 60 seconds to get everyone and their luggage off the train, it was a seamless journey. There had been disappointment at the news that these trains do not have a restaurant car, but this quickly changed at the arrival (several times) of a very well-stocked cart. Again, no-one went hungry!

Kyoto was the old imperial capital of Japan for over a thousand years before Tokyo was named the capital in 1868. Kyoto was also home to the Shoguns, or military rulers, who actually held most of the power. Our hostel was at the edge of the CBD, beside the old Imperial Palace and newer St Agnes Cathedral. Again the hostel had all the modern amenities (including the expected hi-tech toilet facilities).

The group visited the Nijo-jo Castle,



home of the Shoguns, the Golden Pavilion Buddhist temple (with real gold leaf, but out of reach), and the Fushimi Inari Taisha Shinto Shrine, although at this venue the various food stalls on the roads up to the shrine offered an added attraction. No-one went hungry! And we made the interesting discovery that there are very few public rubbish bins – people are expected to take rubbish home. Fortunately for us, there was a very large bag on the bus, as the Japanese seem very enthusiastic with their packaging!

St Agnes Cathedral is a small attractive church with an English language Eucharist at 8.30am on a Sunday. With rehearsal starting at 8am, it was just as well that it was only about 100m from the hostel. After the service the congregation de-camps down the

road to the local hotel for hospitality – an excellent idea. We sang at both the service and the hospitality-time and were all done by 10.30, leaving plenty of time for more sight-seeing, shopping and eating. No-one went hungry! Some took the opportunity to visit a monkey sanctuary, others didn't like the idea of too much exercise!

It should be noted here, that this was a tour of many steps. For those who had the odd little things on their wrist that beep at 10,000 steps or give you an electric shock if you stop at 100 steps, there was a lot of beeping going on. Shanks' pony was the preferred mode of transport except when long distances had to be covered, so there should be no complaints of boys coming home unfit. Even if they did eat a lot – no one went hungry!





Back on the bullet train to return to Tokyo and this time Disney was in our sights. We stayed at one of the Disney Hotels – where we could not escape endless cheerful music and pictures of various Disney characters in nearly every room! A day each at Disney Sea and Disneyland saw us dropped, thrown, hurtled, twisted, dampened, plunged, and plummeted in a wide variety of rides. No damage, but chiropractors could do a booming business in years to come. The number of soft toys accompanying the tour had slowly been increasing but the breeding programme took a sudden increase at this time, with Donalds, Mickeys, Poohs and other sundries making an appearance – the most odd probably being the red octopus worn as a hat! The Disney empire certainly knows how to sell – and knows how to recognise people easily parted from their yen!

And suddenly it was almost over. One final night at Disney

– and one final breakfast on Mickey Mouse plates, eating Mickey Mouse patties (were they really made of mouse meat?) – and it was onto the bus for our final concert in the Chapel at Rikkyo University. This institution had been founded by the US Episcopal Church and still maintained a strong schedule of choral services, all in Japanese. We sang to a packed house, ate our last bento box lunch (still no one went hungry) and headed towards the airport

for the flight home. It was an exhausted group, but one that was sad to leave Japan. It had been a new culture, but one that was loved by all in the group.

The last item on the official itinerary was to “Hand exhausted choristers over to parents”. This we did and everyone headed home.

Einstein wrote that “Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school.” The boys may not realise it just yet, but this trip will have been one of their most significant educational experiences. No one can ever improve on the experience of actually visiting a place, hearing the sounds, seeing the sights and smelling the smells (even the unpleasant ones). The boys came back buzzing and I’m sure it took a while for families to bring them back to earth! As adults, it was our privilege to take this group away. They were magnificent travelling companions and did themselves, their cathedral, their school and their city proud. Our grateful thanks go to all those who made it possible – from the core of hard-working fundraising parents to the many hundreds who attended events. Without such generous support, this trip could not have happened.

Now ... let’s start thinking about the next one ...

Chris Oldham



THE CHORISTERS' TOUR: THE MUSICAL PERSPECTIVE

"Travel and change of place impart new vigour to the mind."

"Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity."

-- Lucius Annaeus Seneca, (c. 4 BC – AD 65), Roman philosopher

Seneca's words are just as relevant today as they were 2,000 years ago, as the Cathedral Choristers can attest after their recent tour of Australia and Japan.

While on tour, the Choristers were exposed to a variety of experiences and cultures that provided intellectual stimulation and new insights. In Australia we sang services in both the Roman Catholic and Anglican Cathedrals in Sydney. What an eye-opening experience for our boys to sing in such an acoustic; one that provided resonance and immediate feedback. Though we appreciate the intimacy of our own Transitional Cathedral, it doesn't provide feedback to the choir like these other places.

Whereas our usual daily choral service in our home Cathedral is Evensong, the daily choral service of St Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral is Choral Mass. Our Choristers joined theirs (*photo*) on a Tuesday afternoon to sing Britten's *Missa Brevis in D*, a mass setting that displayed new life for our boys when sung in the reverberant acoustic of the Sydney Cathedral. The host choir sang the Gregorian propers of the mass while our boys contributed two anthems on their own. Following the mass, the host Director of Music and I asked both groups together what they noticed about each other's singing. Top comments from the host choir were centred on their admiration of our crisp diction and ability to sing from memory. Our Choristers were enthralled with the host choir's ability to sing plainchant so flawlessly and were of course impressed greatly by the grand building they had the pleasure of singing in.

St Andrew's Anglican Cathedral in Sydney is similar to Christchurch in the sense that they have their own choir school, and therefore their Choristers are a very unified group. In addition to singing a midday concert and Evensong on our own at St Andrew's Cathedral, we were also able to sing a rehearsal together with their boys, who were most gracious hosts to us. The two groups of boys sang together, and also separately. Together they blended beautifully, and separately they displayed their own characteristic sounds. It was a pleasure to hear the similarities and the differences between the two groups.

On arrival in Japan, our first engagement was a visit to Yokohama Jogakuin Secondary School. This school's English class makes an annual visit to Christchurch for intensive English study, so it was an honour to make a return visit to them. The private Christian girls' secondary school, with a roll of about 800 students, made our Choristers feel very welcome. Our boys sang a 60-minute concert for their entire student body, and then spent the afternoon interacting with their English class; participating in traditional Japanese games, origami, and music. The reception our boys received was outrageously positive, an experience like none other.

Additional engagements in Japan included the Choristers singing services in St Alban's Parish in Tokyo and St Agnes Cathedral in Kyoto, as well as a concert in the chapel of Rikkyo University in Tokyo. All of the events were very well attended. I was later told by the Director of Music at Rikkyo that our concert there drew the largest crowd in recent memory, rivalled only by their organ dedication concert in 2013.

All of these experiences will form precious lifetime memories for our Cathedral Choristers, and will help

these boys to be more rounded, better-informed adults later in life.

No Internet search, YouTube channel, class, or even book could compare with physically being in these places, soaking up the sights, sounds, and smells. Thank you to all who have, in myriad ways, supported the tour and contributed to make it happen. Your investment will pay dividends to the betterment of society in the future.

New vigour certainly has been embraced by many young minds, and most certainly preparation and opportunity have converged to make these young people very lucky indeed.

The tour was one of the final acts of Assistant Organist Harry Meehan, who has been with us for just over two years. Harry played an integral part in the tour, not only musically, but by his leadership and sheer height: he was often called on to lead the group in transit as he towers over everyone! All best wishes to Harry as he moves to Dublin this month and undertakes the study of medicine. Christchurch is all the richer from his numerous artistic contributions.

Dr John Linker, Director of Music

