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# crossing BORDERS

High school's music groups enjoy a long tradition of international travel. ▽

Photos courtesy of Patrick Pearson

**I**nternational travel is so ingrained in the fiber of the music program at Oak Park-River Forest High School (IL) that the parent booster organization supporting music groups was called Concert Tour Association for decades, until it reincorporated recently as Applause.

OPRF began taking groups overseas back in the 1960s, when it was still quite rare. While the regularity of the trips waned in the 1990s, the tradition has been resurrected and is going strong. Every year, one of the high school performing groups tours overseas, with the band and orchestra alternating with the choir.



Last year, the choir travelled to Ireland, while this March the orchestra and band will head to Central Europe—working with Bob Rogers Travel for both trips. The benefit

for students goes far beyond the obvious opportunity to perform in historic venues and be immersed in another culture. For many it is a life-changing experience.

“I think the satisfaction you see from the kids, especially from the concert experiences, tells you it’s totally worth it,” says Patrick Pearson, OPRF’s orchestra director. “We like to play in unique places – cathedrals, conservatories. For students to learn, perform and have fun with their fellow students in an international setting – it’s pretty amazing.”

Pearson’s own experience touring Europe with the Ohio Honors Chorale in high school opened his eyes to the world – and also shaped his career choice.

*“I knew from that trip that I was going to make music as my career.”*

“That trip had a tremendous impact on me,” says Pearson. “That was my first time travelling abroad, and it sparked my desire to see more of the world. More importantly, I knew from that trip that I was going to make music as my career.”

**P**erformance venues include primarily schools and churches, many of which are ages old and steeped in history. “The venues that BRT lines up are top-notch,” says Anthony Svedja, OPRF’s director of bands. He also notes that audiences are plentiful and extremely appreciative. “Hearing live music is just part of their culture,” he says. “They want to come and hear an American band.”

While the performing opportunities and rich history lessons are the heart of each tour, the OPRF team says it is the tour guides who bring it all to life.

When the choir travelled to Ireland last year, their bus driver, Liam, gave a lively history of Ireland that brought the country alive for the students. “The kids got it,” says Elaine Hlavach, OPRF’s choir director. “As told by a native and not a dusty old history book, it meant so much more.”

Hlavach has taken choirs all over Europe, but the Ireland trip tops them all. “This was, hands down, the finest trip I’ve ever taken with students,” she says. “We had



the world’s best guide with us, our driver was amazing, and the overall trip was just first-rate.”

**S**vedja says the personal service and top-quality tour guides are two of the many things that keep him coming back to BRT. “They have definitely earned our repeat business through the tour



guides they’ve set up for us,” he says. Adds Pearson, “The local guides have always been absolutely phenomenal.”

BRT looks for exceptional tour guides who not only know the area intimately, but also understand the rhythm and pace of a student group—and go the extra mile to add unique local experiences.

In Ireland, the OPRF choir was treated to an unplanned excursion to meet a champion border collie trainer, and students sat in with an Irish band at the hotel—both thanks to their tour guide.

**O**n the orchestra’s trip to Barcelona two years ago, a student yearned to play the organ at a historic church that was the evening’s concert site. The BRT guide talked with the church master and got permission for the student to play the organ—which drew in more people to the standing-room-only concert.

“They do everything they can to work for you,” says Pearson. “To them, nothing is impossible. Basically, any time we travel, in the US or abroad, we call Bob Rogers.” ▴



## Beyond Music

BRT educational tours come in all shapes and sizes

**I**t’s not just the music students of OPRF High School who will head to Europe on a Bob Rogers Travel tour this spring. French students will take off on a 10-day educational trip to France, also led by BRT.

Though most known for its performance-based educational tours for music groups, Bob Rogers Travel also arranges educational trips for other academic areas. For Lake Forest Academy, BRT is putting together an interdisciplinary art/theatre/history trip to the United Kingdom.

“We handle all types of international travel for schools – from educational to performance,” says Tom Dillon, BRT’s international sales manager. “Our niche is dealing with school systems and meeting the needs of students, teachers and parents.”

Dillon notes a resurgence in international travel, with the economy improving. BRT is also expanding in this market, carrying more students internationally in 2013 alone than from 2000 to 2010 combined.

Europe is often the destination, but more exotic locations have included trips to Japan, Thailand and Australia.

BRT has put together a proposed trip to South Africa, and has also explored a trip to China for schools. “We will take student groups anywhere on the face of the earth,” he notes, saying only somewhat jokingly, “I would like someone to please go to Antarctica, so we can have a group perform at the U.S.’s research site there.”