

U. Singers tour Europe

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MARKTOBERDORF, Germany — For some of the University of Utah Singers, it's the chance to tour Europe and sing.

For others it's the thrill of competition at the 11th Marktoberdorf International Chamber Choir Competition this week. The U. Singers are the only U.S. choir invited to compete in the prestigious festival held in Germany.

But no matter what they think, all the U. students agree that the past three weeks have been nothing but fun — tiring, of course — but fun.

Choir Director Brady Allred and the U. Singers left Salt Lake City on May 11, and for 21/2 weeks they've been on the road, traveling by bus and stopping at well over a dozen cities in seven countries doing what they love to do: sing.

The tour started in Prague, and between the Czech capital and their final destination of Marktoberdorf — a small city about 90 miles southwest of Munich that commands a view of the Alps in the distance — they've logged about 1,500 miles. Cities where they've sung included Budapest, Ljubljana and Salzburg. And in Munich they stayed long enough to record their newest CD in the Himmelfahrtskirche, a small but acoustically satisfying church.

"It's been really fun," soprano Kiersten Honaker said. "The people have been so appreciative. It's been an amazing experience."

This is Honaker's second year with the U. Singers. And even though the tour has been strenuous, it's been worth it, she said. "It's been demanding, hard and incredible. It's everything I expected it would be."

And that's a sentiment she shares with the other 48 singers. "It's been so much fun, it's been a blast," alto Kelly Nelson said. Making it especially memorable is the fact that this is her first tour with the choir and it's also her first time in Europe. "The tour has been a lot better than I expected," she said.

One thing that struck Nelson has been the audience's response. No matter where they've performed, audiences have taken the choir to heart. "We have appreciative audiences in the States, of course, but here we've had more of a chance to interact with the people. And they've been so moved, some have even cried and hugged me after the concert. It tickles me pink to see how appreciative European audiences are of choral music."

Being together for such a long stretch of time has helped the members grow and get to know each other better, something that doesn't normally happen back home during the school year, because of classes, exams and other school commitments. But in a non-academic environment, the close confines that traveling together demands, they've had the chance to socialize and grow closer. "Traveling and getting to know each other has been a lot of fun," tenor Riley Soter said.

They've also made new friends along the way and have had a chance to do some sightseeing. As hard as Allred has worked his young singers during the tour, there has still been plenty of free time. "I'm surprised how much time we've had to ourselves," Soter said. And while in Croatia, they've also actually had some much needed down time that gave them the opportunity to take their minds off the tour and the upcoming competition.

But they still think about it. And for a number of the singers, including Soter, for whom this is the second time touring Europe with the choir, the competition in Marktoberdorf will be the high point of the trip. "The competition is the culmination of this tour," he said. "We've focused on the competition and we've been working on improving ourselves."

And going into the competition, everybody agrees that the choir sounds better now than it did when it performed its "Bon Voyage" concert in Libby Gardner Concert Hall on Mother's Day. "We've been preparing all year for the competition and we've definitely gotten better since that concert," Honaker said. "Our musical level has increased."

"We've come a long way since then," Nelson said, adding that she believes the ensemble is ready to take on some of the best choirs in the world at Marktoberdorf.

Everyone is aware that the competition is going to be tough, and they've got their work cut out for them. But the singers seem to be upbeat about their chances of walking away with first prize.

"I feel good about it," Honaker said. "I'm nervous of course, because there are some really great choirs in the competition, but I think we can do it."

Deseret News music critic Ed Reichel, who holds a doctorate in music, is in Europe with the U. Singers. His trip is being financed by the International Chamber Choir Competition.

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