

A Miraculous Moment: The San Francisco Youth Eurythmy Troupe in Australia

The San Francisco Youth Eurythmy Troupe gave its 25th annual series of public performances on February 6–7, 2020. Astrid Thiersch created a new program (as every year) called “Night Journey.” The featured tale was “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” which was possible because the Troupe numbered twenty-eight members this year. Other works included Steiner’s Morning Verse for older students, texts by Ella Wilcox, Pablo Neruda, and Greta Thunberg, a Beethoven piano sonata, as well as humoresques and a menagerie of animals, including three kangaroos, a swan, a rooster, and a penguin. A special musical highlight was Arvo Pärt’s “Fratres,” with a Troupe member, Lukas Edelberg, on violin, and our accompanist, Lilia Zheltova, on piano.

The public performance on Thursday evening was well attended by an enthusiastic audience of parents and friends, who expressed their appreciation with a standing ovation. The two school performances on Friday were packed with our own SFWS students and classes from three other schools, including Sieglinde Basmajian’s skillful, imaginative, and sparkling “Circus Waldissima” from Summerfield WS, who were our guest artists. Between pieces, Astrid introduced eurythmy by way of audience participation, and the intricacies of tone eurythmy with a demonstration, and also shared thoughts about the mysteries of sleep, part of the program theme. Having thrilled about a thousand fans at home, it was time to pack for the next eurythmy adventure tour – to **Australia!**

In August 2008 Andrew Hill penned a letter on behalf of Glenaeon Rudolf Steiner School in Sydney to Astrid Thiersch in San Francisco. He said, “Are you looking for a sign? Here is one! Why not bring your Eurythmy troupe to Sydney and perform for us? You could use us as a springboard to launch a tour of the many Steiner-Waldorf schools throughout Australia. Look forward to hearing from you.” Due to mysterious circumstances, the letter was **delivered ten years later**, in January 2019. By the time Andrew heard from Astrid he had no recollection of having written this, but he did recognize his handwriting and gamely renewed the invitation. So Sydney was in our sights, where Liz Nevieve enthusiastically took on the organization for our visit, and enlisted Kelly Papas and Rie Rossy in Melbourne to host us there. Steiner education is well established in Australia, and there are many schools and cities that we would have loved to visit, but time dictated a choice, and we decided on these two beautiful places.

It was not easy to pull this trip off, from either hemisphere. We planned to arrive in Australia with the opening of school for the new fall term in February, and the terrible bush fires erupted during the summer holidays. We were deeply sympathetic, remembering our own fire disasters over the past three years, and kept in touch throughout, not knowing if we would be able to go. In the end the fires abated, and we all felt that the performances could bring a welcome uplift. So thirty-two of us boarded a Qantas flight: twenty-eight students, their teacher and director Astrid, our pianist Lilia, Mandarin teacher and consummate chaperone Yi-Hsing Hou, and speaker cum factotum David Weber.

We arrived in Sydney in what locals described as the first ‘normal’ week since the fires began, with clear skies and balmy temperatures on Valentine’s day. We were drawn to the Opera House, as amazing as advertised, where we joined crowds of Sydneysiders, who looked as if they were on permanent summer vacation, strolling about and enjoying the beautiful building, the shops and cafés, and gorgeous water views across the expansive harbor, including Sydney Harbour Bridge and an assortment of boats, from sailboats to ferries to cruise ships. Our first two days were spent exploring this friendly and beautiful city from our hostel base – Chinatown, The Rocks, the

Botanical Gardens, and the CBD; we even managed a ferry trip to Manly and Shelly Beach, and a beautiful harbor cruise.

On the third day we checked out of the hostel and loaded ourselves and bags into a bus for a short trip across the famous bridge to Glenaeon RSS in the near northern suburbs of Sydney. It is the first Steiner school in Australia, and the Middle Cove campus (with classes 3-12) featured charming brick buildings terraced on a long downhill slope, with the performance hall and sports fields at the bottom. We were met by Andrew, the Head of School, Liz, eurythmy teacher and our faithful organizer, and Evan, the tech and design teacher, who just had a new lighting system installed. The hall was created for performance — a large stage, beautiful lighting, spacious wings, dressing rooms, and great acoustics! Ms Hou, Liz, some teachers, and many of our students ironed a hundred and twenty costumes over four hours, and we had a satisfying run-through. The students took to the stage eagerly, and brought a fine spirit of engagement to the rehearsal. This is what we came for, and it felt wonderful to be doing eurythmy!

Parents and students from the school arrived in the evening to take our students to their homes for a two-night stay. They were friendly and welcoming, in the renowned Australian manner, and our students went off in ones and twos with their new hosts with only mild flutters of trepidation. The chance to stay with families is always a most rewarding aspect of any trip, as understanding is deepened, and bonds of friendship are created. The parents of Glenaeon could not have been more gracious, and our students had a wonderful experience of Australian life.

The performance challenge came the following day, with three shows – morning, afternoon, and evening! The first performance was for a full hall of lively third to sixth grade students from two schools. The Troupe responded with fine energy and put on a sparkling show, helped by superb stage lighting. For the second performance we had a packed house with classes seven through twelve. Many were enthusiastic, and some seemed to discover something unexpected and interesting. We were treated to a homemade dinner at school, and then did a third evening performance for a smaller but discerning and very enthusiastic audience, mostly adults. The students battled through fatigue to present an earnest and heartfelt performance. There were many compliments and much thanks all around, and we felt that the students had brought a high standard of eurythmy.

Everybody returned with their hosts in the morning, and visited a wide variety of lessons. As we packed and gathered for the bus trip, many Glenaeon students and teachers came with thanks and good wishes for the onward journey. Beautiful impressions of the school remain with us, from a community where Steiner education clearly is carried in a deep and wholesome way. We are truly grateful to our colleagues Liz, Evan, and Andrew, and to the many parents and teachers who hosted us in Sydney.

A short flight brought us to Melbourne in the late afternoon; we later heard we had narrowly escaped a terribly destructive storm in Sydney. We went straight to the theatre, which is in a complex housing a large Steiner-stream K-12 public school, called Collingwood College. Kelly Papas and Rie Rossy, eurythmy teachers and energetic organizers, were on hand to welcome us with a pasta dinner prepared by twelfth grade students, and a crew waiting to iron costumes. Somehow it felt like coming home, and everyone was at ease. We arranged things in the newly-renovated theatre and tried out the fine stage. It was late evening before we checked in at our hostel, and we settled into our Melbourne digs with an early wake-up call.

Everything was beautifully and thoughtfully prepared for us at Collingwood by Kelly and Rie, who had enlisted a group of parents and teachers to feed us snacks, tea, lunch, and dinner, all home made and delicious. The crew took care to see that we were rested, hydrated, and cared for in every possible way. Thanks to their help our costumes were ironed and on racks backstage, and the newly renovated theater was ready and waiting. Two high school students, Matt and Will, did yeomen's work to get the lighting system up and running with Astrid's cues, and we had the morning to rehearse. With all this wonderful support our fatigue dropped away, and the students gave two outstanding performances. The first was after lunch for a packed house of more than two hundred students from grades three to six from two schools, a lively and appreciative audience. The evening show was for the community, and more than a hundred interested parents, teachers, and friends came to see this unique high school eurythmy. They showed their great appreciation with a standing ovation, and a question and answer session with the audience and performers afterward was most rewarding.

We retired this year's program in fine fashion the next day, with two last performances. The theatre was full for both, and they were nearly back-to-back. The morning show was for classes two through six from three schools, and the noon show was for classes seven through twelve, also from three schools. These packed houses meant that more than eight hundred people saw our four performances in Melbourne! The little ones were delighted and entranced; some of the the older ones needed to be won over, but they were cheering at the end. Our students rose to the occasion, performing with engagement and intensity, and also humour and lightness. The eurythmists from the various schools expressed that they felt greatly supported in their work from our performances, and we felt gratified for what we were able to bring.

Our tour concluded with a little Melbourne sightseeing – a day about town, Shakespeare under the stars, and a delightful trip up the Yarra Valley to see native animals in their habitat at Healesville Wildlife Sanctuary. We were joined by Kelly at our final dinner, during which each member of the troupe gave a highlight of the trip, which was very moving. Many students mentioned their friendships with each other, the joy of doing eurythmy together, meeting their host families, the performances and audiences, and the wonderful way we were hosted and cared for in Australia.

Looking back, it seems like a miracle that we were able to accomplish this tour, in a window of time between the Australian bush fires and the worldwide virus pandemic. Despite the hiatus between invitation and response, it felt like we went at just the right moment to encounter these colleagues, and to support the teaching of eurythmy in this time. We carry a strong impression of a culture which values lowering stress and enjoying life, as expressed in the ubiquitous phrase “no worries!” We also found a genuine striving to bring Steiner education and eurythmy in the fullest possible way, for the health of the children and the future. We are so grateful for the joy and privilege of visiting these beautiful school communities and cities Down Under.

– *David Weber, March 2020*