

The Putney School Chamber Orchestra Tours Spain

By Anna Brinkman '06



Pressing the endpin
of my cello against
the cobblestone streets of
Spain, I looked at Emily and
Annie with a smile. Emily gave her usual enthusiastic cue while looking at me as if to say, “Why are you doing this to me?” We began to play Bach’s “Double Violin Concerto” and in almost no time, people were throwing money into Emily’s violin case. Hillary was taking pictures and I smiled as I remembered how I had convinced them to play on the street with me. Annie and I had been inside a chocolate shop and, as we were coming out, ran into Hillary and Emily who had just been on a shopping spree. “Guys!” they both cried in mock horror, “We’ve just spent all of our money.” I rolled my eyes as I smiled at them, “Well, we could always play on the street.” Annie was taken with the idea, partly because she assumed we would never do it. The other two were not as pleased. “Oh no!” they said. After much cajoling Annie and I finally convinced them to do it.

Playing on the street was a brief moment in a two-week tour over last March break that The Putney School Chamber Orchestra did of the Basque country. Our conductor, Inés Gómez-Ochoa, organized the entire trip and took 16 students and three chaperones to her home country to play an ambitious program: Bach’s “Double Violin Concerto,” Bach’s “Brandenburg Concerto No. 4” and Vivaldi’s “Spring” from *The Four Seasons*. With these three pieces, we wound our way through the Basque Country, carting cellos and violins through airports, train stations and subways. However, it was not only the music that we played that was incredible, but also the realization that taking 16 kids and immersing them into another culture has a strange way of bringing

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them closer together. I had never experienced this before. On this trip I was a witness to it and also a participant.

It was little occasions where the getting closer occurred. One of these occasions took place inside one of the little cafés that dotted the cities in which we stayed. Being one of two fluent Spanish speakers on the trip, it fell upon me to order everyone's food. At first I found it rather a hassle, but some of the students seemed so grateful and it initiated conversations with students I had never spoken to before.

Some of the occasions did not involve conversation but were simply the sharing of an experience. One of our first concerts took place inside a stone cathedral situated in the old part of San Sebastian called El Casco Viejo. As I walked in, the echo of my footsteps told of the incredible acoustics of the building. I went over to two vocalists and proposed that we sing one of the shape note songs from the Sing book. We began to sing and the sound reverberated throughout every stone and, at times, I thought I could hear the sounds of past singing that had taken place centuries before.

In many ways, staying with Basque families also brought the group closer together. When we got off the plane in Bilbao we all boarded a bus that would take us into Durango, the city in which we spent most of our nights, and I could tell that I was not the only one who was apprehensive about staying with people I had never met. I especially thought of the Korean students and those who did not speak a word of Spanish.

The Putney School's
Music Director Inés
Gómez-Ochoa conducting
Bridget Mendel '05 and
The Putney School
Chamber Orchestra.

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e arrived in Durango and the families were there to pick us up. They were wonderfully outgoing and welcoming in spite of our scared and groggy appearance. Inés read my, Emily's and Lillian's name from a list and told us to go with a young lady named Ushue. Ushue was not our host mother but she was going to drive us to where our host mother was. As we drove in the car I tried to keep up a conversation but had trouble understanding her very Spanish accent just as she had trouble understanding my Mexican one. However, we managed to keep up a good conversation until we arrived where Irache (our host mother) was waiting for us. Lillian and I walked with Irache through the old part of town to the house where she lived. It was on a small street in the old city; she lived on the top floor of a three-story house with a narrow staircase that sloped down. I remember thinking that my cello was not going to make it up that staircase, but somehow we managed.



One of the first things I did as we stood in the house talking about ourselves was mention the fact that Lillian was a vegetarian. "Oh that's okay, we have chicken," said Irache. I explained to her that Lillian's type of vegetarianism allowed her to eat only vegetables, fruits and dairy. Irache looked at me, smiled, and said playfully, "There's a restaurant across the street and a hanging plant that she can eat." I looked at her for a second, not sure if she was joking or not, but when I saw her smiling I laughed and explained to Lillian what Irache had said. That was enough to break the ice and from then on Irache, Lillian and I had loads of fun together.

Even though most everyone had had good first experiences with their families, the next day it was a relief to see everyone from Putney at the music conservatory where we were to rehearse. There was something comforting in seeing people one knew and could talk to freely. Most of that day was spent as a group rehearsing and walking around Durango.

Concerts were very much on everyone's mind, and as the one in Durango approached, everyone was very excited. It was to take place in a large concert hall just outside the old city. Inés told us we had to play our best because her parents would be there and so would all of her friends. We were all nervous. It was the first time we had played on a professional stage and it was somewhat intimidating. When it was time to play the concert, my palms were wet with sweat and the soloists were all frantically playing through the difficult passages. I heard the people in the audience clap as the person who was introducing us went out on stage. As they talked about the orchestra we all waited anxiously for them to be done. After a few minutes Inés shooed us on stage and we stood, blinking in the bright lights, smiling nervously as the crowd clapped. We all sat down and we began to play the Bach Double.

As the concert went on the audience became irrelevant and all that mattered was the music. However, the minute the music was over and an eruption of clapping came from the audience, they suddenly became very real and I could not keep myself from grinning, and, I noticed, neither could anyone else. We all bowed (helped by the bowing classes Inés had given us). Everyone seemed to love the concert. Our hosts' families came up to us and told us how wonderful it had been and even people I had never seen before came up and shook our hands.

All of these shared moments had an effect on the way we played music together. It was not just individuals playing notes from a page. It was one entity with different parts that were all connected at the core. This tie made the music have a feeling and depth that we had never achieved at home and made every concert unforgettable. Best of all, the music and travel bonded people who would otherwise never have spent time together. ❧