

On tour with the MountainTop Strings

By **ADDY EPSTEIN** and **HOLLIE MAYHUGH**
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A select group of musicians from the MountainTop Strings embarked on the ChamberFest Italy tour on June 25. They played 10 concerts in a variety of venues, returning to the mountain on July 15. Two of these musicians kept a journal over the course of the tour and shared their experiences.

For the first five nights of our Italian tour, we are staying at a country farm residence hotel in Reggello. Everybody in our group agrees that we enjoy how our rooms are more like apartments than hotel rooms.

With this unique set-up, we are able to hang out on our patios, which are all connected together, allowing us to play games and talk without having to invade personal space. From these amazing patio spaces we also were able to enjoy a rather beautiful and peaceful view of the valley below the residence.

Not only are we given time to recover from our jet lag and explore the landscape around us, we are also able to have rehearsals in a separate building part of the hotel.

One thing that surprised us is that Reggello is a small rural community; the roads are so narrow we were frightened by our bus drivers.

Our first concert was at a winery in Arezzo where we were playing for a wine-tasting event. For this concert we played various genres of music and we noticed that the audience was stunned by our vocalist, Tori Waner, as she performed multiple appealing pieces. The audience also particularly loved our modern pieces and “Winter” from Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons.”

During our time at our first stop, we had an additional two concerts in the Tuscan region: one in Florence and one in San Giovanni Valdarno.

As much as we enjoy Reggello, we must move on to a new city.

The next four nights of our tour we



The ChamberFest Italy tour concluded with a program of Vivaldi’s music at his church, Santa Maria Chiesa della Pietà in Venice.

are staying in a small, medieval town called San Gimignano which is located in Siena, Tuscany. We are excited to try the world-famous gelato that is right across from our hotel, La Cisterna di Salvestrini, and is located at the top of the hill in the city. We can see the entire piazza from our hotel window while watching the sunset!

As part of our daily schedule, we rehearse at the local monastery that is an eight-minute walk from the hotel. This sounds extremely close but, when coming back to our rooms, it is an all uphill walk with our instruments which we have learned is quite exhausting!

One of the downsides to this small but lovely city is that they do not have very much food to fit any dietary restrictions and the only local store is about a half-mile walk. The combination of walking uphill and eating salads has kept many of us in shape.

We also had our fourth concert at

the monastery we were rehearsing at. It has a beautiful sanctuary which was an amazing contribution to our sound as an orchestra, giving us a great last day in San Gimignano.

Next up, Viterbo. Despite having a short stay, our time here was not wasted.

We had rehearsals in the mornings and outdoor concerts in the evenings. Except the final concert in this city was not as we imagined. As we were setting up for the concert, there was a sudden downpour with the deafening sound of thunder! In a panic we ended up cramming ourselves under two small awnings bordering the piazza. After about 20 minutes, the rain slowed and we relocated to a local church. It was extremely humid inside while we were playing, but the outcome was truly unforgettable and the audience continued to grow!

Moving forward in our journey, we are headed to Rome.

In this crazy city where new architecture is built around old, we have been able to experience many exceptional opportunities such as visiting the Vatican and the Colosseum. We are keeping plenty busy as we fill our days with exploring the famous attractions of Rome such as the Spanish Steps. We even were able to take an authentic Roman cooking class where we learned to make spaghetti, meatballs, bruschetta and even lava cakes. Tomorrow we are scheduled to perform at the Pantheon!

The Pantheon was a breathtaking sight to see in person, as no picture does it justice. After playing a wonderful performance with pieces such as Corelli’s famous “Christmas Concerto” and 10th Trio Sonata in A minor, we explored the Pantheon and found the tomb of Arcangelo Corelli. To end our adventure in Rome, we gathered for another amazing group dinner. Two of our members couldn’t eat the dessert that was prepared so instead we were each given half a watermelon!

Finally, we sped our way over to Venice in a high-speed train that was



Grace Chung and Tyki Cantu-Wang playing Bach’s Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor at the Chiesa di San Filippo Neri in Florence.

followed by a water taxi.

As expected, there are no cars in Venice. The main forms of transportation are either water taxis, gondola rides or walking. The bridges that are over the canals allow for easy access to the different parts of the floating city. Here we don’t have to worry about getting run over by the crazy Italian drivers!

One of the most eccentric opportunities we had was to be able to play in Vivaldi’s church, where we only played pieces that were written by Vivaldi. Our entire program consisted of mostly feature pieces such as the Cello Double in G Minor, the Concerto Grosso in D Minor and the famous Violin Concerto in A Minor.

Addy Epstein began learning the cello in 2015. Since then, she has performed in honors orchestras, the MountainTop Strings and attended the Redlands cello camp. She recently began giving cello lessons to beginning musicians.

Hollie Mayhugh started learning to play the violin in 2014. Since then, she has learned to play as many instruments as she can. She has performed in honors orchestras and has even learned to teach and conduct both band and stringed instruments. Her biggest reward is the joy her music brings to audiences.