

September 12, 2009

Many of you are probably wondering where my travels have taken me, ever since I left LA back in early September.

Well... I spent the first nine days of my sabbatical in Switzerland, with a short trip to Liechtenstein. One of my best friends from childhood plays in the St. Gallen Symphony, so this year I was happy to take a few days off to have fun and work at the same time on a new chamber piece which he is going to perform next year. I have been to St. Gallen many times before, but there is always something new to do. Everything is so different from LA; the town is quiet, well-manicured, and outrageously expensive. There is plenty of hiking around, some excellent bakeries, cheese and sausage stores, as well as a few classy coffee shops and restaurants... if I only had the money for a \$6 bratwurst and a \$5 coffee.

Soon after I got to St. Gallen, Robert invited me to one of their outdoor symphony concerts in Bad Ragaz, where I also met their conductor (David Stern, Isaac Stern's son). This is an excellent orchestra, but as you can imagine, an outdoor concert is more about the atmosphere than the sound. A few days later, we took a daytrip to a high resort town in the Swiss Alps (Arosa), with a stopover in Vaduz, Liechtenstein. I have to admit that Vaduz is probably the cleanest place I have ever seen in my life. Rich people, an even quieter town, and a postcard-like atmosphere. Last week I got together with one my former classmates from high school, who is now concertmaster of the Suisse Romande Orchestra in Geneva – most likely the second best orchestra in Switzerland, after Zurich. Obviously, all our time was spent recalling stupid and funny moments from high school. It's been so long... Among my many musician friends in Switzerland, I also saw Florin Farcas, who works for the Zurich Opera as an accompanist. I checked out the opera house, had a coffee in their cafeteria, and also used the bathroom that Pavarotti, Domingo, and all the others blessed before. What an honor! All in all, Zurich is a wonderful city, with a superb historic area, a wonderful lake (competing with Geneva), and a famous shopping street: Bahnhofstrasse.

I am now in Wiesbaden, Germany, visiting with one of my student's aunts for a few days. Next stop is Berlin, followed by Amsterdam, Trondheim (Norway), Hambach (Alsace, France) and eventually Paris in October. I also have a Fulbright Grant to teach at the Bucharest Music Academy in December. It's gonna be cold!

September 20, 2009

This is going to be all about Germany and four of its cities, in the west as well as east. With Leonie's help, I was able to visit her aunt in Wiesbaden and cousin in Berlin, an excellent opportunity to avoid the touristy and sterile hotel atmosphere for a while. What a trip!

You might imagine that no cultural shock can possibly occur while crossing from the German speaking area of Switzerland to Germany itself. While no such shocks jolted me in the smooth train that took me from St. Gallen to Wiesbaden, after crossing the border, a slightly different landscape revealed itself. Nobody can match the Swiss anal-retentive style when it comes to people, cities, transportation and the environment in general. Germany seems to be a bit more free and careless about its clothes. I guess it's all about the foreigners, right:) Within seconds of leaving Switzerland the graffiti appeared on the city walls, and after the first station in Germany, more languages were spoken in the train (especially Turkish). On the other hand, as soon as I got to Wiesbaden I noticed that everything is A LOT cheaper, as in just \$3 for a sausage, and not \$6. Half a liter of tasty Pilsner tap beer in Berlin was about \$3, including tip and tax! I like that.

Wiesbaden is a small city in the western part of Germany. As I got there on a rainy Sunday afternoon, there were few people on the streets and all the stores were closed. McDonald's seemed to thrive, as

usual. Leonie's aunt, Brigitte, put up with me for 3 nights, which was more than enough to visit the area. The second day was spent visiting Frankfurt, the financial capital and airline hub of modern Germany. Following WWII, little is left from the old town, except a few well-preserved medieval streets and town squares. The rest is all about steel and glass, and for us composers, the Ensemble Modern. The third day of my Wiesbaden area affair was spent in Mainz, where Mr. Guttenberg created his famous printing press. I was initially planning to take a cruise on the Rhine (the landscape and castles are supposed to be spectacular), but on that Tuesday there seemed to be no cruises leaving from my location. In any case, I found Mainz to be quite enjoyable. One of its prominent churches had all its stained glass windows created by Marc Chagall, while the main cathedral was rather impressive, especially through its size. The old part of the city was well kept, with lots of restaurants, stores, and an open-air market. I had a good time.

The train ride to Berlin took over five hours, despite booking a ticket on the fastest land ride in Germany, the ICE. Guess what... it was 30 minutes late (the maximum speed of 250km/155 miles per hour didn't seem to help). And then, Berlin slowly revealed itself in front of my eyes. A truly impressive capital! The city itself is a lesson in 20th century history, from the pre-war German state, to Hitler's bunker, the East/West wall, and the rebirth of unified Germany. I spent the first night in an excellent hostel (centrally located for 40 Euros per night only!), and the first evening walking the entire Berlin Mitte area like crazy. Check Point Charlie, Unter Den Linden Boulevard and the Brandenburg Gate were the highlights. While the effects of WWII and communism were not immediately obvious, a well-traveled European would quickly notice that only about 10% of the buildings originate in the 19th century and before. Switch to Paris, Vienna, Amsterdam, or Venice, and the percentage goes up to 90. After buying a 3-day museum card, I started checking out Berlin's treasures, starting with the Pergamon Museum, Bode, Museum of Musical Instruments, the Old National Gallery and the German Guggenheim. Just to get a general idea, there were about 20 other museums on the list that came with that pass! Of the ones that I visited, I strongly recommend the Pergamon, which has one of the best collections of Ancient Greek, Roman and Islamic art in the world. Among the highlights, a rendition with original pieces from the Pergamon Temple (Greece), and the gate of Ishtar, from Babylon. Parts of east Berlin also reminded me of old socialist Europe, and Bucharest in particular. Large apartment blocks, wide avenues, old sidewalks, and boringly functional architecture. No matter how hard the new Germany is trying to overcome its painful life in the 20th century, the architectural scars are going to remain for a few decades, if not centuries. At the end of the day, I felt that Berlin is trying really hard to be reborn as a major European cultural center. It's not a particularly neat urban area, but this makes it more real. A long history of avant-garde movements mixed with cheap rents, and the striking clash between East and West seems to have attracted a large number of artists, musicians, and writers. The German government has been investing heavily in its infrastructure and buildings, so the state support is there. It remains to be seen what the fruits will taste like. What I saw, I liked very much though.

As I started writing this long postcard in the train, in Germany, we crossed into Holland about an hour ago. The happy free roaming cows I left in Switzerland are back. Everything here is small and cute. No mountains though... Just found out that a Swedish group played my "Moto Perpetuo" four days ago at the Musica Viva Festival in Lisbon, Portugal. I wish I knew about this before.

October 8, 2009

I left Berlin on Sept. 20, on a train to a small town in southern Holland called Tilburg. Back in the mid 90s I used to visit my best friend there every year, so it felt like being home again. Daniel Held used to be my classmate, neighbor, and partner in crime in Bucharest, from the second grade all the way to the crazy college years. These days he plays in the Eindhoven Brabants Orchestra, and lives with his Dutch girlfriend Charlotte, also a violinist. There is not much one can do in Tilburg except drink Belgian beer, which comes from a large number of abbeys and small breweries located within 20 miles of the town. As a

matter of fact, one of the best Belgian-style breweries in the world is located just about 3 miles from Daniel's house (occasionally you can find "La Trappe" in fancy stores like Whole Foods or BevMo). As I am a huge fan of Belgian-style beers, you can imagine that I had to pay homage to this "Temple of Pleasures" as soon as I arrived in town!

After only 2 days in Holland, I took a couple of flights north, all the way to Trondheim, Norway. Perhaps I should backtrack a little and tell you how this whole adventure got started in the first place. A few years ago I met Odd Johan Overoye in Los Angeles, during his Fulbright-sponsored visit at CSUN. We exchanged ideas, music, and stayed in touch over the years. Daniel and Dolly Kessner visited him a couple of years ago (when they played one of my pieces), so I guess now it was my turn. Our idea was to spend about two weeks in Trondheim, with the first week devoted to attending concerts and lectures during their annual new music festival, and the second week focused on me lecturing on new music topics and analysis. Trondheim is a small and beautiful city, with a magnificent cathedral, lots of concert halls, and superb hiking by the sea as well as in the surrounding hills. Unfortunately, during my time there (11 days total) it rained every day as it got progressively colder, all the way to the low 30s F. I think I must have seen the sun a total of about 10 minutes, and the blue sky no more than 3 hours during my entire trip. Everybody was telling me that such weather is not at all typical for September. Liars! Despite all these obstacles, Odd Johan and I managed to do some hiking every now and then, which gave me a chance to enjoy what Norway is known for, besides lots of oil and tasty salmon: its natural beauty. I got a taste of some specialties as well, such as sheep and cabbage, fish cakes, brown cheese, and heavy dark bread. Everything is VERY expensive in Norway, from a \$12 hot dog, to a \$14 beer, and a \$50 simple main dish in a restaurant. Even in the grocery stores, a beer was \$4 per can. Last but not least, despite their huge oil reserves, gas is \$8 a gallon.

The music festival had a few excellent chamber music and symphonic concerts, with guest artists coming from all over Europe. Unfortunately the guest composer was Oswald Golijov, who in my opinion is as good to us as Salieri was to the Austrians. Trondheim Conservatory, where I taught in the second week was centrally located, within 5 minutes from Odd Johan's house, where I was staying. I had a great time lecturing there on various topics from musical analysis, to new American and Romanian composers, Bartok's music, and of course, my compositions. The students were quite receptive, although a bit shy. Just in case you didn't know yet, everybody speaks perfect English in Norway.

I shall definitely return to Norway one day, to visit the more impressive fjords in the south in a better weather, if possible. Odd Johan and his family were great hosts, and getting to know a new country by living with a family is always a very special gift. Last but not least, it was great to visit a place where people do not hate Americans that much, or at least they do not mention that every two minutes. I am now in Paris, and the entire U.S. has just been described to me as the world of McDonald's and Mickey Mouse. Welcome to France!

October 10, 2009

After a month of traveling across Europe I finally made it to France, where I'm going to spend the next two months. You can imagine how good it is to have a stable place, where I could finally empty my suitcase and enjoy more of a structured life.

Prior to my arrival in Paris, I spent three days in the Alsace/Lorraine area, in the northeastern corner of France. As my apartment was not ready for a few days, I got to visit Sandrine Fuss (an old friend from the early 90s) and her family. Sandrine is completing a doctorate in musicology in France, and actually knows my music quite well, since she wrote a research paper on my works a few years ago. Obviously, substantial eating was involved during this short period. The cuisine in this area has been influenced by the Germans for centuries, as the border changed quite often until the end of WWII. Besides the usual

selection of superb cheeses, my diet included the traditional "choucrute", a type of sauerkraut cooked with white wine, and garnished with sausages, ham, and other types of smoked meat. Both Sandrine and her mother cooked everyday for me, mostly with ingredients coming from their garden. Such a feast of monumental proportions shall never be forgotten! At the end of the Alsace/Lorraine chapter I spent a day in Metz, visiting the magnificent cathedral and a couple of museums. With some luck I found a centrally located hotel for only \$45, from which I walked around the old town for a few hours... pulling my humongous suitcase for 10 blocks all the way there was a problem though, especially while raining. Metz was not bad; a nice little city with many fortifications, small pedestrian streets, the oldest church in France (going back to year 400 AD!), and the occasional rain coming and going every hour or so. My trip to Paris (by way of the TGV, the fastest bullet train in Europe) took only an hour and a half, for a price of about \$60, first class. I am getting spoiled!

I am now comfortably set with a two-bedroom apartment in *Le Marais*, which is among the most beautiful and well-preserved neighborhoods in Paris. Central location, small streets, lots of restaurants, excellent pastries, and almost \$2500 per month for a smallish apartment with everything I need: furniture, sheets, cable TV, fully equipped kitchen, and the occasional noise coming from the typical European mopeds. A bit steep, but definitely worth for a short period. From my second day here, I started attending a French language school during weekdays and began calling and writing to all the composers and musicians I know. My goals are to network, attend concerts, exchange music and ideas, and work towards future performances of my music in Paris. Today I went to a new music concert with Ensemble Intercontemporain at the Centre Pompidou, and saw Boulez sitting in the same row with me. The music was quite good, and the hall was almost full. I even got a discounted ticket for \$15. *Pas mal!*

November 12, 2009

I suspect you have been wondering for a while now if my English writing abilities have vanished completely, as it's been more than a month since I wrote you. Indeed, ever since moving to Paris in early October I've been trying really hard to improve my French, and becoming "one of them". I'm going to school everyday, meeting composers, visiting museums, going to concerts, and especially continuing my daily regimen of cheese and pastries. *C'est super!*

As I promised not to bore you with stories and pictures of the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre, I'm going to move straight to the juicy part: *la musique*. As you can imagine, my focus has been the contemporary landscape, and the IRCAM/Centre Pompidou scene in particular. A great advantage is my location in *Le Marais* (the apartment is only about 10 minutes away from these venues), which means that I have been able to attend pretty much every concert they have produced during the last month or so. Among them there were four concerts at IRCAM and two at Centre Pompidou (most of them involving electro-acoustic music), one at *Salle Pleyel* (with Ensemble Intercontemporain and Boulez conducting Ligeti and Stockhausen), and one at the Paris Regional Conservatory, with Ensemble 2E2M performing works by Enno Poppe and C.P.E. Bach. I also heard a great chamber music recital at *Ecole Normale de Musique*, as well as a couple of organ recitals in various churches around Paris. While I found each of these events to be stimulating, after a couple of weeks I realized that if you are a composer living in Paris, being friends with Boulez would not be such a bad idea. The government sponsors many concerts and new music ensembles, but the majority of these grants are centered around IRCAM and its satellites. Furthermore, most of the young composers seem to continue on the same path opened by Papi Pierre in the 50s, which in turn gives them a chance to be performed and acknowledged by the major ensembles and venues he established. The emphasis is on crafting complex sonic structures, exploring timbre, while completely avoiding any sort of formal predictability, rhythmic pulse, and harmonic direction. For some reason, humor has been completely extinguished from the concert hall. During the last two weeks I have also reconnected with one of my friends (Allain Gaussin), who is a well established composer, former professor at the Paris and Sevran conservatories. He invited me to have dinner at his place, on which

occasion we discussed at length his composition lessons with Messiaen and the role played by Boulez in developing the postwar new music scene in France. I shall see him again next week.

There is more, much more to talk about. My eating habits have changed quite a bit, as everything is smaller and better tasting here. I have been eating bread and cheese pretty much everyday, with no signs of weight gain. I am obviously walking a lot, drinking a bit of red wine everyday, and trying to do what the French are doing in order to avoid obesity. No matter what restaurants I tried, I noticed that the food is not greasy, salty, or excessively sweet. The portions are small, and the meat servings are no more than 30% of the entire meal. Comparing with LA, I found Parisian restaurants to be overpriced, with excellent food but awful service. My recent theme has been couscous and Moroccan food, in a quest to find the best recipe in town (so far I've tried five places).

As far as museums, I had a better time with less touristy places. *Petit Palais*, The Modern Art Museum of Paris, and *Carnavalet* turned out to leave a more positive impression than the insanely crowded Louvre, which has become some sort of a Disneyland-like attraction. A couple of weeks ago I also made a daytrip to the Loire Valley, where I visited three superb castles: *Chenonceau*, *Cheverny* and *Chambord*. Leonardo da Vinci died not far from one these castles, which contains a spiral staircase he supposedly designed at the end of his life. It was a welcome break from the busy life and crowded streets of central Paris.

So far, my time in Paris has been as incredible as I have ever dreamt. If I could single out the best moment it will have to be my daily walk in *Le Marais*, heading to the language school every morning, among all the busy Parisians going about their business. The simple pleasure of getting lost everyday on these tiny Medieval streets is worth more than any museum in the world.

December 6, 2009

Over the past month, I have experienced and learned much more than I ever imagined. How can I possibly share with you all my travel impressions, following a busy month of concerts in Paris, a trip to the French Riviera, my meeting with Kurtag, and simply put, my serious attempt at breathing French air as a local, and not just as a passing tourist. I've avoided writing this letter for a while now. Still, I don't know where to begin.

November '09 in Paris was particularly exciting. A whole week of concerts was devoted to contemporary Hungarian music, which to be honest, is among the best gifts one could have offered me. Ensemble InterContemporain played Ligeti's Violin Concerto, in addition to numerous other works by Kurtag, Eotvos, and some other young Hungarian composers. Following a conference and roundtable discussion with his music publishers, I was able to meet Kurtag and chat with him (in perfect Romanian) about his years in Transylvania, as well as his latest projects. He was very kind and promised to listen to my CD, which I gave him that night. I shall never forget this brief encounter.

I also heard many other symphonic, new music and jazz concerts in some of my favorite locations, such as the *Cite de la Musique*, IRCAM, *Centre Pompidou*, The Romanian Cultural Institute, and so on. The Baden Baden Symphony and Brussels Philharmonic were invited in November as well, so it was not always about the French. Those of you who are into jazz, may want to check out Kristjan Randalu, a truly amazing Estonian pianist (just search him on YouTube). Besides all these great concerts, my daily life in Paris continued happily with French classes, lots of cheese and baguettes, museums, couscous, and countless neighborhood walks, each one of them focused on a particular area of historic interest. I have also seen the worst of Paris (as in how to beat everybody else in the world at being rude and ineffective), which I will be writing about in the "bonus section", below.

Among my late November travels I should mention a trip to the Fontainebleau Palace (one hour outside Paris), as well as my first visit to Southern France, in Provence and the Riviera. The four days I spent in the south have been absolutely amazing! I got a really good taste (indeed!) of Avignon, Aix-en-Provence, Antibes, Nice and Monaco/Monte Carlo, in a short trip that brought me very close to Italy. This chapter may have been the highlight of my entire European trip, in terms of natural beauty, historical significance, and culinary enjoyment.

Since December 1 I have been teaching at the National University of Music in Bucharest, which so far has been great. It's getting colder, but the food is also becoming cheaper and tastier. I will be back in the US on December 28, but hope to write another report about my Romanian adventures soon.

December 25, 2009

Who would have thought that my sabbatical will reach its last chapter one day? Is there any way one could forever prolong a beautiful dream? I'm awake now. It's almost over. In a few days I will be returning to the U.S., and soon, I will have my feet firmly landed on planet REALITY. You are reading the epilogue of what has been the trip of my life. I hope that one day, you too will grab a backpack and start traveling around the world without worries. Don't postpone. My own adventure has been worth the time, effort and money invested, every single day, in every single place I visited. If you could just trust my words and pictures...

The last few weeks have been quite busy. Since September 1st I have been teaching at the National University of Music in Bucharest on a Fulbright grant, going to new music concerts, and reconnecting with my family, friends, and former professors. At the university I gave a very well received presentation on my music, taught private lessons in composition, lectured on American music (Ives and Varese) and the education system in the U.S., and audited a few courses taught by my favorite professors. While a few of the composition students were truly extraordinary, the majority was slightly above average. Overall, I think the program has lost its cutting edge virility, especially as the younger generation has more options these days and less pressure to perform and succeed. Despite all these changes, the school seems to be doing better than CSUN's Music Department in many areas. They have two concert halls in excellent shape (one with an organ and a beautiful one with an orchestra pit for operas), lots of practice rooms, a pretty good library, free wifi for everybody, and last but not least, a solid tradition going back almost 150 years.

I also took a short trip to Transylvania, where I visited a few small towns and villages founded in the Middle Ages by Saxon immigrants. This is not at all the high tourist season, so what I saw with my friend Mihai was mostly the quiet life of the local folk. Early December was not that cold yet, so the timing was excellent. Back in Bucharest, I continued going to concerts, meeting with musicians, visiting museums, and checking out the traditional restaurants. I found the food to be excellent, pretty cheap, and the service to be better than in France (occasionally even better than in the U.S.). While the selection of Romanian dishes is very wide, the variety of ethnic dishes does not match LA or any other major European city. The city itself used to be glamorous, until the communists decided to get rid of a few 19th century neighborhoods and cut endless boulevards planted with apartment blocks. One would need to know very well this place in order to find its treasures, not to mention that the winter is not a good time for such neighborhood walks. Over the past two weeks it has been really cold, with temperatures as low as 10 degrees Fahrenheit. For a few days the whole city was covered with snow, which led to horrible traffic and lots of delays.

If I could pick a few favorite moments and places from all the countries I visited, they will probably be in Southern France. My peaceful days in Avignon, Aix-en-Provence and Antibes have been truly unforgettable. Right now, however, I need to look forward. I'm ready to come back!

Bonus! What I hate about Paris...

1. In most stores or restaurants, the customer is generally wrong. Servers are moody, tired, bored, uninterested in the job they do and complaining about their work, despite everything being more expensive than in the U.S., and having a tip automatically included in the bill.
2. Drivers do not stop when pedestrians cross the street on a crosswalk.
3. At the Paris Opera Bastille, you have to call a toll 1-900-like number to buy a ticket, and when you go inside, there are no ushers to help you find your seat (mine was taken by somebody else anyways, and this person didn't even feel like moving when I showed my ticket).
4. Restaurants advertise at the door dishes and items they do not have. Occasionally you can see rats running in the windows of restaurants, or you may end up eating in a construction zone.
5. If you are hungry between 2:30 and 5pm, forget about eating out in a restaurant. Despite having menus posted outside and all sorts of signs with the "special of the day", there is no chef cooking after 2pm.
6. The same French CDs that I can buy in the U.S. for \$10, will cost \$25 in Paris. All of them!
7. People who advertise things for sale on the internet, check their e-mail just about once a week.
8. If you go to a music store to buy an instrument, you can only buy what you see there. Ordering is quite rare, or it takes weeks to find what you want.
9. When you go to a restaurant you may be shown to a table, but after seating down, another waiter could come and ask you to move to another table. Even at your own table agreed by everybody, you may not be allowed to choose the exact seat or angle. Sometimes, there could be just one acceptable position.
10. At the post office there are various lines for various transactions. For example, you cannot buy a money order and a stamp at the same counter. This may extend the total waiting time to 40 minutes or more.
11. Food or other objects to be used in the household will occasionally have instructions in multiple languages, such as French, German, Spanish and Dutch. English will be generally excluded.
12. The subway has no escalators, elevators, or any sort of facility for handicapped people. Entering the metro system with medium to large luggage may block the doors and get you trapped (opening the wide doors require an attendant, who is occasionally missing from the booth).
13. If a company or store advertises something that is not really available, when asking for it, the answer may simply be "no". Any additional explanations or excuses are practically nonexistent.
14. When dealing with state institutions (museums, the train company, etc.), various changes in the schedule, location, or temporary closures will not be updated on the appropriate websites, even if these changes occur for weeks or months at the time.

...otherwise, France is quite amazing...