

Thames Voyces Tour de France

Ogeu & Oloron 21 – 26 October 2008

Choir Diary¹

[Oloron Map](#)

[Ogeu Programme](#)

[Oloron Programme](#)

[Ode to Oloron](#)

Tuesday 21st October: Il pleut.

Thames Voyces arrived in the Haute Béarne in several waves. Two parties over the previous few days by air to Biarritz and then by car over the mountains; one by air to Toulouse and then by road; but the main party by Eurostar to Paris and on by TGV. Teresa was presented with a “Souvenir de Paris” in the form of a cartoon drawn at the table by an amorous waiter and signed “Gregory”. There followed a five hour journey to Pau arriving early evening. It was pouring with rain. Peter Soul and Jonathan, his brother-in-law, met us, loaded all (except JW who was taken directly to chez Ash in Ogeu) into a coach and launched them off to Oloron.

All were successfully bedded down for the night, 8 in the L'Amphityron B&B in the St. Croix quarter, 15 in the Hôtel Bristol in the centre of Oloron St. Marie and 5 chez Petrena and Jonathan Ash (P&J) in the village of Ogeu. All were graciously welcomed in their different hostelries, the Hôtel Bristol contingent being much impressed with a four course meal of soup, pate, veal and rhubarb tart despite their late arrival.



L'Amphityron



Hôtel Bristol



Chez Petrena & Jonathan

Thus we all arrived safely, thanks to the cascade of e-mails from Peter S over the last few weeks and the efforts of his gang of helpers, not to forget P&J “on the ground”.

Wednesday 22nd October: Il pleut.

A number of possible sightseeing opportunities had been listed by P&J for our benefit – For locations in Oloron see [Oloron Map](#) . They had booked a guide for a tour of Quartier St Croix for our first morning together. For most of us this was the first time we had set eyes on Oloron in daylight though it was still raining! We assembled at the Eglise de St Croix where we were shown the inside of the ancient Romanesque church by the guide who then took us to the Musée and the Tour Garde. Originally there were two settlements one each on its own hill – St Croix and Oloron St Marie. There are gorgeous views, in good weather, one of the other. In the Musée there was a

¹ Compiled by JW from John W, Anne H diaries, extracts from Peter S e-mails, anecdotes and photos.

room given over to an account of an internment camp near Oloron, initially for Spanish refugees but later for French Jews. Then to the Tour Garde where, on the ground floor, there was a stuffed Pyrenéan bear. Quite large and threatening. Local fauna were displayed on several other floors too.

For lunch a few of us went to La Crépèrie in Place Pierre, close to L'Amphityron. There, a certain tenor was asked if the wall decorations were too “distracting”! The Kir Breton fascinated us till we realised that the base was cider instead of dry white wine. A gentle walk down Rue Labarraque took us to a bridge over the Gave d'Aspe to Place de Jaca and the Bristol Hotel to assemble for lifts back to Ogeu.



St Just, Ogeu

Our first rehearsal of the trip was in St Just in Ogeu. We met Arnaud Garnier, the Director of La Villanelle who was joining us to sing first tenor in the Ogeu concert. The rehearsal went well. Afterwards some of us visited a local village shop where they did their own weaving. We were given a demonstration of the hand loom. The products were beautifully done and very colourful; also very



P&J's Magnificent Supper

expensive. The choir variously walked back through the village and finally found P&J's house. They produced food for 33 of us. Magnifique – soup, cold meats, cheese and fruit tart.



In Full Voyce

So, to the concert. (For details see [Ogeu Programme](#)). There was a good audience who became quite enthusiastic at times. Jonathan introduced sections of the concert in French. They absolutely loved the Tippett Negro Spirituals and were bowled over with the “Je ne l'ose dire”. At the end we had to come back to do a second encore. A great success - even a one woman standing ovation (she was at the Oloron concert on the Friday too). The weaver lady we had met earlier in her shop was there and she was very impressed. All then repaired to the Mairie where we were served cake and sweet wine. The wine was a relatively local one, from Jurançon. Very sweet but with a bite to it. Unusual and very very good.

Thursday 23rd October: La Soleil.

This was a free day, with rehearsals in the evening. All variously explored the town. (Again, see [Oloron Map](#)). There is a long walk from near the Place de Jaca up the hill to Place St Pierre where many of us had been the previous day. The sun was shining at last and the views breathtaking. Looking over the valley to Oloron with the Cathédrale de St Marie perched on the summit is delightful. To a new visitor, Oloron can be confusing. It is centred on the confluence of the Gaves d'Aspe and d'Ossau. The conjoined river is then the Gave d'Oloron. (*Discovered later* - “Gave” is a torrent!). A return walk from from Place St Pierre down some steep steps finally breaks out into a street leading to the Pont Romain over the Gave d'Aspe. And so back to the Place de Jaca. Many of us variously discovered a Salle de Thé at the back of a pâtisserie which overlooked the Gave d'Aspe from quite a height.

A restaurant, Le Louisianne opposite Hotel Bristol became a popular meeting place. A lunch party seemed to assemble out of nowhere from which we all again dispersed, to heaven knows

where, on our disparate explorations. The Jardin Public appears to be lined with extremely tall trees when viewed from across the valley at St Croix. Close to they appeared quite normal! Many visited the Lindt chocolate factory. The Office de Tourisme also proved an attraction, where there are virtual trains. You climb into a railway carriage and press buttons on the console for a virtual ride up one of the many local valleys or around Oloron. As you watch the screen in front of you, the side windows show the countryside streaming by. Amazingly realistic and very addictive. There were about six “journées” which could prove to be soporific. Opposite the tourist office is a “Site Geologique” which sports a collection of rock samples from the region and across geological time. A pair of local school children were seen close by, practising their rock etching skills on a stone wall and eyeing the samples with presumed intent!



Gargoyles and Musicians

After an early evening meal, all walked up to the Cathedral for the evening's rehearsals. The arch around and over the west door is encrusted with gargoyles and musicians. In the grounds there is a modern sculpture of a Saint's body being carried by a blind mule. Whichever of the towns of Oloron or Jaca (just over the border in Spain) the mule finished up in was to be the resting place of the Saint. It clearly ended its journey in Oloron! The cathedral interior is a large space arranged in typical French catholic style including enormous and ancient oil paintings on the walls of the nave. The organ, mounted above the west door is magnificent.

Thames Voyces rehearsed first and, after a short break, with La Villanelle. All were given name tags (which soon fell off) and we all introduced ourselves. The idea was to have the two choirs mixed up within each part but a few of the La Villanelle altos seemed too shy at first. Arnaud Garnier conducted the joint forces for some of the pieces. Peter W directed his part of the rehearsal in French and made himself understood very well. We were impressed. And so, again, to our various hostelries – in some cases *via* eating and drinking holes!



Cathédral St Marie from the South East

Friday 24th October: La Soleil.

Found in an old bookshop near yesterday's Salle de Thé was a booklet “Proverbes de La Béarn” by Lespey. First published in 1876 it catalogues dozens of local proverbs and to each attaches an explanation in modern French. Given a command of modern French this collection of proverbs will probably say more about the Béarn culture than dozens of short visits!.... a thought that dogged the choice of a large post card to send to Ted and Celia who sadly could not be with us.

The market pulled in a fair cross section of the choir. One report was that unless you want cheap shoes there was little of interest. However it is a great place to buy farm produce, which was exactly what Petrena did for P&J's magnificent supper on Wednesday. For the souvenir hunter there were some rocks.

On a sort of reconnaissance three of us met by chance at the restaurant La Cancha where we were to have our choir dinner on Saturday evening. Jonathan had recommended it for lunch on two counts; one, the low cost (€12) and two, the unusual presentation. The three courses were brought, wrapped and all together in a sack hung on the back of your chair. The wine, a small bottle each, was included in the price. It was extremely busy. Instead of 2 rosé and 1 red we got them the other way round. When pointed out to the maitre d' he brought 3 more but left the originals with us – so we had double! The food was delicious and the wine, well, plentiful.

Another cultural attraction in Oloron was an art gallery which Peter S had listed in “places to go”. Galerie Révol was exhibiting works by Robert Fuente, a local painter who was himself present that afternoon. He had travelled the world and his collection reflected that. There were also some stunning abstracts. Other adventures included two of our sopranos searching for an Auberge some distance up the Gave d'Aspe, beyond the Pont Romain. They had overshoot it and lost their way finally finding it, but very late in the presumed lunch period. No matter – they were mightily welcomed and emerged some 2 – 3 hours later after an amazing meal.

The time had arrived for the singers of Thames Voyces and La Villanelle to climb up the hill again and congregate at the Cathédral St Marie. The rehearsal went well and the concert followed in no time at all. For details see the [Oloron Programme](#). The audience of *ca.* 90 – 100 was very



Joint Choirs in Concert, Cathédrale St Marie Oloron

appreciative. Arnaud Garnier was a very clear conductor, smiling massively throughout although he grimaced apologetically when he tried to bring the soloists in early in the Purcell. Peter W did his usual inspired conducting despite having to rush off at one point to retrieve his music! Alex was a dream with the accompanied pieces. Arnaud introduced the items using a microphone. It was very successful though he stumbled occasionally with English titles, to much forgiving mirth. An outdoor Disco was scheduled to begin before our concert finished but they waited till our audience had more or less dispersed. It was very thoughtful and much appreciated.



Janine and Jo

We were then entertained with drinks and food in the Mairie, right next to the cathedral. It was a very old building. The room next to where we were having the party was an old meeting room, possibly the original council chamber. Although small it was like an arena, with raked benches set in a semi-circle around a tiny flat area. Wine flowed and also much conversation in varying degrees from broken to fluent to native in both French and English. We had the sweet Jurançon again as well as excellent red and other white wine. There seems to have been intense competition between the ladies of La Villanelle



Hugh & the Green Mademoiselle

to produce the most extraordinary patisseries. Delicious. There were a number of excellent speeches and presentations. The night descended into hilarity as Hugh fed wine to a couple of young visitors in fancy dress from the Disco outside which was then well underway. They were brought to order by one of the Villanelle sopranos with a withering cry “Attention”! A great time was had by all.

Saturday 25th October: La Soleil.

This was our singing free day. Yet again there was a Thames Voyces diaspora! Not a square kilometre of the Haute Béarnne was unexplored that day by one or other of us. For a taster the following few paragraphs summarise just a few such adventures.

Several small groups travelled to Pau by train and spent the day exploring the town which is much larger than Oloron. There is a funicular up to Place Royale – a pretty square with trees and a statue of Henri IV. A walking tour of the town leads down some old medieval streets to the castle. Pau is a very nice town with plenty of old buildings and gardens and long views of the Pyrenées.



Pau Les Anglais

Others travelled up and around the Vallées leading into the Pyrenées from Oloron and even into Spain. They travelled by car, train, 'bus and on foot. One group set off south and over the Col St Martin *via* twisty zig-zags through trees showing lovely autumn colour, to the current snow line where there was ice on some parts of the road. One road was marked as impassable but our intrepid explorers pressed on into Spain and Aragon anyway, finally turning east into Jaca (where the mule was supposed to go with the Saint!). This was described as a pleasant town with a small cathedral and a moated citadel. The return to France was by Col de Sampacet – a ski village and a deserted frontier post. This time the road was barred by road works and so a detour was necessary, through the tunnel and down the Vallée d'Aspe where Ali was seen on the roadside taking a photo.



The Pyrenées beckon!

Another group started up the Vallée d'Ossau, first stop Laruns which Petrena had informed us was famous for its local ham. The boucherie could have been a butcher's shop in an English market town a hundred years ago. Monsieur knew all his customers and what they wanted. They argued amicably about the cut and obviously were all friends. Further up the valley was a tiny hamlet where the local speciality this time was Fromage d'Ossau. And so up to the Col d'Aubisque. The scenery is breathtaking with snow on the tops and melting lower down, glistening in the sun. Lots of S-bends, galleries, fabulous views and, inevitably, lots of photo stops. A picnic in the mountains is always a joy. A great treat was to observe Griffin Vultures circling down in the valley. On, on to Col Salour and down to Ferrière on a circular tour.



On top of the world



Entente Cordiale - Arnaud Garnier on the right

The final event of the week was the choir dinner in La Cancha. We all assembled in the bar, including about half of La Villanelle. Sadly, Peter W and Alex had to return to the UK earlier in the day. The bar overlooks a couple of courts for playing pelota or “Frontons Pelotte” in French, although no one was playing. (Most villages around here have a “Fronton”, including Ogeu, usually surrounded by very high netting. The ball is small and hard and can reach extremely high speeds. Dangerous!). There were two menus

which we had each pre-selected. Then, after the first course we all moved around, a bit like musical chairs. With pudding we had “sauce anglaise” which was far superior to any of our english custards. After the move there was much conversation, some of it in fluent French or English but some encountering impenetrable French and doubtless English too. No matter, sign language to the fore. When two of the tenors discovered they had aeronautical engineering in common there was no stopping them!

An unexpected treat was the rendition of a song “Blah, Blah, Blah” with lyrics by Diana and Ian, to the tune of “Oh la, la, la, je ne lose dire...”, singers Diana, Anne, Dawn, Hugh, Ian. See [Ode to Oloron](#). There followed some excellent speeches including one from Jonathan who said that if anyone returns he and Petrena can offer accommodation “at excellent rates”.

Alan spoke, expressing our gratitude to our hosts for their great hospitality and hopes that we might all repeat the experience some time in the future, perhaps with Thames Voyces returning the compliment to La Villanelle. Back at our various accommodations, clocks were put back one hour, alarms set, bags packed, ready for the morrow.

Sunday 26th October: La Soleil - eventually.

Just as well the clocks were back since most of us needed to be up early for the coach to Pau. Jonathan and Peter S saw us off at the Ogeu pick up. At Pau station Ian distributed bottles of Jurançon wine - a gift from the Hôtel Bristol to the Thames Voyces party. We were all impressed by their generosity. The journey back went off as planned till we got to the London underground where those of us heading for Waterloo suffered a frustrating diversion. Even after so many hours of journeying we still felt it had all been worthwhile and a key event in the history of Thames Voyces.



La Génie de Pyrenées

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Postscript. An e-mail from P&J to Peter S after our return informed us that our French hosts and audience were still “enthusing” over our visit.