

CZCOGODNE STOWARZYSZENIE MUZYKÓW

Which is how the Poles say The “Worshipful Company of Musicians.”

The Company’s first foray to foreign parts was full of charming discoveries. 35 Liverymen and guests led by Livery Club President, Eugenie Maxwell, had a fascinating and very enjoyable weekend in Warsaw in May. First impressions: nearly finished, modern airport; friendly and very welcoming people; innumerable, almost unpronounceable consonants; tree-lined main roads; large areas of public green space; no hills; hot (90° F for most of our stay); no old cars; vast new commercial buildings on the outskirts and much soviet style concrete (homes, factories and offices) closer in, including a gigantic “present from Stalin”. This 30-storey Palace of Culture and Science, completed in 1955, reaches 750 ft to the top of its spire. It was an ever-present, ugly, monolith, being just across the road from our hotel, but did make a useful landmark when returning from expeditions.

The pride of the Poles in their country was evident. They rebuilt the almost completely destroyed historic centre of the city by the mid-1950s, with the help of some stunning Canaletto paintings, which some of our party visited. The untutored eye would not notice that the rebuild is only about 50 years old instead of 500, especially on a warm early summer evening when the cobbled streets and open air restaurants and cafés were buzzing. Chopin and his music was

the main reason for our visit but we also saw a production of *The Barber of Seville*, explored Warsaw by night, tried Polish national dishes, enjoyed an open-air piano recital and visited Chopin’s birthplace – and that was just the formal part of the trip.

The Rossini was a treat. Performed by the Warsaw Chamber Opera, which mainly specialises in Baroque operas, based in a lovely, atmospheric 18th century former church accommodating about 250. The young cast and orchestra were excellent. Names to watch are Sylwester Smulczyński (Count Almaviva) and Elzbieta Wróblweska (Rosina). The enthusiastic curtain calls lasted for at least ten minutes. In how many intervals have you enjoyed complimentary fruit juice for the audience (ages ranging from 8 to 80) followed by waitresses with trays of elegant, fine china cups of coffee with delicious petits fours? It was absolutely charming.

We emerged elated on a beautiful, balmy evening to go to dinner in the Old Town in a restaurant based on an 18th century hunting lodge. We dined on traditional specialities: soup with mushrooms, eggs and sausage; salmon; duck; and a special apple pie. However, some, including the Master, were more adventurous – or less hungry! The “Night of Museums” beckoned, when all Warsaw Museums (along with others throughout Continental Europe) were open without charge until the early hours. There was a big queue for the National Museum, so the group visited the

Museum of the History of Warsaw, built into a row of ancient houses. There was even a cabaret show with appropriately costumed singers and players.

The next morning was free to explore the city, before attending the opening concert of the summer piano festival in the Powsin Botanical Gardens, outside Warsaw. The soloist was the Artistic Director of the Festival, Anna Maria Stańczyk. In 2005, Anna Maria had approached Eugenie to sponsor the winner of the Powsin Festival competition for young musicians with a recital in London and Karolina Marchlewska, then at the Warsaw Conservatoire and now studying in Paris, played at Bluthners. In exchange, it was agreed that a young British pianist would give a recital at Powsin and Ashley Fripp, one of the Company’s prizewinners played there in May 2006. Eugenie accompanied Ashley to Poland, giving her the marvellous idea of a visit by the Livery Club.

In brilliant sunshine, the large audience included regular concert goers; young families with (well-behaved) toddlers and babies; children in rapt attention, lying on the grass; some nuns; and what appeared to be wedding guests in all their finery, complete with parasols. The warm welcome from the organisers, included “the very special honoured guests from London, the Worshipful Company of Musicians” (or “czcogodne stowarzyszenie muzyków”). The programme began with

