



*Only a day after an impressive concert in The Space, 47 members of the Gospel Choir travelled to Berlin. The highlight of the trip was, undeniably, the opportunity to perform in the illustrious Berlin Philharmonie.*

This trip was unique in the way that it was almost entirely organised by work experience students, including the budget, flights and accommodation. However, we were only given a short time to admire the latter before we were hurried to the Gospel Choir's first rehearsal. The site of the majority of these rehearsals was the Haus des

Rundfunks, a large, intricate building with a wonderful concert hall.

These extensive rehearsals were led by Dr André Thomas, a renowned composer, conductor and professor. Observing these sessions, it was obvious that many were inspired and captivated by his emphatic character and likeable personality.

The following day began with a boat ride along the river Spree which offered an alternative view of the city and a number of recognisable sites such as the German Chancellery. We then walked to the striking Brandenburg Gate, noting the continuous line of paved brick marking the course of the former Berlin Wall.

Friday was an extensively busy day accompanied by beautiful weather. Our first visit was to the beautiful Reichstag building, home of the German Parliament. The almost fairy-tale looking façade was topped with a clear glass dome in which a spiralling pathway led up to the top. Not only were there spectacular views of the city but also a



view from above of Parliament in action; the idea of this being that the German Parliament is transparent and has nothing to hide.

The Jewish Memorial proved to be particularly poignant. Slanted, uneven ground led us through a maze of grey stone slabs which alternated in height, giving an impression of confusion. Indeed the memorial is supposed to be left to interpretation as the artist never revealed his vision for the project and the absence of graffiti provided a contrast to the rest of the city's surfaces. There was also the opportunity for accompanied visits to such monuments as the Book Burning Memorial, Checkpoint Charlie, and a remaining section of the Berlin Wall.

From the choir's first rehearsal in the Berlin Philharmonie, it was clear that it was a remarkable building, both angular and spacious. The choir was given the incredible opportunity to exclusively perform their repertoire in the foyer. Throughout the week I had been amazed at the reception and admiration for our Gospel Choir and the response of this audience was no exception. The quality of the performance allowed the choir to fulfil and showcase their potential; not only were the soloists outstanding, but the whole choir were unified in their vocals, choreography and enthusiasm.

The three-part Festival of Cultures event was truly remarkable. André Thomas conducted the Gospel Choir and the other performers in the third section. The lively nature of the performance, along with André Thomas's encouragement, caused the audience to wholeheartedly participate. The Gospel Choir's palpable diversity is reflected in the numerous nationalities of its members. Similarly the concert united our international choir with our foreign hosts in a musical event which was not affected by the language barrier. This, and the entire experience, was a rare occurrence and the fact that the performance was in such a prestigious venue rendered the occasion even more memorable. The collaboration between the Sevenoaks School Gospel Choir, the Rundfunkchor Berlin and the Aarya Foundation, driven by the vision of Simon Halsey, Emma Pears and André Thomas, allowed the choir to establish themselves on an international stage.

After this unbelievable experience there was no time to sleep before we travelled through Berlin in the early hours of the morning to catch our flight back home. Despite our exhaustion, it was greatly acknowledged that the tour was superbly organised and certainly unforgettable.

*Gabrielle van den Hoek*

