



JENNA WANG: REFLECTIONS ON



2017 BALTICS TOUR

LABAS RYTAS, LIETUVA
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„SONG OF THE BIRDS“

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As a ninth grader at the very beginning of the ups and downs of high school, I had the opportunity to be a part of the most advanced orchestra at the Preucil School of Music, called the Preucil School String Orchestra (PSSO). While I was incredibly fortunate to have this opportunity, I was even luckier to be a part of the tour group that would be traveling all the way from small-state Iowa to the Baltics in order to share our love of music around the world. The Baltics are made up of three small countries all next to each other, which include Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The countries were relatively unknown to me other than through my Global Studies but regardless, I was excited because it was my very first time in Europe and a little mystery is always good for a trip.

When I first heard about the trip, I couldn't believe that I would have a chance to travel internationally, as I rarely got the chance in my childhood. Growing up, I'd always heard of the past tour groups before me that got to travel internationally at Preucil, and I couldn't comprehend that it was finally going to be my first time. I couldn't wait to get up and leave my Iowan life for a week and a half, as I'm sure that most of my other tour group mates felt. I just couldn't wait to experience another culture so different from mine. However, no matter how excited I could be, rehearsals became a common part of my school week and the beginning of summer.

During the school year, rehearsals were once a week for about an hour and fifteen minutes. In the summer, rehearsals were generally three times a week at three hours each. At these rehearsals, my tour group definitely got extremely familiar with the music and even though we weren't close to each other because of the age

differences, I could feel the growing excitement and connection as the Europe trip came closer. When it came time to discuss the packing lists, power adapters, passports, and whatnot, we were whisked off to Europe before we knew it. After all the jetlag and long airplane flights, we finally arrived in Vilnius, which is the capital of Lithuania. From there, the fun began. Each day was a new adventure, with new sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. With our wonderful tour guide Jolita and our bus driver, we experienced so many wonderful places and had so much freedom to be young explorers. With a small group of three, we would have the freedom to be able to venture and walk around areas that interested us. As a whole tour group, we visited Riga, Latvia, and Tallin, Estonia. Each country had a unique sense of culture and none of it ever bored me. Everything was so beautiful. At the beginning of the trip, I recall my dad asking me how much money I would like for the trip and I said that I wouldn't need a lot, because I wouldn't buy many souvenirs. How wrong I was. At the end of the trip, I almost spent all of my money because I had bought multiple items from every single souvenir shop I was in, which was a lot of shops.

I remember even crashing into bed every single night immediately when the bus pulled back into our hotel at 11:30 feeling exhausted because the whole day was jam-packed with fun, and I would wake up extremely early at 4 am naturally without an alarm clock! Perhaps it's because I was so excited for the day to begin.

So, what are the highlights of the trip? There are too many to list. Every single moment in Europe was a highlight and all the attractions were breathtakingly gorgeous. I loved the castles that spiraled up towards beautiful panoramic views. The Hill of Crosses was a true phenomenon to pass across. The churches, palaces, and shops were the most beautiful buildings that I have come across, and the beaches were loads of fun. The Old Towns were absolutely fairy-tale-like and were the perfect inspiration for my stories that I was writing.

I do have a few of my most favorite highlights, of course!



- ❖ Over the whole course of the trip, I have gotten so much closer to people that I have known for years in orchestra but have never really talked to. It's amazing how this trip has connected my orchestra when we barely associated with each other in rehearsals. I feel so much closer to many people. For example, the Brown sisters. (Maria and Maylee) During our free time in the Trakai Castle in Lithuania, the Brown sisters and I decided to do a little exploring, and we ended up finding the remains of an old castle, as well as climbing to the top of a tall hill that gave us such a pretty view!



❖ My visit to the Rundale Palace in Riga was beautiful. Being in there really did make me feel like an actual princess. Back in Iowa, I've always admired Europe for being so beautiful and elegant, so being in the Palace made me feel that way as well.



- ❖ During my visit in Riga, it was perfect timing with [St. John's Eve] Festival in Riga, and my tour group decided to engage in some festivities after an amazing rooftop dinner. It was such an incredible experience dancing with my friends being surrounded by citizens, even though we didn't understand the words of the music. I guess that's one of the reasons why music is the universal language of the world. People were taking pictures of all of us (my friends and me), and we even participated in a traditional Latvian dance! Some of the citizens pushed Maylee and me into the center circle, where we danced while citizens danced in a circle around us! The beautiful flower crowns that we bought were a true highlight. They really made me feel so regal and beautiful, and that night was really perfect.



❖ Because I admired European culture so much for their elegance and beauty, I really became acquainted with European fashion! I bought so many beautiful shawls, amber necklaces, and earrings, as well as a pair of leather gloves. On the last night of the trip, I dressed all European, and it made me feel so graceful, regal, and elegant in a way.



❖ On the last night of the trip, my tour group visited Restaurant Maikrahv in Tallinn, which was a medieval restaurant situated in the Town Square of Old Town. It wasn't just any other regular restaurant, because it hosted a fun tournament while we were eating, and I had so much fun! It was utterly hilarious, and my stomach hurt so many times from laughing so hard! My group ended up winning!



❖ Some of my absolute favorite highlights were the concerts that we performed. Back in Iowa, the rehearsals sometimes killed me, but during the concerts, I played the music so much more emotionally. I felt a connection to every single person in the orchestra when performing and it was just such an electrical buzz. The audience was simply so touching and amazing. The one woman who said that her opinion of America changed because of our soulful playing really stuck with me in a way throughout the trip. My favorite places to play were the churches, because the rings at the end of songs made me powerful in a way!

With that being said, you can imagine how sad and bittersweet I was on the very last day of the trip. All the way home, I scrolled through all of the tour group photos and wished I could go back. Right now I wish I could go back! While I was utterly devastated that we were leaving, I was so happy for the memories I made and the new friends that I made. The tour trip to the Baltics was so eye-opening, and this post will never be able to fully convey all of my good memories about this trip. I rate it 10/10 storks! [*ed: The Baltics have lots of storks, consider them good luck and rate things in terms of storks instead of stars.*]

Lastly, I want to thank the Preucil School of Music for my first and last tour trip as a part of PSSO. There are countless people to be named, but I want to especially thank Jean Littlejohn for being such an amazing chaperone, Pam Garner for being awesome to talk to and taking pictures of me, Julie Xian for being an awesome roommate, Claire Sauder, the Brown Sisters, Anne Marie, and countless others for such a good time, and last but not least, my fantastic violin teacher Sonja Zeithamel for teaching me and encouraging me to participate on this trip, Sharon Sonnleitner for answering all of my Dad's questions and organizing the tour, Tony Arnone for making our orchestra sound so awesome, and the Preucil Board of Trustees for helping to finance and organize this once-in-a-lifetime trip.

Thank you so much for such an amazing trip! I can honestly say that I'm really excited for PSSO next year and can't wait for another exciting year!