

the Arts

Books Theater Music Fine Arts Dance Media

MUSIC

Singing in the Land of Song

During a spring concert tour in Wales, the Rutgers–Newark Chorus paid tribute to Paul Robeson, the distinguished Rutgers alum, who spoke out for Welsh miners. And he is still revered.

Wales had everything to inspire the Rutgers–Newark Chorus when its members toured the country in May: a breathtaking mix of quaint villages, rugged coastline, and lush countryside. And the “Land of Song” had something else for the students: learning about the enduring reputation of Paul Robeson RC’19, the renowned Rutgers graduate, world-famous

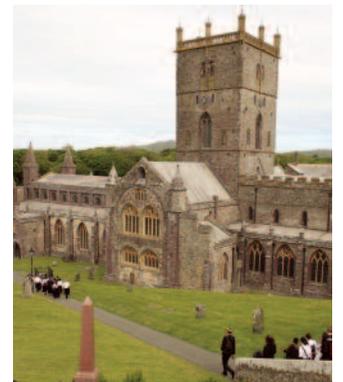
performer, and uncompromising activist who is still celebrated in Wales for advocating for Welsh miners. His association began in 1928 when he was starring in a London production of the musical *Show Boat* and met with unemployed miners conducting a hunger march from South Wales. During the 1930s, he gave performances in numerous locations to benefit victims

of a mining accident and to commemorate the Welsh men killed while fighting for the Republican government during the Spanish Civil War.

Under the direction of John Floreen, the Rutgers–Newark Chorus spent 10 days touring and performing in the nation. As part of the itinerary, the chorus visited sites where Robeson performed during

his visits in the ’30s. The students also dedicated a portion of each concert to songs from Robeson’s repertoire and talked to people who had seen his concerts and met him. “I learned Paul Robeson’s legacy here—which is that one person can make an enormous difference,” says Robert Hylton. “Tracing Robeson’s trail helped me and my classmates realize the power that music has and the joy it brings to people’s lives.” Members of the group kept journals of their experience performing, visiting the Wales countryside, and developing a kinship for one of Rutgers’ most renowned graduates, Paul Robeson.

— Bill Glavin



PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEATHER MORRISON



Dear Diary: What the Students Wrote

Robert Hylton NCAS'07

"We sing to full houses in very old churches, and our concerts always end with the audience joining us in singing the Welsh national anthem. They sing it with much emotion—and even though we, the Rutgers singers, don't know the meaning of each word, it brings tears to some of our eyes, too. This music means a lot to them."

Douglas Ogwu, junior

"You had to be there to watch the audiences turn from indifference to tearful joy by the end of our concerts, to feel the satisfaction of standing ovations and the warm handshakes of the Welsh people. Then we get on the bus and do it all over again in a different city and for a different crowd but with the same response. I now feel a bond with people whom I was unable to know singing in a sterile academic setting back home."

Diana El-Neemany NCAS'07

"On our way to perform at Holy Trinity Church, we pass the beautiful countryside of Wales. I have never seen so much greenery. You can feel the history and the kings and queens who had ruled. There is livestock everywhere. I took pictures but soon realized that no photograph can express the beauty of Wales."

Lauren Smith, senior

"Robeson performed at the Grand Pavilion next to the Grand Hotel in Llandudno. Pictures and newspaper articles there reveal how influential Robeson was on the Welsh. He represented his race and defined how black musicians and actors would be viewed not only in America, but also in places like Wales. It angers me to see some old photos of black men in blackface as minstrel show entertainers."

Nadia Naranjo, senior

"The hospitality of the people may be because of the culture; religion also seems to play a large part. We feel most welcome at the local churches where we perform. Wales is almost entirely Anglican; churches are abundant and revered places, but I haven't seen any teenagers or young adults in church. But, when the 'clubbing' hours begin, the streets swarm with young people."

Anthony Lang, senior

"Before one concert, Dr. Floreen asks the audience if anyone knew of or ever came across Paul Robeson. Only one person raises his hand. But once the concert is over, it seems like everyone knows about Paul Robeson and has a story to tell. One woman tells me that when she was younger, Robeson would come over to her house every Sunday and sit with her family. The stories that the chorus members hear are amazing."



Photographer Heather Morrison's pictures of the trip to Wales are on view through September 26 in the main lobby of the Dana Library on the Newark Campus and from October 8 to November 7 at the Paul Robeson Cultural Center on the Busch Campus in Piscataway. "The landscape surrounds you with awe and beauty," says Morrison DC'95. "The buildings confront you with their history. Each concert venue allowed me to capture the play of light against the texture of the architecture. And the people make you feel as one with their culture simply with a smile. Like their land, they are filled with light and full of life."