



### ***Diva in the Desert***

#### *A Performing Adventure at a New Music Festival in Mongolia*

Our flight was three hours late leaving J.F.K. Bound for Ulaan Baator, Mongolia, via Amsterdam, Berlin, and Moscow, this initial delay set the tone for what would turn out to be one of the most wild, bizarre and amazing trips I have ever been on. It would also provide me with plenty of opportunities to learn some needed dharma lessons. In addition to being a meditator, I am also a professional singer. To save time explaining I call myself an opera singer, although I don't sing much opera these days. After graduating from Princeton, I got a masters at Juilliard, received fellowships to music festivals at Aspen, Tanglewood and Marlboro, did a thousand auditions, various concerts and opera productions here and there, and now specialize in singing chamber music repertoire and avant-guard new music. Singing opera can be really fun, but I love the freedom that comes from creating something new, and I especially love working closely with composers to bring their vision of the music and the poetry to life.

As a freelance musician, I have worked with many different new music groups from Philadelphia to Washington, Princeton and New York. The group with whom I

traveled all over the world is Continuum, one of New York's oldest new music organizations. Headed by pianists Cheryl Seltzer and Joel Sachs, who also runs new music activities and the graduate program at Juilliard, they are willing to play anything and go anywhere in order to get the music of composers heard. In working with them, I also find myself doing almost anything - certainly not what would be expected of the average opera diva - in the service of the composer. When I was a student, the life of an international performer always seemed exotic and glamorous and I yearned for that kind of career. This trip provided plenty of "exotic" but as for "glamorous," well, I would learn a lot in the Gobi desert about who I thought I was.

For this trip, to the second annual Roaring Hooves International Festival of Actual Music in Mongolia, we would have to travel to the other side of the globe, and perform in the Festival's opening concert the day we arrived, June 12, 2000. This was going to be extremely challenging, both in terms of jet lag and dehydration after many long hours on several planes. In order to keep my voice in the best shape possible under the circumstances, I packed four 1 1/2 liter bottles of water to drink along the way, but it was in vain. When our Saturday night flight from NY arrived in Amsterdam two and a half hours late Sunday morning, we had just enough time to jog through the airport - an invigorating antidote to our initial jet lag. We managed to make our connecting flight to Berlin. Unfortunately, our checked bags didn't. Once in Berlin, the sobering realization hit us: our bags would not arrive from Amsterdam before our flight left for Mongolia. The next flight to Ulaan Baator was in a week.

In my carry on bag I had the second of the four 1 1/2 liter bottles of water, my music, my toiletries, a black sequin gown, and one change of clothing. No hat, sunscreen, power-bars, handy-wipes, Pepto-Bismal, and other special clothing and equipment I had spent the previous month assembling to help me brave the Gobi Desert. Actually, I had spent several months obsessively planning, especially while trying to sit, what to take, how to pack, what I already had, what I needed to buy, etc. What a good use of my sitting time that turned out to be! The four out of six of us who had been on the Amsterdam flight searched through the few stores in Berlin's small Tegel airport to replenish our supplies. The men had to buy very expensive performance clothes, but we managed to find some souvenir hats and T-shirts, underwear and sunscreen. Joel, who had a lot of travel experience and many disaster stories to show for it, was upbeat and calm as usual. We bolstered our courage and tried to look on the bright side as we met the other musicians from around the world who had gathered in Berlin to travel to Mongolia for the festival.

When we arrived in Ulaan Baator, it was now Monday morning, 12 hours later than Eastern Standard Time, almost 30 hours since we had left for the airport, and two days since we had been in a bed. We were pretty tired and disoriented, to say the least. The ride from the airport revealed the stark contrast between the bleak landscape of high plains surrounded by bare mountains and the urban sprawl of industrial communism. Scattered among the buildings were grazing herds of animals and collections of traditional Ger, "yurt" in Russian, the portable felt tent structure used by the nomadic herders. This was the first of what would be many such incongruous sights. By the time

our whole group checked into our rooms at the hotel we had enough time to take a hot shower and a short nap. Then the four of us without luggage went out shopping at the State Department store for whatever remaining essentials we could find. The city was extremely hot and dusty, and within minutes, I, and outfit #2 was filthy, a state in which I would remain for most of the rest of the week. After a surprisingly good lunch at the hotel we had the option of sightseeing. I figured I was so trashed that I might as well forgo the usual afternoon rest before a concert and see what there was to see. This turned out to be a beautiful Tibetan Buddhist monastery, and a historic monument on the mountainside offering a windy and dusty view of the city.

When we returned from sightseeing, it was time to go to the concert hall at the Cultural Center, where we discovered a considerable amount of disorganization. "Where should we put our stuff? Are there dressing rooms? Is there a bathroom?" The answer to all of these questions (and many others during the week) from the German-speaking director of the festival was "I don't know." The concert, which would include participation by many of the visiting musicians, as well as the State Symphony Orchestra and traditional Mongolian folk musicians, started more than 1/2 hour late. The audience filed leisurely into the concert hall while pop music blared from huge loud speakers. Since there was really no place for us to wait back stage, we ended up sitting in the audience listening to the other performers. Our contribution tonight was to be a ten minute set of songs in Spanish by Roberto Sierra, for piano, violin, cello, flute, clarinet and soprano. One by one, my colleagues sitting around me started nodding off to sleep. I knew if I fell asleep now there would be no way I could summon the energy or voice to sing later on. So I snuck back stage, changed into my black sequin gown in a corner of the one communal green room, and watched and applauded my fellow musicians from the wings. By the time we finally went on stage, well into the second half of the concert, we were all pretty brain dead, not to mention sleep deprived, dehydrated and unwarmed-up. Speaking only for myself, let's just say it was not my best singing, but it didn't really matter. The act right before us was some heavily miked Mongolian folk singers. We performed without amplification, the audience had no translation of the Spanish texts and they talked on their cell phones during much of our quiet performance. It was surreal, but I didn't even care. I was so happy to make it to the end of the piece. Soon after that I was back at the hotel, asleep in a bed at last.

The next morning we were scheduled to leave for the Gobi Desert at 8am. Our departure was delayed, like most other events throughout the week. Finally around noon - time we set off into the countryside in a caravan of five busses. Our group was now close to 100 in all: 32 musicians from the U.S. Canada, Europe, Kyrgystan, India, Mexico, Vietnam and Mongolia, about 50 music students from the University in Ulaan Baator, several guides, translators and administrators, miscellaneous journalists and a film crew making a documentary for Mongolian television, and ten courageous non-musician travelers from Germany and Switzerland who heard about the festival and wanted to join us. The seven hour journey, which I found out later was only 120 miles, took us through awe inspiring territory along a narrow and pot holed road. The busses lurched and swerved violently to avoid rough patches, animals, and the very occasional other vehicle. The landscape was vast and empty with mountains in the distance. A drought had left the

land more brown than green, and not one shrub, tree, fence or power line disturbed the unending expanse. This proved troubling when it came time to stop for a bathroom break. Bathroom? The guys lined up on either side of the road and pointed down wind. I could not bring myself to squat out in the open in view of 100 people whom I either didn't know at all, or knew too well. Our guides on the bus kept handing out bottled water, but while I drank, I was so dehydrated from traveling and the hot, dry climate, that it was not too hard to wait. Along the way we saw herds of sheep, goats, cows, yaks, a few camels, and many of the small Mongolian horses, which would become one of the most endearing memories of the trip. Occasionally we would see a Ger or two in the distance, or a herder tending to a group of animals. Talk about out in the middle of nowhere!

We finally arrived at "Bayan Gobi", a tourist Ger camp sitting on the edge of the Gobi Desert, about 6000 feet above sea level. The complex consisted of 30 or more traditional Gers, each with 4 beds and a heating stove, a large dining Ger where meals were served, and a bath house with several western style toilets and sinks for men and women. We were welcomed with a traditional tea ceremony and warm words from our hosts and festival organizers. After indulging myself with the toilets and sinks, I felt much better. The scenery was incredible-- mountains in the distance in one direction, sand dunes in the other, a little river, and endless sky. The sun was going down and the air was soft and cool and deliciously clean. Dinner, though several hours later than the itinerary had listed, was simple, but good: bread and jam, rice and a soup containing various pieces of vegetables and meat, and a bottomless carafe of hot tea. I had to sing in the concert that night, which was to take place after dinner in the dining Ger. This ended up being at about 10 pm, several hours later than originally scheduled like everything else on the itinerary. But that didn't matter since my body had no idea what time of day or night it was anyway. I borrowed a skirt from someone, as my sequin gown was not quite the right look for the countryside. Though I was still filthy, I managed to put myself together a bit and warm up properly for the performance. The piece I was to sing was by the Chinese-American composer Chen Yi for soprano, violin and cello. It was in Chinese, and included traditional vocal and instrumental gestures from Chinese opera. I had done as much research as I could in preparing the piece, but as I waited to perform, and listened to the female Mongolian singer sing her folk songs with traditional instruments, I suddenly heard the style my piece was trying to achieve. Though I was exhausted, and still jet lagged, the piece went very well, and I had a wonderful performing experience that night.





The next day, Wednesday, was the most incredible of the whole week. In the morning, we had small workshops with some of the musicians and students. The most interesting to me was with the Mongolian throat singer, who through an interpreter tried to explain how he learned and executed this extraordinary technique. Discussing Western vocal technique in English is difficult enough, but through smiles, nods and some trial and error demonstrations we managed to have a meaningful meeting of minds and throats. At mid-day we crossed the little river for a mini-nadam, or Mongolian sports festival including horse racing and wrestling. Several hundred of the “local” people had traveled several hours, mostly on horseback, some in old trucks or motorcycles, for the event. I was lucky to get a front row seat next to one of our English-speaking guides, for the wrestling. He explained the subtle strategy to me as we watched. The people behind us, dressed mostly in long, dark traditional robes and hats, despite the heat, got a better view by sitting on their small horses who snorted and whinnied right in my ear. The jockeys for the horse race were mostly children between the ages of 6-12. They rode in a circle, singing and chanting to their incredibly beautiful horses to energize them for the race. The horses seemed an interesting combination of family car, kid’s bicycle, and beloved pet. Most families had several with them. Once again hot and covered with dust, I walked down the gentle slope of the mountainside, across the small stream and back to our Ger camp, where I managed to wash my hair in the sink before the pump to the well broke and we were completely without water for the next day and a half.

The concert of the day was to take place a 10 or 15 minute walk on the other side of the Ger camp, in the flat space between two enormous sand dunes, maybe 60 feet high.

Now this was my idea of the Gobi Desert! How strange then to have two loud speakers blaring Ricky Martin, the recording and video equipment of Mongolian T.V., and an old upright piano, missing 10 hammers, sitting in the middle of this wilderness. The “audience” turned out to be all the people from the Nadam, including women selling beer, children playing in the sand, and of course the horses, neighing and whinnying. It seemed sort of like a day at the beach, but with no water. I didn’t have to sing today, so I could enjoy the incredibly bizarre combination of elements as I sat with some new friends in the setting sun. Joel and Cheryl, barefoot, managed to play a piece for piano four hands, their chairs sinking into the sand. The Mongolian nomads seemed totally appreciative of the strange music they were hearing which included selections by Steve Reich, Nancarrow and improvisation on Swiss alpenhorns perched at the top of the sand dune! After the concert I got a ride back to the Ger camp on one of the Mongolian horses. The encounter with the horse's owners was very friendly at first, but then frantic head shaking and furrowed brows alerted me that I was trying to mount the horse from the wrong side. Through smiling and hand gestures we managed to communicate the proper protocol and I had an exhilarating ride over the rough desert brush. After a late dinner, we all reassembled outside where the most famous shaman in the region performed a magical-religious ceremony. We chanted and swayed in the moonlight, and tossed an herb mixture into the bonfire as we wished for good fortune. I prayed to see my suitcase again, but for the moment I felt completely at one with these people and the desert. Western civilization seemed a distant memory.



By the next morning, all the locals had disappeared into the countryside. We loaded into the busses again for a three-hour ride to Erdene Zu Monastery, near the site of



Genghis Khan's ancient capital city. The monastery, one of the oldest left after the communist destruction of most Buddhist monasteries throughout the country, is magnificent, with its outer wall of 108 stupas. Inside the compound, we were treated to a guided tour of the few buildings that remain. The general state of everything we saw, including several monks, was pretty run down and dusty, but the statues and murals inside the temples were impressive and beautiful. I bought some prayer beads from the small gift shop. Once again, pop music blared from loud speakers set up in front of one of the temples to announce the concert. This time it was Cher. Several hundred locals, including old men with brown leathery skin and no teeth, dressed in traditional gowns, and children dressed in western ruffled party dresses and patent leather shoes, assembled for a performance of avant-guard western music and traditional Mongolian folk music. We were beginning to learn some of the Mongolian tunes, as the throat singer, at least, seemed to sing the same song every day. Today, our clarinetist played a solo piece by Elliott Carter that included wide leaps and small chirping figures. A large and very vocal falcon perched at the top of the temple appeared to get into a heated discussion with the clarinet, imitating and responding to the musical gestures: quite a magical duet. After the concert we were taken to a Ger camp on the bank of a near-by river for refreshments. The scene was beautiful, but after using the outhouse (at least I had some privacy as I squatted) and sitting on the ground at the monastery, my hands were filthy, and I was a little worried about eating the finger food offered. I did try the traditional fermented mare's milk which was very strong and vinegary.



Friday's bus ride back to Ulaan Baator took even longer, eight hours, because one of the busses broke down. While we waited to continue, we played frisbee with the

Mongolian students, trying to avoid the animal dung that covered the ground and hoping we would not be stranded there. Once underway again, we stopped at one of the many shrines we passed along the way. They are made of piles of stones and trash - as vast and unspoiled as the landscape is, the Mongolians think nothing of chucking a plastic bottle or Styrofoam container out the window as they drive along. It is said you will have good luck if you add something to the pile and walk around it three times. I tossed on a stone and wished for my suitcase back as I jogged around. Back in the city, I declined to go to the first of the day's two concerts at the Dinosaur Museum where the famous "fighting dinosaurs" were temporarily missing because they were on display in New York! I opted instead for some alone time in my room, a bath, and a good cry about my suitcase, which was not waiting at the hotel when we returned. We could have had our bags held in Berlin, where they would most certainly be waiting for us on our return trip. Instead our group decided to send the bags on a small carrier through Moscow where they might get to us while we were still in Mongolia, but where they could just as easily be irretrievably lost. I tried to tell myself that my favorite leather jacket, the high-tech travel shirt my mom had given me as an early birthday present, the small stuffed animal that my daughter had insisted I take along, were just things to which, in this land of Tibetan Buddhism, I should not be attached. Most of the other stuff was replaceable enough, but I was upset about the loss, and weary from performing in battle conditions and being a good sport about it. It wasn't the roughing-it that I minded so much. The difficulty was summoning the "singer" me without the usual costumes and props. But who was this "singer me" anyway? So I cried and sat and tried to be present with the intense swirling emotions. When I came down for dinner, after climbing back into sweaty, dusty outfit #1, I was told that our bags *had* miraculously arrived, and Joel was going to the airport to get them. An hour earlier I had given into despair and tried to be present with nonattachment. Now I was so ecstatic to be reunited with my possessions, all I could do was observe the impermanent nature of my state of mind and admit that I was not as spiritually advanced as I thought.

During the second concert of the evening in the hotel's dining room, I had a fascinating conversation with a well-educated, English speaking young professional Mongolian woman. "We saw no fences out in the countryside. Is it possible to walk across the country without trespassing on anyone's land?" She seemed confused by the question. "The land is everyone's" she said. "Well, how do the herders keep track of their animals then? Do they know which animals are theirs and do the animals ever wander off?" Again she seemed baffled by the questions. "Of course the herders know which animals are theirs. That is their job, their life. Occasionally animals have been stolen and taken to other areas, but they know where they belong, and usually come back." A different way of thinking! Amazing.

Saturday was full of disorganization and confusion. The six hour concert, at which each group of performers would get to present a more substantial program, was to start at 5pm at the Top Ten Disco Club. We didn't know when we would be able to rehearse, or when the working grand piano was to be delivered or tuned. Most of the day was spent waiting to hear when we could go over to the performing space. Continuum usually likes to rehearse a lot, or at least have a sound check in the hall on the day of the

concert. Everything about the schedule was so unpredictable that by this point in the trip we were ready for anything. Other pieces on our 40 minute presentation needed more attention than the Russian songs by Azerbaijan composer Frangiz Ali Zadeh for flute, prepared piano and soprano that I was to sing. So, we had performed them two years ago in Washington, and rehearsed them in NY a week and a half ago, which now seemed like another lifetime. I didn't mind winging it in the concert. I was happy to have clean hair and a clean concert dress to wear, and besides, I sing better when I am not worrying about singing. That was surely the case the whole week! Luckily, we were first on this marathon concert, so our audience was fresh and attentive. Our performance went extremely well, particularly the theatre piece by Francis Schwartz, which we did in Mongolian. We were energized by the enthusiastic response of public, students, and our new friends and colleagues. Relieved that I had survived all my singing, I relaxed to listen to the rest of the concert only to discover that my digestive tract was not happy. ( I learned the next day, that a number of people in our group had suffered various degrees of tummy trouble as well.) During the course of the next five hours, I felt worse and worse, threw up in the communal bathroom, twice, actually got to wash my hands with soap and water, and then gradually felt better. Kneeling, all alone in that grimy stall, the thought came to me that this must be as far from the image of the glamorous life of an international performer as Ulaan Baator is from New York! By 10 pm, a group of local businessmen noisily arrived for their regular Saturday night drink at the club. We, who had been in reverent concert mode for hours, were startled back to the moment by another totally incongruous clash of elements. Back at the hotel, a final celebration offered a lavish spread including tongue canapes and plenty of vodka, which my stomach had absolutely no interest in drinking.



While we were all happy to be heading home the next day, it was sad to leave our new friends, and we all felt the letdown that comes after an intense performing experience. Just as after an intense meditation retreat, it takes a while to process all the experiences and bring what you have learned back into the world, it took quite a while for me to digest all that happened on this trip and reflect on how it changed me. At my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party, a few weeks after I returned home, I felt immeasurable gratitude for my family, my little house and beautiful back yard, indoor plumbing, and the precious opportunities I have had for adventure and music making. Maybe other people think I have a glamorous life traveling and singing in exotic locations. Maybe I thought the illusion of that life was important. Maybe now, I have finally left my grasping after the diva somewhere in the desert.