

FROM BALTIMORE TO GREENLAND WITH OBOES AND ENTHUSIASM

Who said there are no oboes in Greenland? For five days in the middle of August 2007 they would have been wrong. Trio La Milpa, an oboe trio based in Baltimore, was fortunate to tour this remote country where the ensemble performed concerts north of the Arctic Circle. Heralded as "some of Baltimore's finest chamber musicians" (Baltimore Sun), the members of Trio La Milpa are Katherine Needleman, Sandra Gerster and Michael Lisicky. Though Greenland is under Home Rule, it still operates under the umbrella of the Danish government. Residents of Greenland are actually citizens of Denmark. And with the guidance and direction of the Royal Danish Embassy in Washington DC, the trio became the first American music ensemble to appear in Greenland.



Outside of Sisimiut Kirke before the evening's recital on Day One

There has never been direct air service between the United States and Greenland until this past May. For the first time in its existence Air Greenland began seasonal service between Baltimore and Kangerlussuaq, Greenland's international landing strip. After numerous e-mail exchanges within a relatively short period of time, Trio La Milpa

was offered free air service between Baltimore and Kangerlussuaq. However, Greenland has no road system. Traveling from community to community in Greenland is only accomplished by domestic flights (except by dog sledge in the winter) and the offer of free air service ended at the landing strip in Kangerlussuaq. Domestic airfare between the "cities" in Greenland can be quite costly, especially in the summertime when Air Greenland collects most of its revenue. Just when the proposed tour seemed dead in the water, the Katuaq Cultural Center and Nunafonden stepped forward to cover this expense.

The Katuaq Cultural Center is located in Nuuk, the world's smallest capital. This modern structure, whose design is influenced by the shape of icebergs, hosts the country's main concert hall and sole movie theatre. Through the help of Katuaq's Ove Telemann, domestic airfare and

accommodations basically appeared overnight. It was now official that Trio La Milpa would be heading north.

The trio landed in Kangerlussuaq on August 16 and quickly changed planes so they could reach their first concert destination, Sisimiut. Sisimiut has a population of about 5,000 and is Greenland's second largest city. Practically all communities in Greenland are coastal towns. Over 80% of the country is covered by ice. One could never imagine how beautiful a treeless community could be! The group arrived in Sisimiut at 6:30pm and quickly assembled for an 8pm recital. Precisely on time, Trio La Milpa made its Greenland debut at the Sisimiut Kirke for a largely Inuit audience. With a late night sunset after the performance, the evening was an unforgettable memory.



The trio overlooking Nuuk's harbor

The next stop in Greenland was the big city of Nuuk, with a population of almost 15,000. This is where the trio would meet its hosts from the Katuaq Cultural Center. The city of Nuuk seemed to be at a faster pace than Sisimiut and its citizens complained of its 'rush hour traffic'. Yet Nuuk is still basically a walking city. That night the trio walked to its next concert at the Hans Egede Kirke. The mostly Danish audience included an occasional American who had escaped to this laid back country. Trio La Milpa was honored to meet audience members who were eager to attend their upcoming appearance at the Katuaq Cultural Center.



The trio working with students from Nuuk's Musikskolen.

Saturday was set aside to work with the students of Nuuk's Musikskolen. The trio began with a morning educational performance which was similar to concerts the group performs through the Baltimore Symphony's "BSO On-The-Go" series. The afternoon session was devoted to rehearsal with Musikskolen students in preparation for a joint performance at Trio La Milpa's final formal recital in Nuuk at the Katuaq Cultural Center. The students played flutes and violins; remember, there are no oboes in Greenland! There is also no word for oboe in the Greenlandic language. The Danish word 'obo' suffices. This

educational collaboration was easy and successful. Everybody was eager to present the arrangements of 'Simple Gifts' and the Greenlandic song 'Qaqqat akomani' (Among the Mountains) to the audience the following day.

The final performance at Katuaq had to be delayed as the Center scrambled to add extra seats for the sold-out concert. Along with the student collaboration, Trio La Milpa performed some of the largest staples in the oboe trio repertoire. The Nuuk newspaper Gronlandsposten simply called the performance "elegant". It was a perfect way to end the stay in Nuuk.



On the Nuukfjord.

It was not all work and no play. The ensemble was able to patiently take a four-hour whale watch, visit the Greenland Museum of History and take a short wade in the icy North Atlantic water.



The trio poses next to its poster at the Katuaq Cultural Center.

Trio La Milpa left Nuuk for Kangerlussuaq, the country's main airstrip and a "city" of 500. It is the closest community to the ice sheath. With a long layover for its return flight to Baltimore, the trio was able to take in a musk ox safari and pick and eat wild blueberries growing in the country's desert area. In appreciation of Air Greenland's generosity, the ensemble performed a short performance at the transit terminal. This location was the largest space in which to perform in this small community.

The repertoire for the tour included, of course, Beethoven's two trios written for two oboes and English horn, as well as works by Triebensee, Koetsier, Wenth, and Gordon Jacob. A robust compilation of Bartok's Hungarian Peasant Dances by David Bussick, a must for any performing oboe trio, was an enthusiastic addition to many of the trio's performances. Also included was a new transcription of Handel's Oboe Concerto in g minor, arranged by Katherine Needleman and scored for oboe, oboe d'amore, and English horn. Richmond, VA music critic Clarke Bustard recently praised this rendition as "being as close to orchestral as

it could be". An acknowledgment of the trio's tour to Greenland was an interpretation of the Maritime song "Greenland Whale Fisheries", which was arranged for the group by Michael Lisicky. The performances at the two churches in Sisimiut and Nuuk also featured a version of the Irish hymn "Slane - Be Thou My Vision", also arranged by Michael Lisicky. The composition was arranged in preparation of the trio's upcoming residency on Smith Island in Maryland's Chesapeake Bay.



Trying to pose for pictures while standing in the icy Arctic water at Nuuk.



Walking through the streets of Old Nuuk.

Accompanying the trio were Sandy & Michael's eight-year-old daughter Jordan, and Katherine's fiancé, Dr. Nicholas Mantel. This historic tour would not have been possible without the wonderful support of Air Greenland, Greenland Travel, Nunafonden, the Katuaq Cultural Center and the staff of the Royal Danish Embassy. The office of Nuuk Tourism was an invaluable resource for the group's visit. In May 2008 the twice-weekly air service between Baltimore and Greenland will resume. Hopefully this will not be last time Trio La Milpa or any other American musical group will visit that beautiful and remote country. If you are unfamiliar with Greenland, look it up on the computer or simply look at a globe. Even though it is the world's largest non continental island with a population of only 56,000 people, it is extremely important to the health and beauty of our planet.