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The Canadian War Memorial at Vimy Ridge in northern France provided a moving venue for the adult members of the Don Wright Faculty of Music New Horizon's Band.

When performance becomes its own reward

A project to bring music performance to adults results in a memorable tour

By Mark Kearney

Shouts of “encore” in Paris, the palpable feeling of dignity while performing at the Vimy Memorial, and a standing ovation in the Netherlands.

My recent trip to Europe was not typical, but like most of our life journeys it had “moments” that overwhelmed any overall sense of destination.

I play second clarinet in the Don Wright Faculty of Music New Horizons Band in London, Ont. It sounds more impressive than it should. Essentially, we are a group of adult players, many of whom began as beginners some five years ago and who perform at the level of a high school band. What we may lack in musicianship we more than make up for in chutzpah.

This was our band's second “tour” of Europe, having played free concerts in Prague, Vienna and Budapest two years ago. This time around we played in Paris, Vimy, Bruges, and Amsterdam, with one of those venues being the grounds outside the palace at Versailles. Hey, go big or go home.

As fun as it was playing for the passersby at Versailles, that wasn't the moment that resonated most for me; there were three others more satisfying.

The first occurred in Paris's Luxembourg Gardens where we played outdoors under the threat of thundering clouds. We had a small roof over our heads in the pavillion where we set up, but the audience that gathered had no such protection. We managed to stay rain free for our first few songs.

When the rain hit, I knew I wasn't the only band member thinking "uh-oh, everybody's going to leave." But to our delight and surprise, the audience put up umbrellas and stayed. They applauded enthusiastically for each number and one man shouted, "Encore, encore."

That felt good, even though one band member immediately leaned over and said, "don't forget, the French like Jerry Lewis." But our fan's shouts were still music to my ears even when I was told later that he had been guzzling wine throughout the concert and likely desired more musical accompaniment to help him finish the bottle.

Vimy was as solemn as Paris was raucous. It was perhaps the key reason people signed up for the trip this time – to play at the memorial during the 90th anniversary year of that famous battle. There wasn't much of a crowd that day, but we didn't care. We would have played to empty fields in the driving rain, if it had come to that. Instead, we had sunny, windy weather and a small audience – friends who accompanied us on the tour, a few curious onlookers touring the site, and several sheep grazing nearby.

A few band members mentioned afterward how emotional they felt playing in the memorial's shadow. One song in particular, *Nightfall in Camp*, chosen specifically for the Vimy concert, proved challenging for those caught up in its significance. For me, it was *O Canada*. I'm not a big fan of anthems played at virtually every gathering, but this was different. About two notes in I felt my throat clutch and thought, "Jeez, I'm playing *O Canada* at Vimy. Get it right."

The third moment came from our concert in Zeist, near Amsterdam. Our audience this time wasn't just people strolling by; this outdoor theatre had bleachers with people who came specifically hear us play. Our band's photo was in their summer program alongside a blurb about our coming from Canada to perform just for them. They wanted us to play two sets, with an intermission, as if we were, you know, real musicians. They normally didn't hold concerts on Monday evenings, but for us they made an exception.

No pressure.

But we managed. It may not have been our strongest performance of the tour but it was solid enough. The audience seemed to enjoy our efforts and, to our astonishment, gave us a standing ovation.

I know I'll never be another Benny Goodman, no matter how much I practise, but the joy comes from those rare times when either the listeners truly appreciate what you're trying to do or the band finds its unity in the sweep of a few notes that somehow sound ... exactly right. That's my memory of Zeist.

There were many other non-musical moments from this tour that still resound. Standing in a room in Anne Frank's House in Amsterdam, looking up at the attic where she would sometimes seek solace. The gathering of a few band members late one evening near the Eiffel Tower sharing chocolate, bottles of wine, and waggish remarks. Silently strolling through the Canadian cemetery at Vimy seeing so many graves inscribed with the words "A soldier of the Great War Known unto God."

But those moments deserve their own stories.