
A Land of Music: Alumnae Chorus Tours Cuba

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As the Smith College Alumnae Chorus rehearsed in Matanzas, Cuba, for the July 28 opening concert of the group's Cuba tour, the skies opened up to a torrential rainstorm.

Thunder cracked, and a lightning bolt struck the church, rattling the building with a deafening crack. "I could see smoke coming through the windows high up," says soprano Laura Levin '09, an auctioneer from Manhattan Beach, Calif. "I think it was good luck."

The lightning strike may have been the most dramatic moment of the choir's weeklong tour of Cuba—but for most of the choir members, it was only one of many memorable experiences in a nation that's still largely inaccessible to most American visitors.

[The Smith College Alumnae Chorus](#) (SCAC) board chose Cuba as this year's tour destination in 2014, just one day before President Barack Obama announced the United States' new openness with the island nation. Having traveled to Sicily in 2011 and to Russia and Baltic States in 2013, the SCAC wanted to go to another country with a "rich musical and cultural history," said Caroline Winschel

'09, the chorus' vice president. "And Cuba was someplace we couldn't go on our own." A group of 83 intrepid travelers, representing 21 states and alumnae classes from 1951 to 2014, made the trip.

The singers prepared in a "festival model," practicing as individuals (and sometimes in ad hoc local or regional groups) for several months in advance of the trip, then joining Cuban musical ensembles in group rehearsals for just a few days after their July 23 arrival in Cuba.

The ensemble's July 28 and 29 concerts in Havana and Matanzas—featuring music of Vivaldi and Pergolesi—drew sizable crowds. And the response—from critics and concertgoers alike—was enthusiastic. Writing in *On Cuba*, music critic Enriqueto Nuñez Rodríguez said the ensemble "sounded like a well-tuned, taut and subtle instrument, responding bravely and knowledgeably to each conundrum raised in the music."

The trip also offered opportunities to visit museums, historical spaces and ecotourism sites.

Marjorie Swett '72, a Washington, D.C.-based clinical social worker who was a government major at Smith, had visited other Latin American countries before. But she said it was really "a privileged experience to spend time in a country that's making a transformative transition."

The tour prompted questions that Swett continues to ponder. "I've been thinking about a government's obligations to society," she said, "and especially about how a government can go about raising the floor for so many without lowering the ceiling so much that other things are forfeited, like personal dreams, and more freedom to make choices for the direction of their lives."

And then, there was the music—not only at the SCAC's two concerts, but seemingly at every meal and in every public space. "Whether they were playing American tunes, Beatles, classical music or their own local flavors of music, the influence of music runs very deep in the Cuban culture," noted Levin. "Everywhere I went, I just wanted to dance."

In a media interview after one of the group's concerts, music director Jonathan Hirsh said the international collaboration was the highlight of the trip. "I've never met friendlier people and encountered so much musical talent anywhere," he said, "and I have visited many places in the world. I cannot wait to return."
