Summary

The Chamber Singers of Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges traveled to Mexico City January 10-18, 2014 for the choir’s seventh international Cultural Exchange Tour since 1996. As on previous trips, the primary focus was to enable students to engage intensively with their peers in a culture different from their own through the catalyst of shared musical collaboration.

The Mexico tour also provided a special opportunity for intra-college collaboration by being planned to coincide with the annual Migration Seminar of the Center for Peace and Global Citizenship (CPGC) at Haverford. The twenty-seven bi-college students and three faculty with the choir and the nine students and one staff leader for the seminar were housed together in the Casa de los Amigos (a partner of long standing with CPGC at Haverford) and the Hotel Texas directly across from the Casa. One of the three faculty leaders for the choir was Jim Krippner, professor of history with a focus on Mexico and Latin America, and the current faculty director of CPGC.

In addition to daily breakfast together at La Casa, students from both programs shared a full day of activities which included preparations for the weekly community potluck dinner at La Casa, a visit to the US Embassy Franklin Library the next morning for a 90-minute meeting with the Embassy’s Director of Homeland Security, followed by an afternoon spent visiting the historic pyramids of Teotihuacan.

The primary musical collaborations for the Chamber Singers were with a university choir (the UNAM Voces del CELE, Ana Carbajal, director), a community choir (the Kárítes choir, Gabriela Franco, director), and a children’s choir (the Collegium Musicum of Morelia, Gerardo Cárdenas, director). We exchanged music from each other’s repertoire in advance so that we could perform together as well as separately on each concert. Two of the four Mexican pieces we learned were in the indigenous mesoamerican languages Purépecha and Nahuatl. One of our three faculty leaders on the trip was Brook Lillehaugen, a linguist focused on these early and endangered languages, who was able to provide rich context for the students before and during the trip.

In addition to shared formal concerts, our students had extensive rehearsal and social time with the Mexican singers who hosted us. In the case of our overnight visit to the historic city of Morelia, half the students took advantage of the opportunity for planned homestays with the families of children in the Morelia choir.

There were two unexpected situations on the tour that were cause for concern and extensive discussion. First, a burglary of contents from four student purses in a room just off the stage of the Simon Bolívar Auditorium of UNAM during our first formal concert was a shock and
learning experience for everyone involved with the tour. Passports were recovered, credit cards and cash replaced, and no one was hurt. But the incident led to extensive discussions not only among our students, but with our Mexican hosts, who were at least as dismayed than we were that such an incident should happen and the negative impression it might leave with us about Mexico (our host conductor had even left her own purse on the same table, so it was quite a surprise to them). In the end, the incident served to deepen our discussions with our Mexican hosts and with each other about issues of class and culture.

The second situation that was a cause for concern were reports in the Mexican press of military tensions in the state of Michoacan, whose historic capitol city, Morelia, we were scheduled to visit. There was no actual armed conflict, and the tensions were 2-3 hours away from Morelia (ie, farther than New York City from Philadelphia). There was a stand-off between the national army and local militias who felt the army was not doing enough to confront militants from drug cartels. We followed events closely and consulted with our ACE travel advisory company (a role for which they were hired by the college) and our Mexican hosts before determining that it was safe to make the trip. Other than seeing an occasional army convoy on its way from Mexico City to the troubled area, we were never in any danger. However, our host families in Morelia were especially welcoming to us because we had gone through with the trip in spite of the negative publicity. The historic 500-seat theater was packed for our performance that night. Extended discussions among ourselves and with our Mexican hosts went on throughout the week about issues related to security, the drug wars and the US role in the drug trade, and perceptions of culture, class, economics, and security.

Preparations for the tour included a full class time devoted to a conversation about cultural differences between Mexico and the US with several bi-college students who are themselves Mexican, Mexican-American, or recently returned from study abroad in Mexico. Students also had the opportunity to watch and discuss three recent films related to Mexico: Hecho in Mexico, a recent critically acclaimed film on the intersection of music, culture, and politics in modern Mexico, the Juan Gonzalez film Harvest of Empire, and Maquilopolis by Vicky Funari, visiting professor of film studies at Haverford. Students were also assigned to make written notes for themselves for later reference identifying expectations they had of Mexico in advance of the trip.

During the trip itself students were split into three groups for three 90-minute reflection/debriefing sessions during the trip, one with each of the three faculty leaders. A detailed list of the daily activities and links to daily blog summaries and videos can be found below. At the end of the trip, the students were assigned to write two reflection essays: one during the plane ride home to examine their immediate impressions at the end of the trip, and another two weeks later. Waiting two weeks to write their final set of reflections allowed the students to view the experience after having re-entered their more familiar cultural situation and having made attempts to articulate what was significant or meaningful about the trip to friends and family. Selected excerpts from student reflections are provided below.

The Mexican music learned for the tour was also shared in several performances on campus during the Spring semester. After Spring break, a formal presentation was made to the bi-college community at a forum in Stokes Auditorium. Six students spoke about their experience and took questions, with video excerpts from the tour shown in between presentations. Even though this
event was ostensibly directed to the community, it was of particular benefit to the students themselves in trying to articulate their experience for themselves and each other.

Arrangements for the trip were made by Prof. of Music Thomas Lloyd in coordination with Chloe Tucker of CPGC (director of international programs and leader of the Migration Seminar), the staff of Casa de los Amigos, Donna Mancini, Haverford dean of international affairs, and a wide range of professional and academic contacts in Mexico and the US. Nine months prior to the trip the cost per person was estimated to be $1,500. Students were asked to tell the trip leader how much of that cost they and their families could cover. The trip leader then raised the additional funds from a variety of sources at both Haverford and Bryn Mawr so that all students in Chamber Singers could participate regardless of ability to pay. In the end, primarily due to the location and economy of the arrangements at La Casa, the trip came in well under budget, and refunds were made to the students for all contributions above $500. A detailed budget summary is provided below.

Diary of the trip

December, 17 2013 – promotional video of the trip produced for Mexican audiences
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lt3V4zEAt0

Thursday, January 9

- rehearsal beginning at 4:00pm in MacCrate Hall at Haverford with dinner break for pizza; overnight for students from both colleges in the Multi-cultural Center lounge at Stokes (HC)

Friday, January 10

- 4:00am wake-up call for 4:15am Werner Coach charter bus from HC to Philadelphia Airport for 6:30am American Airlines flight AA 1455 to Dallas, and American Airlines flight AA 0393 to Mexico City, arriving at 2:35pm; group Suburban-taxis (7 per van) from airport to Casa de los Amigos; 6:30 dinner at Café Tacuba

Saturday, January 11

- at 9:30am leave Casa for 30-minute walk to Anfiteatro Simón Bolivar for warm-up rehearsal and noon concert with the CELE choir from UNAM and conductors Ana Patricia Carbajal and Gabriela Franco; lunch nearby; small group reflections back at La Casa
- blog entry for the day, with video of concert and rehearsal:
Sunday, January 12

- at 9:30am leave Casa for 30-minute walk to the Palacio del Arzobispado for warm-up rehearsal and noon concert with the Kárites choir; after lunch nearby return to La Casa to shop and cook for weekly “Comida Compartida” (“Shared Meal”) community potluck at La Casa, with singing for those gathered
- blog entry for the day, with video of concert and rehearsal: http://blogs.haverford.edu/chambersingers/2014/01/13/concert-with-the-karites-choir-at-palacio-museum/

Monday, January 13

- after breakfast leave at 9am for walk to 10:30am meeting at the Benjamin Franklin Library on migration issues with Edgar Ramirez, head of Dept. of Homeland Security at US Embassy in Mexico City
- after meeting, grab sandwiches to go and board charter bus for trip to pyramids at Teotihuacan; lunch along the way dinner nearby la Casa; small group reflections
- blog entry for the day, with video: http://blogs.haverford.edu/chambersingers/2014/01/14/mexico-today-and-long-ago/

Tuesday, January 14

- take charter bus for overnight trip to Morelia, Michoacán
- after lunch in Morelia on arrival, take a guided tour on free tramcar (from Mayor’s Office, arranged by our hosts) to historic center of Morelia
- visit to historic Cathedral of Morelia, with impromptu singing
- late afternoon rehearsals with the Collegium Musicum Children’s Choir of Morelia, Gerardo Cárdenas, director
- 7:00pm shared concert at the Ocampo Theatre, Morelia
- 15 students to dinner and homestay as guests of the families of the choir children; others to hotel
- blog entry for the day with video: http://blogs.haverford.edu/chambersingers/2014/01/15/a-visit-to-a-remarkable-colonial-city/
- online news article of our concert in Morelia: http://www.mimorelia.com/gente/ver_eventos.php?id=2756

Wednesday, January 15

- return to Mexico City from Morelia directly to Coyoacán (near UNAM rehearsal)
- visit Frida Kahlo museum
- 6pm open rehearsal session at Escuela Nacional de Música de la UNAM in Coyoacán, followed by dinner with UNAM students from CELE (Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras de Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM)), Gabriela Franco, director
Thursday, January 16

- visit to Anthropology Museum and other sites
- small group reflections with faculty
- live radio interview at UNAM Instituto Mexicano de la Radio at 17:00 for TL and 2 Spanish-speaking Haverford students (Robin Banerji and Isabel Gross)
- blog entry for the day with video:

Friday, January 17

- free time; visits to Artisans’ Market, farewell banquet hosted by bi-co alums Edith and Bob Kostes at the Hotel de Cortes, Av. Hidalgo 85, esq. Reforma - Centro Historico, Mexico, participation with Aztec dancing group in park
- blog entry for the day with video:
  http://blogs.haverford.edu/chambersingers/2014/01/18/friday-our-last-full-day-in-mexico/

Saturday, January 18

- 7:00am departure by Suburban-taxis to airport for 9:20am American Airlines flight AA 1526 to Dallas, and American Airlines flight AA 0370, leaving Dallas at 2:05pm and arriving at Philadelphia at 6:10 pm; Werner Bus transport back to campuses; BMC students return to their dorms; HC students need to stay again at the MCC at Stokes
- end of tour reflections from faculty leader Brook Lillehaugen:
  http://blogs.haverford.edu/chambersingers/2014/01/22/reflections/
- end of tour reflections from faculty leader Jim Krippner:
  http://blogs.haverford.edu/chambersingers/2014/01/19/chamber-singers-mexico-tour/
Chamber Singers 2014 Mexico Tour Budget

Income

- Haverford 5802 CS Tour account $2,000
- Haverford Louis Green Fund $5,000
- Haverford Faculty Research fund $2,500
- Bryn Mawr President’s office $5,000
- Haveford CPGC $5,000
- Student contributions $27,380

Total income $46,880

Expenses

- Airline refundable dep $3,000
- Airline full payment $15,701
- Werner bus rental $1,238
- Meal per diem@$22 each $660
- Meal per diem@1,200 pesos each $3,008
- Cash advance to TL pers acct for exp on road $500
- Donation to Voce in Tempore $1,730
- First payment to La Casa $1,021
- Transportadora Turistica Mar (bus) $1,726
- Finale payment to La Casa $2,415
- Brook Lillehaugen stipend $1,000
- Brook Lillehaugen phone expenses $102
- Pizza for dinner rehearsal break at HC 1-9-14 $157
- TL expenses beyond initial $500(see sheet 3) $842
- Brothers Grafx t-shirts for Morelia $600
- Net expenses $33,699
- Airline refund received $3,000
- Total expenses $30,699
- Refunds accepted by students $15,700
- Net surplus $481
Excerpts from student reflections:

I would say that the most memorable part of this trip was going to Morelia in Michoacan. Two days before we were scheduled to leave for Morelia, the US Department of State issued a travel warning entering the state of Michoacan due to an uprising of the people to protect themselves from the drug cartels that terrorize their state and corrupt their government. I, being my neurotic self, thought that we should cancel the trip. Why would we risk raveling to a violent place just to sing with a children’s choir? After clearing our travel plans with the college and with our travel insurance company, we ended up going. As I looked out the window during our bus ride from Mexico City to Morelia, I noticed such beautiful landscape. We passed through a city of skyscrapers still being built on the outskirts of Mexico City, mountainous green countryside, farmland and desert-like terrain over the course of the four-hour drive. I had no idea that the land in Mexico was so varied. Contrary to many of the people I talked to before going to Mexico, Mexico is not just made up of beach resorts.

Morelia, itself, was a picturesque old city with a European flair. It was so sad to realize that this city, which clearly relies on tourists, would suffer economically from the violence in other parts of the state. One of the moments that has stuck with me is when we performed “Dios Itlaconantzine” and “Sleep, Fleshly Birth” in the cathedral in Morelia. The songs gained such depth when sung in such a resonant space.

When we performed that evening with the youth choir, I could understand why it was so important that we go to Morelia. The house was packed and one could feel the energy in the space. The kids were so excited to be there and based on the email we received from the choir director after returning home, it made a statement that we had come despite the violence in their state.

- Shana (HC’15)

I’m still a little overwhelmed by my home stay experience. Brian and I spent the evening with a family of four who lived up in the hills. The family was overly concerned with our perception of safety and constantly assured us that we were OK but also telling us to stay close. This was interesting because never once during the whole trip did I feel at all uncomfortable from a personal-safety point-of-view. After dinner we went home and tried some famous Morelian hot chocolate (wonderful). We talked for a long time about US/Mexico relations and the perceptions each country tries to perpetuate to further respective political agendas. At one point the mother pointed out the kitchen window at the expanse of Morelia and said “look at how beautiful, look at how quiet, it is normal/nice here and no one knows!” They were overwhelmingly welcoming and kind and I was honored to get to know them and share their home.

The UNAM concert was especially exciting because I don’t think I had ever been to a non-pop/rock concert with such a receptive audience. I think we quickly learned that this was the norm in Mexico—sharing our music became more of a conversation with the audience in a way I had never experience before in the States.

....the language barrier was something I (surprisingly) really enjoyed working with. I knew no spanish going into the trip and I still know very little. That being said I relished the
opportunity to engage with people to try and come to some sort of understanding. At the craft market (though I didn’t buy anything) I had a conversation with a Huichol man making bead art. I was walking down an aisle and he was just sitting in a corner making this beautiful mask covered in thousands of beads. We spoke for 20 minutes or so, and between his repeating things very slowly, my understanding of French, and lots of gestures, we had a short conversation about indigenous bead art in our respective areas. As an ardent cook I also enjoyed figuring my way through our restaurant experiences as well. People were quick to share and patient to the extreme. It was a humbling and incredibly rewarding experience.

- Patrick (HC’14)

Two weeks after returning from Mexico, I have to say that the audiences we encountered there stick out in my mind possibly more than anything else. Luckily, I kept a brief journal for much of the trip, and a theme that crops up in there several times is amazement at the audiences. From the first night where we sang ‘Balaju’ and ‘In his care-o’ at Tacuba to our last trip, I was really struck by how uninhibited and enthusiastic the audiences we sang for were. In the US I feel that every time I attend a classical concert the audiences are very quiet, almost afraid (Is it okay if I clap now? Is smiling acceptable, or is this serious?). I really preferred seeing an audience smiling, bobbing, yelling loudly for encores, and overall just acting like they were having a good time. It was a very different experience, more in line with what I’ve experienced at slam poetry open mics, and it makes for a more exciting environment.

I honestly felt very welcomed by almost everyone I met in Mexico. Especially the other choirs – I got a sense of genuine excitement and warmth from them. Additionally, my host family was so welcoming I felt overwhelmed, which I found interesting and discussed with Isabel…is there a sense in the US that kindness comes with a debt? I felt I needed to do something to repay their kindness, but beyond the small gift I got them, which they seemed to enjoy (a snowglobe from NYC with NYC landmarks in it), all I could really do was sit and repeat “Muchas gracias.”

Also, I really felt this trip was a valuable learning experience. I am an active learner, and talking to people in Mexico – the other choirs and my homestay family, as well as Kate Irick – made me significantly more informed about this country, which I am glad about. I feel more informed about issues on migration in Mexico, from the talk on migration but especially talking to Kate afterward, as well as the violence in Morelia from talking to my homestay family and Professor Krippner. Additionally, I thought it was extremely valuable to get a chance to practice my Spanish. I felt that even over just a week, it improved significantly – I came away understanding almost everything people said, and at the start I could only get the gist of conversations.

My favorite day was definitely Teotihuacan. The site was just so unbelievable, and made me curious about the people who had once walked up those pyramids. I asked Nico about them and he told me that the history of Teotihuacan is still largely mysterious, and that the Olmec civilization lived there but it isn’t known who lived there previously. The feeling of that
mystery really intrigued me, and I feel I may read more about Teotihuacan out of my own curiosity in the future.

Additionally, learning some Aztec dance the last night I was there was a huge highlight. I’ve never experienced anything like that. I was really impressed by how welcoming some other dancers were, even though we (myself and the other Chamber Singers who chose to join in) had no idea what we were doing. It was extremely exciting to feel part of such a unique event, and be learning how to do it, no matter how badly.

Overall, I feel that although a week in Mexico barely scratches the surface of learning about the country, what the trip did do for me was inspire an interest in the country. I will definitely pay more attention to what is happening in Mexico, migration issues, and Mexican music, since I feel that I can understand all these things a little better after spending just a week there. I am extremely grateful to have been granted this unique, probably once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and really appreciate having learned so much about this fascinating country, even though one could devote a lifetime to studying it.

-Naomi (HC ’14)

On the plane to Mexico City, we were asked to examine our expectations and assumptions about Mexico. I barely skimmed the surface, only addressing U.S.-Mexican relations. But what I realized as I explored the city is that certain assumptions were so ingrained in me that I couldn’t even see them. From the moment the tour destination was announced, I was told horror stories about Mexican water, sanitation, and theft; I was cautioned about Mexico’s drawbacks. Without realizing it, I had been conditioned to expect the worst. My view of the country grew less and less favorable as I pictured dirty water and dilapidated streets, and I had come to terms with the fact that this city, while it would be exciting, would also not be as nice as the cities I was familiar with. As I got off the plane with these assumptions in my head, I didn’t realize how much I would come to love Mexico City.

The first thing that struck me was the color. As we drove through the streets, every building was a different shade and the shop names were painted right onto the wall. Vendors sold juice, handbags, and Duracell batteries on the sidewalk, couples sat arm in arm on beautiful stone benches, and businesspeople rode bikes to work under the shade of towering exotic trees. This warm, lively atmosphere reflected the immense warmth and hospitality we felt from the locals. Everywhere we sang — restaurants, pyramids, historic theaters, airports, marketplaces — the audience members and passersby leaned in, drinking in the music and listening to what we had to say (even if it wasn’t in their native tongue).

One of my particular favorite [memories] was a rehearsal we shared with the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) choir. Only a few of us spoke good Spanish, and only a few of them spoke good English, so our common medium was music. We warmed up together, working on our intonation, and then we shared our gifts — the UNAM choir taught us how to dance to one of their traditional songs, and we taught them to sing one of our spirituals,
“Ain’t Got Time to Die”, entirely by rote. It was amazing to be able to communicate with barely any speaking. And once rehearsal was finished, we all went out to dinner, making friends and laughing together while speaking a broken mix of English and Spanish. It seemed as if all walls had been lifted away, and we could learn about each other despite the prejudices we may have had before.

- Emily (BMC ’17)

Traveling to Mexico with the Chamber Singers was a wonderful experience, both on the musical and cultural levels. Based on what I learned in my Cross-cultural psychology class this past semester, I was eager to explore a culture very different from our own and observe what I had researched in class about choirs across cultures. After having looked up their country scores on the Hofstede culture scale and seeing that they are a more collectivist society, scoring extremely low on individualism, my initial expectations for Mexico were that there would be a very strong emphasis on tradition, both musical and otherwise, and interpersonal interactions. In more collectivist societies, the members generally exchange more sincere interactions among their family and friends—especially those in one’s "in group". Initially, before experiencing Mexico, I believed that the locals might have a pre-disposed stereotype about how "privileged" we are, coming via the United States, wondering if perhaps they would think we’re too self-oriented or more independent due to our more individualist culture. I was very pleased to see that this was definitely not the case, as almost every encounter we had with the locals was exceptionally friendly. They seemed excited to share their culture with us, and appeared even more excited at that fact that we were a group of eager to learn foreigners, pleased when we utilized any kind of broken Spanish or local customs.

- Hannah (BMC ’15)

I did have some health related concerns. Mexico City is the fourth most polluted city in the world, and after several negative experiences in India and other developing countries, I was a bit hesitant about what would happen if I did actually get sick in Mexico. I’ve also spent quite a bit of time studying the health care systems in various countries, and Mexico has had its issues with providing adequate health care. Fortunately, I never did get sick, but based on my experiences there I feel that if I had gotten sick, it would have been fine. I actually spent some time talking to the locals about the new universal health insurance plan (or relatively new at least), discussing what works and doesn’t work. It was really interesting to hear about what Mexico has been doing to improve their health care system and see how America could benefit from what they have done.

When I came back from Mexico, I didn’t say much to my friends beyond that the trip was amazing and that I’d love to return some day. I didn’t know how to voice exactly what was amazing about it. Even now I’m not entirely sure what to say. It exceeded all my expectations. The pyramids were mind blowing, and I was so proud of myself for actually climbing both! Of course all the touristy stuff was great (I will say that I would have liked more time in many of the museums, but I’ll just have to go back again), but I think the real highlight of Mexico was getting to know the locals. I’ve traveled a lot, but with the exception of Italy, I rarely get to
interact with the locals. Ideally, I think I would have actually really liked to do home stays with the students of Voces de CELE, at least for a couple nights. I’m glad I got to have lunch and dinner with a few of the students, but there was so much more I would have liked to talk to them about (at least there’s technology so we can stay in touch).

-Zara (HC’14)

We did a tremendous amount while we were in Mexico. I was so pleased by the balance we were able to strike between singing, and other experiences. I am so proud of our three successful formal performances in beautiful venues with great crowds. I am also so thrilled we had the chance to sing with Voces de CELE in a more informal setting. I am equally happy to have seen the sights of Mexico City, and to have had some experiences unrelated to music, such as the visit to the US Embassy, and to La Zona Rosa, for example. We were lucky to have Brooke and Jim on the trip with us. Their knowledge of the city and the culture were invaluable, and I am so happy to have been able to take advantage of their areas of expertise!

I am always eager to explain to people about La Casa de los Amigos, and to emphasize the role that the Casa community played in the success and joy of the trip. Our affiliation with La Casa made our trip particularly meaningful, by helping us to consider our time in Mexico not as tourism, but as an opportunity to do peace work across cultures by sharing our music with others. In contrast, the heavy police and military presence, in Mexico City and during our excursion to Morelia, was a part of my experience that was striking in a different sense. The visible presence of physical force is something I had never witnessed before this trip. Though slightly nervous about it at times, it was interesting and moving to be in Mexico, particularly in Morelia, during a time of particularly extreme social unrest. Witnessing some of it first hand makes real the subtleties that contribute to the sociopolitical climate that are difficult to imagine.

– Allie (HC’15)

Some moments were particularly powerful for me and will likely stay with me for the rest of my life, especially considering how much of a success the trip felt to me. Singing "Sleep, Fleshly Birth" in the cathedral in downtown Morelia was an experience that brought tears to my eyes. To be in such a beautiful place that emanates a strong sense of great meaning for so many people, and to be able to sing a song so aptly meant for such a space, made it feel like the air itself was shimmering. I felt weak at the knees for the next hour or so.

Thoughts for a return trip to Mexico in the future: I want to learn more about migration issues in Mexico and the problems surrounding the ever-present drug cartels. These two issues were ones that I thought about a lot while we were in the country, and I would like to know more about them. I would like to see more of the border regions of Mexico, both with the US but also to the south with Guatemala, to see what sorts of issues Mexico has with being the space between the US and the Latin American world. Because of wonderful conversations I had with Professor Brook Lillehaugen, I would also like to travel to Oaxaca someday and meet Zapotec people and other indigenous folks both in and beyond Oaxaca. -Damon (HC’16)
I was afraid to formulate precise expectations for Mexico. Having spent some time in Colombia, I did not wish to generalize simply because the people of those countries speak the same language. However, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that many of the things I love best about Colombia were also features of Mexican cultures: enthusiastic audiences, and extreme courtesy and generosity. I had also expected that some might resent me for my nationality, given the United States' history of intervention in Mexico. Thankfully, though, no one displayed the slightest dislike, for which I was extremely grateful. On the slightly more negative side, many of the stereotypes that I had tried to ignore about the cleanliness of Mexican food and water turned out to be true. While many of my positive conceptions about the country were confirmed, then, some of my negative ones were as well.

Ten, twenty years from now, I expect to remember the incredible people who welcomed us to their country. I doubt I'll ever forget the feeling of singing beside strangers with a completely distinct heritage and feeling as if we had some connection; of receiving enthusiastic applause and requests for encores from audiences proud of their history. The venues in which we sang also stand out, both for their splendor--the bishop's palace, a stage in front of a Diego Rivera mural--and for their cultural significance. Singing on top of pyramids and in cathedrals in the languages of those places helped me connect with other cultures and feel less foreign.

- Isabel (HC’17)

One of the most memorable experiences of my trip was talking with a young couple in Morelia, Michoacán, from dinnertime until the early hours of the morning. Certainly, the strongest cultural exchange I ever felt was then. I never understood before—although perhaps from lack of wondering—what it was like to be a dentist and a working mother in the capital city of one of Mexico’s largest and most historically rich states. What it was like to be a claims lawyer for the government of Mexico, hearing and redressing pleas of corruption, abuse, failure to protect the citizenry, and so much more. And it's quite true of my host parents that many of the things they were familiar with—both of them had been students for well into their 20s, for instance—were turned on their head compared to the experiences I had had as a young adult and student in the United States.

Of course, the concept of liberal arts was quite foreign to many or all of the people with whom I interacted: my host family in Morelia, the members of the choir from the Center for the Study of Foreign Languages (CELE), and all of the people I talked to at our comida compartida at the Casa de los Amigos. People were fascinated at something I took for granted: the ability to study two vastly different majors simultaneously and sing in a choir at the same time. It was equally confusing, of course, to talk about the educational system on whole in the United States—it works very differently in Mexico, and I don’t think I completely understand the systems of prepas, colegios, certificados, bachilleratos, and universidades even after an entire week.

- Robin (HC’15)
I will most definitely remember when the choir sang on top of the Temple of the Sun and eating lunch with five UNAM [student] choir members. The pyramids were a beautiful historical site, and I was extremely happy for the opportunity to personally ask questions about Mexico to the choir members and be questioned in return. Also, one of the most exciting moments of the tour was when we joined in the Aztec dancing under the monument that last night, being able to, even as foreigners, participate in such a wonderful cultural tradition.

- Carolyn (HC’16)

Some of my initial expectations of Mexico, (because I’ve never been before), proved to be complete misconceptions. Before going, when I heard “Mexico,” I would typically think of an impoverished, crowded, desert country, because I think that’s generally how it is portrayed by social media. However, I found Mexico City to be just as developed and beautiful as any other, for example New York City; each with their own rough areas but also with bustling streets, busy parks, and crafty street vendors. However, one of the major differences that struck me was the overall relaxed atmosphere of the city. Despite it being extremely dense and crowded, there were no angry pedestrians shoving you out of the way, or waiters frantically trying to move you along, or salespeople tapping their toes waiting for you to make a decision (very much unlike cities in the United States like New York).

After being home for several weeks, I am thrilled with how many members of the U-Nam choir have reached out and kept in touch. They are all so eager to hear about our school, our choir, and Philadelphia! I’ve been enjoying answering questions about the Super Bowl and what kind of things I’m studying. They are all adamant about visiting Philadelphia at some point! Especially after reading the kind and passionate email from the director of the Morelia choir, I appreciate even more the way we were received at our concerts as a choir, and as a large group of white American tourists in each city. It seems like these choirs want to maintain a connection and relationship with us and that our performances with them were a really meaningful experience. I love seeing dozens of the U-NAM members have the group photo of both choirs as their profile pictures and showing it off to their friends!

- Ivy (BMC’14)

My elevator speech has been mostly about the crowds that we sang to. I'll mention how lively they are. I think one thing I figured was mentioned how the food was good or the weather was good doesn’t really accomplish why we went on the trip. People already know about tropical climates or authentic food. What they don’t know about is the effect an American choir can have on a foreign audience.

Another sort of similar expectation was that it would be difficult not speaking Spanish and being in Mexico. This was a very interesting experience, I had a feeling of helplessness but an illusory aura of confidence because I would be with other people who could speak well. I’m not sure about specifics, but I heard varying stories of Mexican citizens either liking the group or disliking them. We would walk by comedians who would ask where were from and play off of
that. People at the Sun and Moon pyramids loved out singing. However, I would also hear accounts of someone saying "Mexico is for Mexicans". I did not expect that sort of ownership, or possible anti-tourist vibe. One possible example of ignorance on my part was assuming English was more important than it actually is.

– George (HC’16)

The times when I really felt what Mexico was like were the times when we got to interact with the other choirs. The first of those times where I really felt like I connected with someone was on my overnight with Brenda. She spoke incredible English and we were able to have conversations about many things: from how we like to sing to her expectations for the future. I got to hear her recommendations of Latin American literature which I had never had much opportunity to read as well as hear how she wanted to go into journalism. I was able to go to someone’s home and through our connection to music, learn her hopes and dreams for the future.

The second time I felt particularly close to the people I met was when we returned to Mexico City after Morelia and met the students from the first choir we sang with in Coyoacan. That rehearsal was the first time I felt that I was really able to talk to them. On the way to the restaurant where we had dinner I was able to communicate with someone who spoke very little English when I spoke very little Spanish and even though we stumbled a lot through the conversations I was able to tell her about how I loved reading and how I wanted to be a librarian and in return she told me about her mother who recently passed away but had written amazing poetry in her life which she offered to email to me. I was so proud in that moment and it also made me realize how easy it was to make the effort to understand someone else when you never thought you could. All it took was being open to the opportunity.

- Jo (BMC’17)

What surprised me most about the trip was the profound connection we found with others through music. The friends I have made through musical groups such as Chamber and a cappella make up some of my closest relationships; clearly the amazing power of musical connection is very present in my life. And yet, it had never really become clear to me until we went to Mexico and reached out to other people and cultures through our singing. Music is such an incredible way through which to find common ground, and performing, rehearsing, and hanging out with people who share the same passion as us made it so much easier and more meaningful to connect with them. If I had traveled to Mexico as primarily a scholar or a tourist, looking to observe and learn from the culture, then the experience would have been much less meaningful than it was when I traveled as, first and foremost, a singer. Music not only leveled the playing field, allowing us all to approach each other as equal artists, but also laid the groundwork for a relationship based on reciprocity and sharing. The height of this experience, for me, was the rehearsal that we had with UNAM’s choir, Voces de CELE. Teaching our music and being taught their music in equal parts was an experience that launched us all into friendships based on sharing understanding and teaching as well as learning. It was an
incredible evening, filled with dancing and singing and an equal exchange of music, language, culture, and laughter.

I was nervous at first about going on an eight-day long trip with two professors who I had never heard of before, and who had never met most of the group. I wasn’t sure how they would feel around us, or how we would all feel with them, especially since we didn’t get a chance to get to know them before we all left. Their presence, however, was an incredible addition to our experience, and the trip was greatly enhanced not only by their vast knowledge and experience with the country but by their personal contributions to the atmosphere of the group itself.

– Colleen (BMC’14)

Certainly my expectations of hospitality were exceeded, and I can think of no better example than my home stay. My host family was more than generous, leaving me unable to return the favor or to express thanks. It is also through them that I was able to experience Mexican cuisine at its finest. One of the most memorable experiences for me has been Mexican chocolate—at the Café de Tacuba, and again with churros in Coyoacán. They took me to a restaurant in Michoacán, urging me to taste every dish and making sure that I enjoyed the dinner—as indeed I did! My host father also showed me around Morelia, a beautiful historic town which has survived to the present day as a proud piece of Mexican heritage. My stay in Morelia I will not soon forget, and if I get the chance I would be eager to visit again.

Before arriving, I was unsure what place music would have in the lives of people in Mexico. What I saw was a great interest in, and love for, music, but little opportunity to pursue it academically or professionally. Throughout Mexico City are street organs, but sadly many of these instruments are out of tune and poorly maintained. The choir at UNAM is full of talented and eager students who love music, yet most of them have not had the chance to learn musical notation; instead, they learn solely by rote. At Mass at the Cathedral there were some who sang together out of a love for the liturgy and for the music, but with untrained ears and voices. It was pointed out in one of my sessions of reflection that there is not a single music publisher in Mexico, and that conservatories are rare.

- Micah (HC’14)

Driving around Mexico and seeing the colorful houses that look rather poorly put together and make you feel like you are in a poorer neighborhood, I was so surprised by the interior of one of these types of houses, which I stayed in with my host family. It had the most beautiful décor, from amazing paintings to a fountain in the living room. I’m not really sure what I concluded from that. If anything, just not to make assumptions.

....Another special day was when we had was the rehearsal we had with the UNAM choir where we learned the dance to Balaju together and taught them Ain’t Got Time To Die proved, as music has time and time again, that it has the power to bring people together from all over
the world. It was amazing to hear them articulate in English what music means to them. The last memorable thing I will reflect on is the basket that I was given by the host family I never met. They choir of Morelia was truly so welcoming to us and I am really grateful for that experience.

- Joelle (BMC’15)

From a historical standpoint, this trip was phenomenal, allowing us to visit one of the wonders of the world in the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacán and take a deeper look into the wide variety of Mexican native societies in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. However, it was my home stay left the strongest impression of upper-middle class life in Morelia, which was not significantly different from life at home. The family welcomed me with open arms, as did all of the groups who we performed with. Additionally, all of the informal concerts that we performed, for example at the artisan’s market, were received well by the local people, especially when we performed traditional Mexican pieces. Thus, my image of the average Mexican is definitely more positive than before, and more similar to an American, a human being. This is a common theme that follows travel experiences throughout the world by people of any age and background; immersion permits us to realize that the human experience is more homogeneous (especially in this modern age) than one realizes when confined to one’s own culture.

- Joe (HC’14)

Before entering the state [of Michoacán] we were all skeptical based on the many statements being said about the danger, and the civil unrest. But upon arriving in Morelia, we were instantly stunned by its noticeable beauty, history, and the hospitality of the people. Our tour showed some of the prettiest cathedrals in the world that have been maintained as a symbol of Mexican history. Singing with the groups also brought a cultural experience. We were able to bring our small knowledge of the songs and culture and expand upon it by being around the people of the country. Songs like *La Adelita* and *Balaju* had strong cultural influences that we could only learn in that country around the people. The dances we learned from *Balaju* and the cultural history we learned from *La Adelita* are influential parts of the trip that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

- Abby (BMC’16)

Thinking of moments that I will remember ten and twenty years down the line, I think the biggest one for me is definitely seeing the pyramids at Teotihuacan. The enormity of them was really impressive to me, and I love seeing wonders of the ancient world, as I find history to be fascinating. Because of this, I also loved seeing the house of Frida Kahlo and learning about her. One of the other moments I really enjoyed was singing *La Adelita* in our rehearsal with UNAM. While singing, I felt a great deal of camaraderie with my fellow singers, which is something I really enjoy about singing. It’s a lot more fun to sing when everyone is really engaged with the song and having fun with it.

- Misha (HC’16)