

6 Cultural cruises

Transatlantic crossing hits the high notes

Join the National Symphony Orchestra on a trip from New York, says **Gabriella Le Breton**

Standing nervously in the wings of the Royal Court Theatre, I listened with disbelief to Anthony Inglis, the music director of the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO), announce my choir's performance. I had zero experience of singing in a choir, never mind doing so in front of hundreds of people, and yet here I was, filing out on to the grand stage of the 1,100-capacity theatre on Cunard Line's flagship *Queen Mary 2* (QM2).

Seeing the musicians of the NSO in their white jackets and black bow ties, adjusting their strings and bows, and the sequined

audience facing us, smiling up expectantly, I felt a surge of nervous excitement. I had never been on this side of the stage before and it was thrilling.

For the past ten years Inglis and about 25 members of the NSO ("the cream of the crop" as he describes them) have joined a September crossing aboard QM2, timed to coincide with the last week of the Proms. Passengers enjoy two sparkling performances, attend rehearsals and a Q&A session with Inglis, and even join a choir to practise under his tutelage to give a performance during the Last Night of the Cunard Proms evening show.

It was the cultural focus that made me select this sailing to New York. Despite all QM2's bells and whistles, and her jaw-dropping size (at 1,132ft she is longer than the Shard is tall), I was wary of growing bored of my floating gilded cage. It's a peculiar feeling knowing you won't set eyes on land for a week.

During the jubilant sail-away from Southampton to the strains of *Land of Hope and Glory*, I savoured a stiff G&T as I watched Britain's coastline slip past, and suddenly felt daunted when it was gone, leaving only the flat, blue horizon. Would I be tempted to throw myself and/or my mother, my transatlantic voyage companion, overboard in a fit of claustrophobia? Or worse, succumb to boredom and learn to play bridge?

Luckily the music was nonstop from the start, and with 15 restaurants and bars, five swimming pools, a planetarium, Canyon Ranch Spa, a 6,000-book library (the largest at sea), and 5,000 pieces of original art, there was plenty to do.

The musical crossing is part of a diverse and expanding programme of cultural transatlantic voyages offered by Cunard, which has hosted the world premiere of Hollywood's *The Greatest Showman*, run classes from St Ives School of Painting, and this year brings the English National Ballet aboard for performances and dance workshops. In November it will launch a Literature Festival at Sea, with talks by the authors Sebastian Faulks, Louis de Bernières and Robert Harris.

While my mother and I are passionate about classical music and singing, our enjoyment heavily outweighs our ability

Passengers on Cunard's *Queen Mary 2* sailing to New York can sing in a choir conducted by Anthony Inglis, right

and neither of us had any experience of performing. Fortunately, the jovial Inglis favours attendance and enthusiasm over perfect pitch. "We don't normally have many people who have sung in a choir before. It's about creating something special and very British, about simply making music with like-minded people."

Thus all 70 nervous hopefuls who "auditioned" on the third day were warmly welcomed without humiliation before being separated into voice types and then into two choirs ("Choir A and Choir I, for fairness's sake"). We learnt that *Amazing Grace* was to be our standout performance,



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Need to know

Gabriella Le Breton was a guest of Cunard Line (cunard.co.uk) which has a Last Night of the Proms transatlantic crossing on board *Queen Mary 2* departing New York City on September 15, from £1,669pp, including flights to New York

with the audience joining us to sing *Rule Britannia*, *Jerusalem* and *Land of Hope and Glory* in true Last Night of the Proms jollity. Inglis assured us that two rehearsals would be enough to master the beautiful, if complicated, harmonies of the hymn. I'm not sure any of us believed him.

At least we had plenty of time to practise. In a world where travellers tend to prize speed, Cunard Line celebrates the luxury of slow. Capable of zipping across the Atlantic in only four days, the ship, which exudes the old-school glamour of her predecessors, adopts a sedate pace to make the crossing in six or seven days.

We quickly fell into little routines: three laps of the promenade deck before breakfast (one mile), joined by serious-looking Lycra-clad joggers and less serious strollers still sporting their dressing gowns. This was followed by a morning seminar, fitness class or choir rehearsal and a spot of reading on our sunny balcony before lunch, then some swimming, spa treatments, classes on ballroom dancing, art or cooking, and lavish afternoon teas, that somehow rolled into cocktails and dinner.



The highlight was the ever-present strain of music: not only at the nightly musical and theatrical performances in the Royal Court Theatre, including a sparkling American evening awash with Broadway favourites performed by the NSO, but from the string quartet that played at afternoon tea, the resident jazz band in the Chart Room and the pianist in the Commodore Club. There was no need to seek out music — it found us.

As New York got closer, so too did our Last Night of the Cunard Proms performance, and our nerves began to jangle. I kept catching segments of *Amazing Grace* floating in the air, as fellow choir members hummed or sang the melody under their breath. As I practised on my balcony (belted out my words to the ocean, believing I was out of earshot), I heard a baritone doing the same two decks down.

Too soon the penultimate night of our crossing dawned and I found myself on stage. After a shaky start, I sang my heart out with Choir A to critical acclaim from passengers, who joined in with a rousing, flag-flying *Rule Britannia* for the finale. The elation lasted through my reluctant packing the next day.

A new elation set in the next morning at 4am: tucked under my duvet on the lounge on my balcony, I listened to the gentle peal of a bell on a rocking buoy in New York harbour — the first sound I'd heard in a week that was not of the sea or the ship, and a sweet-toned introduction to the awaiting cacophony of New York City.

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