Steve Gerber’s Excellent Oslo Adventure

I was invited to be a speaker at an international gathering of 50 music academy (conservatory) directors and music librarians from eight countries in Oslo, Norway on February 17, 2011. It was a short trip: an overnight transatlantic flight, one day to catch up on missed sleep and finish my script, one day at the conference, one day to sightsee, and finally, one long day for the flights home.

Here’s my ride, parked at Washington Dulles Airport: a Boeing 777. Even though I live a mile or so away and preprinted my boarding pass, I got to Dulles three hours before takeoff, just in case there was a complication! The flying time to London/Heathrow was seven hours, followed by a 90-minute layover and change of plane, then two hours to Oslo (all via British Airways).

Return trip was somewhat longer, twelve hours in all, because of headwinds.

Inside Gardermoen Airport, about 25 miles northeast of Oslo. After passing through international arrivals, my first order of business was to find a currency exchange and switch $100 US into 510 Norwegian Kroner (after paying the 50 Kroner commission). Wow, I’m RICH.

Inside the high-speed express train, Flytoget, that runs from the airport into downtown Oslo and then westward another forty miles. Ah, my choice of seats. The photo is a bit fuzzy—sorry.
As my train was pulling away from Gardermoen, this one was pulling in. Flytoget’s top speed is supposed to be about 120 miles per hour, but it seemed to be traveling around 70 or 75 mph for my short, 20-min. trip; perhaps it goes faster in the hinterland.

Yup, it’s winter in the Norwegian countryside. Most of my shots from the window of the speeding train were gray and blurry but this is almost acceptable. The landscape was quite beautiful.

Here’s where I get off: the National Theater Station in downtown Oslo. I studied up ahead of time with MapQuest and GoogleMaps so that I would know where this station, my hotel, the music academy, and the station nearest the academy were located. Nonetheless I still had some confusion when first emerging from the underground into the heavily overcast daylight, and wondering which direction was north, without sun and shadow to navigate by.
A warm musical greeting by street musicians outside Theater Station. I’ll bet their fingers were pretty cold. Daytime temperatures during my stay were around 20 degrees Fahrenheit.

They were playing “Midnight in Moscow.” Go figure.

Here’s my hotel, about a three-block walk from the theater station. A slippery, sloppy walk, most of the way; they seem pretty casual about clearing the sidewalks here, and sometimes the snow and slush covers up frozen ruts and black ice.

Here’s my cozy room, #623. Free wireless internet. And substantial breakfast buffet included in the cost of stay, unlike the wimpy continental breakfasts in American budget motels! I had eggs, sausage, fried potatoes, fruit, cheese, coffee, and juice every morning. (They also provide bread/biscuits, cereal, salad bar, fish, and baked beans at breakfast; I passed on these.)

My hosts paid for two nights; I stayed an extra night at my own expense. I had to bring along a voltage transformer so that my overnight CPAP breathing machine would not burn up, and a plug adaptor for my netbook (which runs on both 120 and 240 volts).
Counting up what money I had left after buying the round-trip Flytoget tickets (which cost 340 Kroner = $68) and a foot-long sausage & bacon sandwich (35 Kroner = $6.50). I’m not so rich after all, and must find an ATM and use my debit card for more spending money.

ATMs are a better deal than using an airport or bank currency-exchange, in any case- no commission to pay! The 100-Kroner note is roughly equivalent to $18.

This is the Norges Musikkhøgskole (NMH), or Norwegian Academy of Music, just one station away from Theater on the T-Bane (or metro). It’s at the edge of the University of Oslo campus. You’re wondering about the greenery in February… I didn’t actually take this photo; this is an online publicity shot of how it looks in the summer. NMH was the host for the two-day winter assembly of Association of Nordic Music Academies, a consortium of about three dozen conservatories from eight Scandinavian and Baltic countries.

Here’s the title of my address, a 60-minute speech illustrated with 34 powerpoint slides and one short music track. Below is a photograph of me responding to questions and remarks from the audience afterward.
Thursday’s events—in addition to my talk and the Q&A that followed, three shorter presentations, and a workshop—including two 15-minute musical interludes. First was an improvisational performance of live-electronic music by members of the U Oslo iPhone Ensemble (pictured here in a publicity photo, holding their phones and mini-speakers). Later there was a performance of Joaquin Turina’s piano quartet by Norwegian Academy undergraduate students—four pretty and talented young ladies from Sweden, Korea, and Russia!

The first night of the assembly featured a banquet at this historic log restaurant in the hills overlooking Oslo: Frognerseteren. It opened in the 1880s. As our motor coach made its way back and forth uphill along switchback roads toward Frognerseteren, we passed Holmenkollen (newest-biggest-best ski jump in the world?), being prepared for an international competition the following week.

A stock publicity shot of the interior of Frognerseteren, from the restaurant’s website. Our tasty dinner here included a marinated smoked-elk-and-mushroom appetizer, a main course of salmon and crabmeat rolls with garlic-mashed potatoes and vegetables, and a wild-berry parfait.

I sat at a table with directors and/or librarians from conservatories in Stavanger, Talinn, Copenhagen, and Gothenburg. Everyone speaks English. I don’t drink, but the wine imbibed by others made them convivial, and, magically, made me appear CHARMING and WITTY. Interesting how this works!
I had no conference obligations on Friday, so that was my “free” day to trudge around central Oslo in the gray, damp cold. I wisely brought my “Minnesota” clothing and bundled up. Here’s a store window welcoming international competitors to the Nordic World Ski Championships to begin the following week; a pretty big deal for winter athletes. Lots of skiers were already in town.

This is Norway’s National Theater, with a statue of their most celebrated playwright, Henrik Ibsen, standing guard. I wandered through the theater district and then southward toward the waterfront.

A storefront troll. You see lots of trolls inside and outside souvenir stores. Trolls and Vikings. I did not buy a Viking hat.
Oslo’s monumental Radhuset, or town hall for its municipal bureaucrats, is very near the waterfront. When I turn around from taking this picture…

…here’s what I see: docked boats of various sizes and types, waiting out the winter. Oslo is at the northern end of a fjord which opens into the North Sea, and is thus a seaport for fishing vessels, pleasure craft, excursion boats, ferries, cargo ships, and cruise liners. The sun is trying to break through the clouds. Cute—that foreground vessel is the “Henrik Ibsen.”

On a high hill overlooking the downtown waterfront is Akershus, a seven-century-old stone fortress and castle complex. It has also been used as a prison and currently includes military barracks. I tramped around where I could, but most of the grounds and all of the historic buildings were closed for the winter.

Unless you’re a skier, February is not the best time of year to visit Norway!
I thought this was a nice photo opportunity, one that I had to grab in very few seconds— a small boat heading out to sea, framed by one of the Akershus gates.

Also on the waterfront (about a mile from Akershus) is Norway’s National Opera and Ballet, a huge new building in a very striking modern style by the innovative Snøhetta architectural design group. It’s larger than what you see here; this shows the upper levels. On either side are broad, sloping walkways up to one of the roofs (see the people?). The lower level walkways (out of the picture) actually slope into the water.

It looked a little treacherous in the snow, but others were climbing up to the roof with no trouble. I figured that I might never come this way again, so I eventually made my way to the top also.

First I stopped to shoot a self-portrait, mirrored in the opera house’s ground floor windows. FaceBook is full of people photographing their own reflections in mirrors. This will be my contribution.
Halfway up the slope to the roof of the opera house. A sign warned “no bicycles or skateboards allowed” in Norwegian and English. As if! It didn’t mention snowboards.

A view from the roof. I very much like this interesting sculptured-glass-and-steel construction out on the snow-covered ice. The artist is Monica Bonvicini and the title is “She Lies.” It’s about 50 feet tall and, in the summer when the ice is gone, it swings around gently on an axle in response to currents, or so they say.

Another view from the roof of the opera house, looking westward over the city. Notice the distant hill, about six or seven miles away....
…and now notice how, with my camera’s 12x optical zoom, I can close-up on the hill and pick up that Holmenkollen ski jump. It looks like a bridge to nowhere. 30,000 spectators will crowd around it for those ski championships. Looks tiny in the distance but it is huge.

Inside the opera house’s main lobby. By this point I needed hot coffee and a raspberry muffin at the opera café! The current production was Alban Berg’s expressionist opera *Lulu* (which I did not attend). I could have taken an afternoon tour and seen the auditorium, the stage and backstage areas, the library, etc., but time is marching on; there are other things to see.

About half a mile back inland from the waterfront opera house is Oslo’s huge and part-modern, part-historic Sentralstasjon: two levels of shops and food franchises above, two levels of commuter trains and metro trains below. The plaza outside one of the entrances features a gigantic bronze tiger, taller than I am; apparently one of Norway’s authors referred to Oslo as “the city of tigers” and the improbable metaphor caught on. Bought my sweetheart a souvenir at a shop in here somewhere.
My next trek was about a mile up a gradual hill through an East-Indian neighborhood to the Edvard Munch Museum.

I’m about halfway there in this shot. Oslo reminds me of my home town of Duluth, Minnesota in many ways; this is one of them! (Except that in Duluth, there is an ordinance that every property owner must shovel or plow his sidewalks within 24 hours of a snowfall.)

Exterior of the Munch Museum. Fascinating place. What a tormented artist; his expressionistic artwork is generally quite… depressing. After a while I really needed to see something pleasant or playful, but there was nothing! Dumbest thing I did here was to lock up my camera with my winter clothing in a 2-Kroner (35-cent) locker before entering. So, I’ll show you some stock photos appropriated from internet sources.

After passing through airport-like security gates but before entering the galleries, the visitor passes by glass-walled conservation labs where one can observe work in progress. Here, work is being done on one of several of Munch’s 10x30-foot paintings-on-rollers; they were studies for a large mural project.
The extra-heavy security was implemented a few years ago, after Munch’s most famous painting, “The Scream” (1910), was stolen. (It was eventually recovered.)

“Separation” (1900) – one of several paintings on this theme that haunted Munch after his first major “girlfriend” (I’m being polite; she was married at the time) left him for yet another guy. He should have known it couldn’t last. (Munch had another series of paintings on the theme of “vampire” women…)

Lyrical and perhaps a bit melancholy, this earlier work is as close as we’ll get to “happy” or “serene” in a gallery full of painted pain and tragedy and horror and cynicism. It’s called “Inger on the Shore” (1889). Reminds me of Cezanne. But what do I know.

Enough of Edvard Munch. You can certainly google-image him, if you want more.
By this time, early Friday afternoon, I was far afield from my home base, Thon Europa Hotel, so I wandered back. Here’s some of Johanns-Gate, once a main street but now a pedestrian shopping mall. Oslo residents and visitors have no trouble shopping in the cold. And someone has shoveled all the snow!

A park was being prepared for a winter festival, perhaps in conjunction with the Nordic Ski competition. There were large blocks of snow and ice placed here and there for sculpting or building. Norway has ice-and-snow “professionals” like these fellows from a company called “Mr. Iceman.” In addition to ice delivery trucks and the cool blue parkas, they had a little blue SmartCar painted with the slogan “Got Ice?”

This is the Norwegian history museum operated downtown by University of Oslo and it was just one block from my hotel… so I planned to go there LAST, on the theory that I could spend an hour or so and end my exhausting explorations conveniently close to home base. I got there at 4 pm. It closes at 4 pm. Sigh! They wouldn’t let me in. Sigh! I love history museums; even worked in one for about six years.
Making a long story short: I returned to Room 623, checked email messages, packed my suitcase, had dinner in the hotel restaurant, rose early on Saturday, ate a hearty breakfast, and took that high-speed train back to Gardermoen airport.

By the time I took this picture through the airplane window I had flown south for about 15 minutes; we’re cruising at 30,000 feet, the air temperature outside the pressurized cabin is about -70 degrees F, and I can glimpse the coast and the mouth of the Oslo fjord down there through the clouds... Goodbye, Norway.

Love this in-flight GPS mapping, displayed on an individual seat-back screen. At this point in the return-trip, I’ve changed planes in London and am re-crossing the Atlantic- looks like I’m about 5 hours from home. The Oslo adventure is over! I watched an in-flight movie, but as I write this a month later I cannot even remember the name of it or what it was about. Maybe it will come to me later. Skimmed through an issue of *National Review* and read a couple of chapters in *Virginia in the Civil War: 1863*. Mostly listened to Hindemith, Thelonious Monk, and the *Goldberg Variations* through my MP3 player.

If in the future I should score another trip overseas for a conference, I hope I can leverage a ride-along for my wife. Travel to interesting places is just not the same without Phylbert, my better half.