

27 Years of Exchange: Blue Jay Band Continues Jesuit Tradition Abroad

Not even one of summer's rare rain showers over Bamberg, Germany, could dampen the mood. For nearly three decades, Bamberg has been the home of Jesuit High School's international exchange with its partner school, Clavius-Gymnasium.

As the final notes of the farewell concert faded into the evening at the Wilde Rose Keller, an outdoor restaurant on the edge of the city, students and their German host families lingered beneath the shelter long after the music had ended. Hugs turned into conversations. Conversations became photographs. Photographs became memories. Every goodbye seemed to lead to one more story, one more laugh, and one more promise to stay in touch.

The rain came and went throughout the evening. Just when it seemed to have passed, another shower drifted across, sending everyone back beneath the shelter before conversations resumed as though they had never been interrupted.

A week earlier, many of these people had never met. Now they were saying goodbye like family. To understand how they got there, the story has to go back nearly three weeks and several countries, to the start of a trip that carried 34 members of the Blue Jay Band — traveling, as they do every other year — across England, Ireland, and France before they ever reached Germany.

Fresh off an overnight flight, members of the Blue Jay Band arrived in Chester, England, hauling their luggage, battling jet lag, and deciphering a paper map. Rather than hiring a guide through the city's winding streets, they were challenged to find their own way. There were wrong turns, second guesses, and plenty of conversations that began with, "I think it's this way." It wasn't a lesson about maps so much as confidence — one that kept paying off for the rest of the trip.



From Chester, the group crossed the Irish Sea to Dublin, where independent exploration gave way to Irish hospitality. An evening of traditional music, storytelling, and dance became one of the trip's highlights, especially when one chaperone was pulled onto the stage to demonstrate Irish dancing with more enthusiasm than talent.

By the time the group reached London, navigating unfamiliar places already felt natural. The Underground, London's subway system and one of the busiest in the world, replaced paper maps, and students learned to read station signs, buy tickets, and move through an international city with confidence. That confidence paid off while walking near Buckingham Palace, when the group heard music drifting through the streets and followed it to the Horse Guards' Parade Grounds. There, the massed bands of the British Army's Household Division were rehearsing for their annual Military Musical Spectacular, filling the grounds with "Masquerade" from *The Phantom of the Opera* as part of a special Andrew Lloyd Webber tribute.



That evening, many students followed the music again into London's West End for a performance of Disney's Hercules. Some had only bought tickets simply because their friends were going; however, by the ride back to the hotel, they were singing the songs together on the Underground.

Departing England via the famous underground train known as the Chunnel, the group emerged in France with their sights set on Paris. Inside the newly restored Notre-Dame Cathedral, students celebrated Mass beneath vaults that have welcomed pilgrims for centuries. The prayers were in another language, but the rhythm of the liturgy felt familiar, and the cathedral's organ filled the sanctuary as a reminder that some experiences transcend language.



That night, the group gathered at Trocadéro, a picturesque viewing point along the Seine river, to watch the Eiffel Tower light up at dusk. At precisely 11:00 p.m., thousands of lights burst to life. Phones appeared almost instantly, but before long, many students lowered them again, choosing simply to watch.



Paris also tested the confidence the students had been building since Chester. One Metro ride ended with the doors closing just a little faster than expected, leaving part of the group on the platform while the rest watched from inside the departing train. After a few anxious moments, everyone stayed calm, communicated, and found one another again. Before long, it had become another story, told with more laughter than worry.



By the time the Blue Jays arrived in Bamberg, they had learned how to navigate unfamiliar cities. Now they would learn how to become part of one.

It began the moment Clavius-Gymnasium opened not only its rehearsal halls but its homes to the Blue Jays. The German students welcomed their American visitors not as tourists but as family — and almost overnight, the rhythm of the trip changed. Tour buses gave way to family cars. Hotel rooms became spare bedrooms. Restaurants became kitchen tables. Together, the two groups attended classes, rehearsed side by side, and wandered Bamberg's streets like they'd known them for years.

While Clavius-Gymnasium was new to many of the students, its namesake was not. The school is named for Christopher Clavius, a Jesuit mathematician and astronomer also honored on one of the medallions of Jesuit High School's Traditions Courtyard — a quiet link between the two schools, though Clavius-Gymnasium itself is not a Jesuit school.



Music continued to bring the two communities together, but by now the concerts felt different. The welcoming concert at Clavius-Gymnasium brought together the Blue Jay Band with the Clavius-Gymnasium Big Band, choirs, a student rock band, and a string ensemble, before families gathered outside for grilled sausages and conversation. Later performances at the Bamberg Swim Club and the Wilde Rose Keller felt less like formal concerts and more like celebrations of friendships that had grown stronger with every rehearsal and shared meal.



Some of those friendships were just beginning. Others had already stood the test of time. Several alumni and parents traveling with the group reunited with German host families they had first met years earlier during previous exchanges. Watching former students embrace people they hadn't seen in years quietly demonstrated something the whole trip had been building toward: the concerts may last an evening, but the friendships last for generations.

No one has watched that idea grow longer than band director Joe Caluda '79, who helped begin the exchange nearly three decades ago. In the years since, more than 2,000 students, family members, and friends have taken part. On the group's first morning in Bamberg, he was surprised with a visit to the city's historic Rathaus, where Deputy Mayor Eva Jutzler presented him with a certificate honoring his "decade-long efforts on behalf of the student exchange program between Jesuit High School New Orleans and Clavius-Gymnasium Bamberg."



Rising senior Carlos Gutierrez remembers the hospitality starting the moment he and his roommate walked through the door: "Since the first second we walked into the house, they greeted us with never-ending plates of classic German food, and treated us to freshly grilled meat every day, straight from the family's own private butcher — their grandfather." His favorite memory, though, had nothing to do with food: a day spent on a massive zip-lining course, something he'd never tried before. What made the trip feel like home, he said, was reconnecting with German friends he'd made on past exchanges — "all of my favorite memories were from when we could meet up with all of my old German friends."



Rising senior Jude Schiro felt that closeness just as quickly: "When we arrived at the house, we were treated as family, and this went on throughout the trip." His host family took them on outings nearly every day, including a centennial celebration for their hometown football (soccer) club, complete with food and live music. Another day, they arranged a private cathedral tour — led, to Schiro's surprise, by the Archbishop of Bamberg himself.



Faith remained woven throughout the journey. Schiro's private tour, in fact, came just after he and the rest of the group joined hundreds of worshippers for the outdoor Heinrichsfest Mass at that same Bamberg Cathedral. Few understood every word spoken in German, yet everyone knew when to stand, when to kneel, when to respond, and when to pray. For a little while, language mattered far less than belonging.



This fall, that same sense of belonging travels the other direction. Students from Clavius-Gymnasium will travel to New Orleans, where they will stay with Jesuit families, attend classes, and experience the culture of South Louisiana. The hospitality so generously extended in Germany will soon be returned, continuing a tradition that has connected the two schools for nearly three decades.

Back in Bamberg, the rain eventually stopped. The conversations finally ended. The buses pulled away, and the music faded. But the friendships didn't. It's the same idea the program was built on from the start: to foster international friendship and cultural understanding through the universal language of music, inspiring students to embrace new experiences and appreciate the unique gifts of every person and every culture. That has always been the true destination of the Blue Jay Band's exchange program. Twenty-seven years later, it still is.

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.