

OLIVER SCHROER: CAMINO

This album is music and images born out of a particular landscape and time. It is the record of an intersection of life, geography, music and photography. During May and June of 2004, I walked 1,000 km of the Camino de Santiago – an eleven hundred year old pilgrim trail through France and Spain – with my wife Elena and longtime friends Peter and Diane. I recorded this album on the road.

In my backpack, I carried my violin like a wooden chalice, like my own precious relic, carefully packed in its reliquary of socks and underwear and waiting to work a miracle. My pack also contained a portable recording studio. When I found a church or cathedral that was acoustically enticing...and open... I played my violin and recorded in these spaces. I played some of my older fractal and spiritual pieces. I improvised a lot. Walking for weeks, new pieces came to me – one hill, one valley at a time. In two months, I played and recorded in twenty-five different churches.

I played my violin; Peter and Diane engaged in their own art-driven folly. They had brought camera equipment – lots of it, and all of it old-fashioned and heavy. Where I stopped to play, they stopped to take pictures. Peter's remarkable photographs – studies in balance, line and form – provide a visual counterpoint to my musical Camino.

Sometimes recording was challenging, especially in Spain. The doors to the smaller churches were often locked and the larger churches were patrolled by zealous church wardens. Because the opportunity to record or even to play was so tenuous, when I did play I was driven to make it count. Would I be allowed to finish even a single piece? Knowing I could be stopped at any time, I gave heart and soul from the first note. My violin sang, and I forgot the crippling pain in my feet.

The music still sings on these recordings. The sense of place is strong here – pilgrims praying, children playing, birds, bells, footsteps, passing snatches of conversation, the sounds of the buildings themselves. Each space has its own distinct character and resonance.

In some churches I played for many people; in others, for a single listener. Occasionally along the way I would meet pilgrims who had heard about me through the Camino grapevine, who were curious to hear me play. Yet at the end of the day, I was always more pilgrim than performer. I could never make plans to play for my Camino friends. These recordings of living moments thus feel like a bit of a miracle.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For about a thousand years, pilgrims have journeyed to Santiago de Compostela, the site identified by long tradition as the burial place of St. James the Apostle. According to ancient belief, a stone boat carried James' body from Jerusalem to Northwest Spain, where he had preached the Gospel after the death of Jesus. The Saint lay in an unmarked tomb until the year 815 when a hermit was led to the grave by shimmering, miraculous lights – the 'field of stars.' The legend says that the Apostle's bones were identified by the gourd and the scallop shell he always carried. That shell continues to this day to be the symbol of the pilgrimage.

Over the tomb was built a church. In the church the faithful gathered. Soon they were gathering by the thousands, from every corner of Europe, driven by their devotion to the Saint and belief in his power to intercede for good in human affairs. The pilgrimage reached its popular peak in the Middle Ages. Between the 12th and 15th centuries, hundreds of thousands journeyed to Santiago in search of healing, miracles, adventure, atonement, and salvation.

As medieval civilization waned, so did the pilgrimage. By the early 20th century, it was the reserve of an eccentric few. The last few decades, however, have witnessed a remarkable revival, with numbers matching and surpassing medieval peaks. Modern pilgrims' motives range from the spiritual to the sporting, but all follow in the precise footsteps of their medieval brothers and sisters. Like the road itself, the history of the pilgrimage has been varied and unpredictable, but continuous.

[Peter Coffman]

THE JOURNEY

El Camino. The Road. The Way. It is a metaphor for a spiritual voyage, an inward journey symbolized by an outward one.

But it is also a very real, very physical path. It is a muddy trail through a forest. It is a hot, dusty line slicing through a parched landscape. It is a country road hugging the edge of a river gorge. It is a cobblestone lane through a medieval village. It is the hard, concrete shoulder of a bleak highway. It is a row of stones crossing a stream. It is continuous, unbroken, yet changing in shape, colour, texture, mood. The one constant is the sound of footsteps – the heartbeat of the pilgrimage.

[P.C.]

Moissac, a medieval French town on the banks of the river Tarn, was really the birthplace of our journey. Years ago, Peter was photographing in the Benedictine abbey there; he met a Camino pilgrim who played his flute in that spectacular sonic space. This made a deep impression on Peter. Upon his return to Canada, he shared with me his dream of walking the Camino together, of hearing me play my violin in the churches and cathedrals along the way. It took many years, but it finally came to pass.

From where we began our walk in the French town of Entraygues-sur-Truyères, the road stretched a thousand kilometres in front of us and a thousand years behind us. Along that road, we crossed many landscapes. We crossed physical landscapes of mountains, fields, valleys and forests. We crossed interior landscapes of pain and pleasure as we encountered the challenges and rewards of the road. We crossed human landscapes – fellow pilgrims from every continent, all with their own compelling stories. And when Oliver played the rhythms and textures of the Camino, we crossed musical landscapes as well.

We lived a hundred years in two months, and rediscovered that the world is, and always will be, a big place.

[P.C.]

Walking the Camino is a slow desire unfolded and fulfilled...

Like a desire, the drive to achieve our goal burns brightly in us all. Like the other pilgrims on this road, now and a thousand years ago, we are focused on our destination – Santiago. Yet the unfolding of this desire happens at an achingly slow pace. We see a marker – Santiago de Compostela: 863 km. We can barely imagine covering that distance on foot. We can barely imagine the difficulty, the pain, the sheer duress we will endure on our journey. Every day we have to reawaken the desire to continue, to even finish the day's walk. Creaking knees, aching feet, blisters upon blisters... Weeks later, another marker – Santiago de Compostela: 480 km. We know the destination is getting closer, one small step at a time. At the speed we are going, it is almost irrelevant whether we are covering ground or not. Good thing that it is *not* about covering ground, that it is about settling into the rhythm of the road. Morning, noon and evening have their distinct rituals and subtle pleasures. The big picture inches by – a rich collage of a million moments of beauty, a thousand discomforts overcome.

We all walk the same road but for each of us the Camino is our own, from our first steps to the last cobblestone before we enter Santiago Cathedral.

THE MUSIC

Abbey of Moissac: Works of medieval imagination and inspiration surround us. Kings and holy men gaze down from windows and walls. In the cloister sinuous marble monsters snap at each other's heels; they enact their centuries-old dramas oblivious to the fleeting presence of mortals. Then the big man with the small fiddle begins to play. For a few moments the glass saints, the stone beasts and the painted kings all pause to listen.

I hear the resonance of these ancient spaces in the music. But we are spending our days walking, and I can hear that too. I hear mountains, rivers, rocky cliffs and open places. I hear the sun on my face and rocks under my feet. I hear the wonder – and the struggle – of getting to know the earth one step at a time.

[P.C.]

1. Field of Stars (8:15)

This is a reinvention of *A Million Stars*, the title track of my last album. Over the course of the journey, I loosened my grip on the melody and let it shatter against the stone arches of those great Romanesque churches. The echoes and shards reassembled and found new life in this image so central to the pilgrimage – the Field of Stars – campo stellae.

(Thank you, Peter, for bringing me to this place.)

2. Camino Overture (2:14)

A pastoral collage – the glorious sounds of nature, the footsteps of some of my pilgrim companions, and a piece called *The Human Condition*.

3. Ultrea (3:45)

On the third day of our Camino, we reached an astoundingly intact medieval village called Conques. It was the first place on my Camino that I was able to play my violin. By 10 pm we were alone in the candlelit church; we couldn't quite believe our good fortune. My audience for the next hour was my three travel companions, many dimly lit saints and a host of flickering shadows. I sounded the church itself with my violin. It was an experience I had never known before.

May 6, 2004. A lanky figure in muddy boots enters through the west door of Conques. Out of his backpack he pulls a violin, gently disentangling it from the socks, underwear, and yards of sleeping bag that have protected it from the wear and tear of the road. It is hopelessly small in his large hands, in this huge building. He steps toward the altar, pauses, and begins to play. The notes and the space embrace as if they have been waiting for this meeting forever – the marriage of sound and stone.

The music is liquid. It races against the stones, changes course, pulls us along like a mighty river storming down a mountain. Then it becomes a gentle stream, playful, caressing. It is always in motion, seeking spaces to fill, leaping joyfully ahead to see what will happen next. The violin sings, the stones sing back. The man stops playing, but the stones keep ringing, reluctant to give up this moment.

[P.C.]

The next morning, we met the organist, Frère Jean Daniel. He convinced me to join him for an improvisation in duo – violin and organ. We had a fabulous and intensive playing session; at a certain point, he actually rose from his bench and started leaning into the organ like Little Richard. An improvising liturgical organist – wow! Afterwards, he talked to us about Camino lore. He introduced us to an old Camino word: *Ultrea* – “carry on, keep the faith, you can make it, you will persevere...”.

4. The Tears of Mary (3:45)

One evening at dusk in a place called Navarrenx, I went to play my violin in the large and beautiful church there. The main light in the church came from the many candles that illuminated an altar for Mary. I was drawn to it and played this song for her.

5. The Pilgrim’s Prayer (5:05)

Of all my Camino music, this piece is the one that grew most directly from my feet up. It started early on as fragments of improvisation. In the long days of walking I had lots of time to think about these theme fragments, and they unfolded over weeks.

This recording is from Foncebadon, an eerily abandoned village in the Cordillera Cantábrica. After an especially long dry spell of not being able to play in churches for one reason or another, here was a place where nothing stopped me; the pent-up music poured into that tiny chapel. Later, many of us slept on the floor of the church before continuing on our Camino in the cool grey of dawn.

6. Bellplay, Santiago de Compostela (1:30)

In France, the bells were mellifluous and pretty. The bells in Spain clanged with a raucous and rousing quality. These are the bells of the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. They were mighty and they were rough – they always sent a chill up my spine.

7. The Lord's Prayer (4:45)

Still one of my favourite metaphysical pieces, originally from my O2 album. This version comes from Eauze, in Southwestern France. A sleepy town, an open church, and a little bell that magically rang as I was finishing the piece...

8. Astorga, Afternoon Bells (:30)

I had high hopes for Astorga. The town was beautiful; the people seemed hip. But a grumpy church warden dashed my hopes – I was thrown out after playing for just 33 seconds.

At least I got lucky with this fine recording of the 4 pm bells outside...

9. And Everyone Was Smiling (5:25)

This piece spontaneously burst out in a small French town called Faycelles. Much later, back in Canada, my CD designer Michael Wrycraft spontaneously uttered the title.

[for Priya Sarkar]

10. Window of Peace (5:25)

In France, a perfect time to play was lunch time, when the whole country went off to eat – duck and pâté, pâté and duck, duck and pâté! On this midday, in a cavernous church in a town with the unlikely name of Condom, I played one of my older compositions. In the middle of my performance, the massive church door slammed shut. It was a perfect moment, but I missed it at the time (like so many perfect moments). It was only back in Canada, listening to my tapes, that I discovered that moment.

[for Viiu Varik]

11. Bells and Birds (:40)

Footsteps were the pulse of the Camino, birdsong the ornamentation, and bells the punctuation. Picture a typical morning in rural France....

12. The Garden of Birds and Flowers (4:30)

This song is for my mother, who could not come with us on the Camino. I grew up on six acres of treed parkland called 'La Solitude' – this is where I took my first long walks. My mother still lives there; she has planted over a thousand trees and countless flowers.

I hope she knows how much of the Camino she walked with me.

13. Cowbarn Bells (1:20)

Music played by cows. In the hills after O Cebreiro, there was a cowbarn with open Dutch doors; each of the cows inside had a different bell. As they tossed their heads to shake off the flies, the resulting bellplay was remarkably musical.

14. Forest Walkby (:55)

The sound of walking permeated our days on the Camino – through mud, through forests, on gravel, on grass, on sand... on asphalt. I often recorded my companions walking by.

15. The Light of Day (4:00)

In a small sun-baked Spanish town called Vega del Valcarce, I played this piece in a little wooden church.

[for Grindl]

16. Santiago Street Sounds (1:05)

Pilgrims' staves on cobblestones, women's voices echoing in the square, and the clanging of the cathedral bells.

17. In Memory of Friends Past (4:50)

AMEN.

18. Alleluia (:55)

As I walked around the Cathedral of Santiago in the blissful daze of having just arrived, I recorded some of the liturgical sounds coming from the many active side chapels.

19. Grace (5:00)

St-Pierre, Auvillar, May 22, 2004: I hear longing in this music. Notes fly around like the swallows that are singing outside. The notes dart through the space as if longing to fly; Oliver, however, is rooted to the spot. He faces the altar as he plays his offering, the most profound gift he can give – his music. But what, I wonder, does he ask in return? Grace?

[P.C.]

20. Moissac Bellswirl (1:50)

On this day in Moissac an organ was playing in the cathedral and the bells were ringing outside. With my microphone I moved between these two places, the interior billowing with waves of mighty organ, and the outside alive with the sounds of the square, its bells, bicycles and birds, the sonorous shuffle of people living their lives.

THE END

“Cuatro de Canada.” We all hear the priest announce it at the pilgrims’ mass. Among the long list of pilgrims arriving that day are “cuatro de Canada” – us. There was a time in our lives before the Camino, and a time after it. Those three words mark the transition.

The climax of the mass is the botafumeiro. The giant censer swings in a massive arc down from the vault, roars past us, and disappears into the opposite vault, leaving a sweet trail of smoke. It is joyful, celebratory, and incredibly exciting.

After the botafumeiro, the mass ends and people begin to leave. “Cuatro de Canada,” I whisper in Diane’s ear. She hugs me, and I can tell by the way she won’t let go that she is crying. I look over at Elena, and her eyes are filled with tears. In a moment, all cuatro are embracing, all weeping. A lady smiles and speaks to us in Spanish, blowing kisses. Fellow pilgrims wish us well. As I walk out the door of the north transept, I know the pilgrimage is truly over.

[P.C.]

TECHNICAL INFO

Recorded May-June 2004 along the Camino de Santiago. Music recorded on a Sony DAT recorder with an Audiotecnica stereo microphone. Sound effects recorded on a Sony minidisc recorder with a Sennheisser Kunstkopf stereo microphone. All reverbs you hear on this recording are natural, the effect of playing in these physical spaces.

All music composed and performed by Oliver Schroer © 2005

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Mastering by David Travers Smith

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Oliver Schroer plays a five string David Papazian violin

A Note about the Notes:

In these liner notes, *sections in italics* are written by Peter Coffman. All other sections written by Oliver Schroer

Check also for additional Camino information and imagery

www.oliverschroer.com

Many thanks to Marjorie Dunn for editing, and to the translators for their great work...

Thanks to all of my fellow pilgrims in life and on the Camino. We walk together.

Thanks to all who have supported and encouraged this music.

Thanks to all who listen with the ears to hear it.

Ultrea.