I had three (3) focuses for my Sabbatical period: Travel to Cuba to continue my contact with my choral colleagues there GIVE a workshop on Spirituals to four (4) choruses and several smaller ensembles Travel to the Library of Congress to see George Gershwin scores of Porgy and Bess

I was able to accomplish all of these things, in addition to having a traditional Batà drum made for me by a master drummaker.

In my 3-week trip to Cuba, I met with singers and choral directors I already knew, including Corina Campos of Vocal Léo, Wilmia Quinones of Vocal Luna, and Luis Barberia of the Enrique Jorrin Band. I was able to give Wilmia and Luis sheet music, which they’d requested in advance. Cuban directors are not able to easily acquire the music they need for their ensembles. So I was happy to be able to provide them with some tools they wanted. These ensembles are based in Havana., where I was able to attend several performances. Music is the life-blood of Cuba. The classical orchestras and vocal ensembles perform everything BY MEMORY!! This is unheard of in the US. It is quite impressive.

In Santiago, Cuba, on the other side of the country, I met a new colleague, Daria Abreu, who directs the Coro Orféon Santiago. This famed ensemble was excited to perform for me. Many of the singers are also professionals in other arenas, including Professors of Physics at the University and physicians, as well as music teachers of younger students.

Coro Orféon Santiago was one of 4 choruses that were to attend my workshop on Spirituals. They all gathered in a dramatic space that had
a large pipe organ in back of them. My main objective was to help the directors to understand a couple of key things about Spirituals and their performance. These choruses often perform for visiting American groups. The Cubans think of African American Spirituals as The Great American Music. I felt it was important for them to know that their American audiences are usually ignorant about this music. So, like the Blues, which was re-interpreted to white American audiences by British rock groups, they as Cubans may have to introduce their American listeners to this American music. This was a revelation for them. My other task was to help them understand a performance issue which I’d seen on a previous trip. They were snapping their fingers while performing Spirituals. This is not a trivial thing. In my workshop I explained that, in America, the drum was made illegal so that the enslaved people couldn’t communicate with each other. So, foot tapping and hand clapping were used as substitutes in the music. In Spirituals, which are sacred music, finger snapping is inappropriate. That is for secular music. I saw an immediate adjustment from the attendees of that workshop. Later in my trip I was invited to see one of the small groups perform at a local hotel. They had a Spiritual in their repertoire. When they started, his impulse was to snap his fingers as had been his previous practice. But seeing me there triggered his memory of the workshop and he started the piece by clapping instead. Victory!!
My trip to the Library of Congress was a revelation. Spending any time in the Library is a dream for an academic. But having the opportunity to spend hours in the Performing Arts Reading Room was an experience beyond words. This year I’m working on Operetta with my students. The first thing I saw in the Reading Room was Victor Herbert’s writing desk, where he wrote some of the music we will perform in February 2015.

My doctoral dissertation is on George Gershwin’s opera, “Porgy and Bess.” The Library has a large collection of Gershwin’s works and letters. I was thrilled that they allowed me to request the boxes with the actual letters in them! It was fascinating to read Gershwin’s trail of letters to and from DuBose Heyward, his collaborator on the opera. It really gave me a sense of the level of their personal discourse and of the sort of requests the composer was making of the librettist.

Then, the next surprise of this trip was that they brought me two scores of “Porgy and Bess”: one was the ORIGINAL conductor’s score and the other was the Stage Manager score from the second production. This was unbelievable to me!

To be able to see and touch that original, pre-publication, conductor’s score felt like going to Mecca. Gershwin signed and dedicated the score to Alexander Smallens. It was a lesson to see the sort of markings that Smallens made in the score, what cuts he took and cues he gave. It was also very interesting to see that there were pages that had the evidence of a lot of turning back and forth. Clearly, these were sections that were difficult and had to be practiced a lot. Fascinating!
Then the miracle happened. They went down to a double locked vault and brought me Gershwin’s ACTUAL MANUSCRIPT of “Porgy and Bess.” Every note in his own hand, his DNA on every page!! I was dumbstruck. I could hear every note ringing out from those pages, seeing his very clear writing. There were very few scratch outs. It was amazing. There is a section in which the chorus sings a layered, canonic arrangement of “Leavin’ for the Promised Land.” In the published score, it’s unclear whether these things occur simultaneously or just in order. There was a notation in the manuscript that seemed to indicate the manner of performance that I intuitively believed was correct. So, I’m very excited to pursue the study of those pages and perhaps write about this finding.