

thestrad.com
JULY 2013
VOL.124 NO.1479

MASTER DECORATOR
JOACHIM TIELKE

CORELLI MASTERCLASS
PAVLO BEZNOSIUK

TEACHING TECHNIQUE
ON THE GAMBA

the

Strad

FOR THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

**BAROQUE
SPECIAL**

**HOW BACH
CAN CHANGE
YOUR LIFE**

**VIOL
CONSORTS
GET HIP**

**A GUIDE TO
EARLY MUSIC
FESTIVALS**

**VERMEER'S
INSTRUMENTS**

JORDI SAVALL

THE SPANISH VIOL PLAYER LEADING
TODAY'S REVIVAL OF EARLY MUSIC



UK £5.20 / US \$10.99 / CAN \$13.95



9 770039 204168



**WIN SAVALL'S
LATEST CD**

Up close and personal

The challenge to engage audiences in classical music is as old as the hills. A Florida festival answers it by offering the public intimate access from first rehearsal through to final performance, as **Ariane Todes** reports

IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Sarasota was known as Circus City. Members of the famous Ringling circus family invested in property in the sun trap and from 1927 turned it into the winter residence of their 'Greatest Show on Earth'. In those innocent days before *The X Factor*, the clowning, artistry, thrill-seeking and sheer force of human endeavour the circus offered audiences made it a cultural lifeblood. As you find out from the scale reproduction of the show at the local John and Mable Ringling Museum, a 1,500-strong troupe would arrive in a town, set up camp in a military-style operation, and entertain an entire community before upping sticks and moving on.

Before they put on the main show, they'd offer a free spectacle through the local streets to drum up interest in the main event. Nearly a hundred years later, a similar principle applies at the city's La Musica International Chamber Music Festival, which I visited in April. For nearly three weeks every year, musicians from around the world, though mostly based in the US, arrive in Sarasota at the request of Italian violist Bruno Giuranna. Players come together to rehearse varied programmes of chamber music in public and then perform them formally in the Sarasota Opera House. Unlike most festivals, where time is limited and rehearsals are strictly behind closed doors, here the audience



Open rehearsals are an integral part of Sarasota's La Musica festival

is invited to engage in the entire musical process, from awkward first run-through to triumphant conclusion. And it's a journey that not only grips them the whole way – turnout for the rehearsals was strong (admittedly there is a large retired community in Sarasota) – but also offers an insight into classical music for both novice and aficionado alike.

THE FESTIVAL, which has been going since 1986, is Giuranna's brainchild, and it came about through one of life's random coincidences – Sarasota houses a theatre that was originally in his adopted home town of Asolo. As part of the Rome Piano Quartet he came upon it while on tour in Sarasota and had the

idea to play there and to start a regular event. The festival quickly outgrew the historic 200-seat theatre, and from 1992 concerts took place in the Sarasota Opera House, with rehearsals in the University of South Florida campus. But the principle of open rehearsals and experienced professionals playing with younger ones, modelled on the Marlboro Festival, remains the same, and guides Giuranna's choice of personnel, as he explains: 'First of all I choose good players who can play chamber music well. Too-big egos would make problems because there are not many rehearsals and they are public, which could add tension for some. They might not like to be told in front of people, "Can we make a little more crescendo here?" The human aspect is important because the experience has to be a feast, a joy, something different from the all-year-round profession.'

I arrived in time for the public performance of the third programme of the festival. In celebration of 50 years of Eisenhower's scheme to twin US cities with others across the world (Sarasota is twinned with Treviso, Perpignan, Vladimir and Dunfermline) the repertoire was a mix of Italian, French and Russian, and began with a piper representing the Scottish strand. As well as the presence



Violist Bruno Giuranna's festival offered many strong string performances

Festival players gave a sophisticated account of Glinka's Grand Sextet



of bass player Scott Faulkner, this led to an interesting combination of pieces including Rossini's Sonata a Quattro no.3 and Glinka's Grand Sextet in E flat major, both of which were charming, but whose sophistication was rather put in the shade by the Ravel Quartet, performed by violinists Federico Agostini and Ruth Lenz, violist Daniel Avshalomov and cellist Julie Albers.

The next morning I went to the first rehearsal of the Hindemith Quartet op.22, with Laura Zarina playing second violin alongside Lenz, Giuranna and Albers. Perhaps the most surprising thing to an outsider was the minimal amount of verbal communication involved. The work was run complete, with a few choice words from Giuranna and others at the end of each movement. Only then was there more detailed analysis of each, discussion of sound qualities, dynamics, and bow division and direction. As the players started to feel more comfortable with the music and with each other, their individual characters began to emerge, bringing a whole new sub-narrative to the event. How does a group of colleagues negotiate the many complex artistic decisions and technical challenges of a work like this – how do they build their relationships and get things done? With extreme tact and delicacy, of course, and often things sorted themselves out just

by playing and listening rather than by over-talking. It was a fascinating process, one that kept the good-sized audience rapt, and by the end of the session I felt as if I was starting to know the Hindemith.

OTHER REHEARSALS for the fourth programme of the festival included ones for Schumann's *Märchenerzählungen* with Giuranna, clarinetist José Franch-Ballester and pianist Derek Han (the

It's not just the players who go through a transformational process, but the audience too

festival's associate artistic director) and for the Brahms Clarinet Quintet with Franch-Ballester, Zarina and Lenz, as well as violist Rebecca Albers and cellist Eric Kim. The process was always similar, but the different characters involved led to different group dynamics – again, fascinating interactions to watch. With each group allotted three rehearsals per piece, discussions were often pragmatic but always constructive – often a lesson in management skills and how to ask someone to do something without sounding like you're asking them to do something. I did wonder how they might have acted had there been no audience

when matters weren't resolved quickly enough, but the tone was always calm and supportive throughout.

By the public performance of the whole programme in the Sarasota Opera House, only three days away and four hours of rehearsal since the groups had first formed, the players are ready to put everything into action and the audiences who had patiently attended all the rehearsals are there to sample the finished product, now as part of a much larger throng. By now I feel as if I know the pieces well, recalling some of the aspects that were discussed and comparing them with the performance. The solos that at first sounded tentative are now nailed, and there's a flexibility that maybe wasn't there initially. It feels as if the players have grown into the music, even in such a short time, just as we have as listeners.

So, by the end of the programme, it's not just the players and the music that have gone through a transformational process, but the audience too. For spectators who have time to go through this journey, and for musicians who can put aside their egos to share it with outsiders, La Musica offers a unique insight into the inner workings of music and musicians, and is a valuable model for anyone running a music festival. No need to send in the clowns. ■