

Grand designs

The newly founded *Piccola Accademia di Montisi* is much more than good music in the sun. Jonathan Wikeley went to the inaugural festival and found big ideas in a small village

The Tuscan hilltop village of Montisi is usually quiet at nine in the morning, but as I stroll languidly down one of its narrow streets I hear emanating from a tiny church the solemn strains of a Scarlatti Mass. Inside, harpsichordist and professor at the Basel Schola Cantorum Jesper Christensen is playing the music to ten students: ‘...and now this is what Scarlatti might have heard once he’d finished Mass!’ he says enthusiastically, putting on another disc and filling the church with the Moorish strains of flamenco music.

‘You have to know flamenco music to play Domenico Scarlatti’, he explains to me a little later, ‘You need to find those vocal lines in his sonatas. So we have been spending the first 20 minutes of every session listening to Scarlatti’s choral music – which is so different from his works for harpsichord – and then to flamenco music, before working on the sonatas themselves.’

These sessions are part of a series of week-long harpsichord masterclasses and the brainchild of renowned American harpsichord maker Bruce Kennedy, all of which operates under the general title of *Piccola Accademia di Montisi*. Throughout July and August the village of Montisi hosted five courses on a variety of subjects, from harpsichord and the dance, and Scarlatti’s music, to ensemble playing, led by tutors Christensen, Skip Sempé, Knut Johannessen, Menno van Delft and Zvi Meniker. In addition, the middle week has seen the inaugural Montisi Music Festival, and there are more courses planned for next year.

That the setting is wonderful goes without saying. Seemingly endless hilltop villages

rise out of the rolling Tuscan countryside like ancient islands, affording stunning vistas to be gazed at sitting under lemon trees or in the shade of old churches. Narrow streets wind mazelike round old houses and small castles making one instantly – and agreeably – lost. It isn’t any wonder that this music festival is joining a host of others in the region; there surely can’t be many places more pleasant to have one. But, as Kennedy says as we stroll around the village, this isn’t just another music festival.

‘There are lots of music festivals around here’, he says, ‘but they don’t have the teaching side of things, which is really the most important aspect of the whole venture.’ Kennedy looks the epitome of Italian-relaxed as we wander up to the 13th-century castle at the very top of the village that the *accademia* has bought and is currently restoring, but it is obvious that behind this venture there have been many, many hours of preparation and planning.

Although Kennedy had the idea of creating a harpsichord school and festival several years ago, it was a chance encounter that really got the ball rolling. He had begun to stop taking orders to make harpsichords, in order to concentrate on working towards the festival, when he was rung up by harpsichord enthusiast Laurel Powers-Freeling – who also happened to be the former director of American Express services in Europe. ‘She asked me to make a harpsichord for her’, says Kennedy, ‘and I told her that I was no longer taking on commissions because I was working on this project. She asked me about it, and we got talking.’ The long and the short of this was that Kennedy got him-

self a seriously good business advisor and Powers-Freeling got her harpsichord. ‘I asked her to look at my business plan’, says Kennedy, ‘on the condition that she was brutal about it. She was – and offered to help re-write it. And approximately 1,300 emails later, here we are.’

A board of directors was duly formed and plans got under way in earnest. They managed to find the funds to purchase the castle in the centre of Montisi – not far from Kennedy’s workshop – and set about restoring it. ‘There’s a room in the tower which is going to house a clavichord, an inner garden, a kitchen and a dining room, a room that’s large enough to use for masterclasses, and seven practice rooms.’ At the same time the board set about restoring one of the three chapels in the village. ‘It was only used for four hours a year, and it has a lovely acoustic, so we have been able to use this too.’

It is this small chapel that has been housing most of the masterclasses this year, with the castle still undergoing restoration. Christensen explains how they have worked. ‘I was asked to do this particular week’s masterclass by Bruce a while ago, and the students on the course are a combination of people I knew and invited, and others who applied through sending in their CV. There are ten of them here – that’s the limit really – two from Italy, two from Germany, and others from Spain, Israel, America, Switzerland and Japan. We wanted to be quite choosy; it’s not like many courses, where there can be quite a wide variety in standard. The aim was to be able to work closely and in depth with the music, which

Local support:
Piccola Accademia di Montisi



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can sometimes be difficult with people of lots of different abilities.'

This year, there are four instruments in use, 'The Accademia borrowed a harpsichord from Tony Chinnery, and there are three of Bruce's instruments', says Christensen. 'But in the future the hope is to have at least eight or ten instruments, and possibly up to 14 or so, representing all the different schools of harpsichord making. It will be a quite exceptional collection, and will also resolve the problem that many summer courses have – that the students can't study because there aren't enough instruments to go round. Here everyone will have their own.'

And what a collection it promises to be. Several harpsichords have already been commissioned for the *accademia*, including, lists Kennedy, 'a copy of a German double-manual instrument with a 16' stop from Keith Hill in the US; a copy of the Lodewijk Theewes single manual harpsichord – now in the V&A museum in London – that was originally a 'claviorgan', combining a true harpsichord with a small, wood-piped organ, by British maker Malcolm Rose; a mother-and-child virginal from the Swedish Andreas Kilstrom; while I am making a double-manual Flemish harpsichord after Ruckers.'

Of course, such an event in such a small village needs local support, and this is something that Kennedy has been very keen to foster. After all, he is a local himself, and has no wish to cause bad feelings. 'We called ourselves the *Piccola Accademia* for a reason and we need to keep reminding ourselves that this is a small-scale project – that's where much of its individuality comes from. It needs to remain in proportion to Montisi and not dominate the village. We have gone to great efforts to achieve this; early on we had a meeting with members of the village, so that they could voice any concerns. One worry they had was the noise – as did the architect working on the castle, until we suggested that a clavichord wasn't going to make much of a dent in the 70cm-thick castle walls! But in the past weeks, with instruments scattered throughout the village, the villagers have been commenting on how lovely it has been to hear music coming from all corners. Now they are worried they *won't* be able to hear the instruments once we move into the castle! We hope, with small numbers of students, that they won't find it intrusive.'

If the series of masterclasses are the *raison d'être* of the *accademia*, then the music festival is its showpiece. With six concerts spread over four spectacular venues, it is obvious that Kennedy has enjoyed using his local knowledge, musical contacts and experience to match venue (and specifically acoustic) to performer and repertoire. 'I simply don't understand why so many other musical enterprises seem to pay little or no



'Magical Moments': Mahan Esfahani



'Dignity and dexterity': Gustav Leonhardt



Montisi

attention to how the music fits the acoustic', he says. Thus, the two solo harpsichord recitals and two chamber concerts were performed in the intimate settings of Montisi's main church and a nearby chapel in the middle of olive groves that could have come straight from an opera set; a choral concert of renaissance polyphony was held in the gloriously rich acoustics of the church of Sant'Anna di Camprena; and a premiere of a Scarlatti opera suited the equally glorious, yet not quite so cavernous, acoustics of nearby Asciano's Church of San Francesco.

And they were well attended too, with a good number of locals turning up in addition to those from further afield. The first concert was a rare opportunity to hear near-legend of the early music world Gustav Leonhardt, who played music by Frescobaldi, Louis Couperin, d'Anglebert, and J S and W F Bach with a dexterity that belied his

80-odd years, and a wonderful sense of dignity and timing. The following day saw one of those magical moments that only music festivals can produce, where after a stunning concert by Iranian-born harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani of Domenico Scarlatti sonatas, carefully chosen and paired, and played with both a sensitivity and vibrance that will send me running to the box office when I next see his name in a concert programme, Leonhardt was seen walking backstage to offer the 21 year old some masterclasses of his own, despite not having taught for several years.

Skip Sempé and his *Capriccio Stravagante* entertained with two concerts – the first of which was accompanied by a quartet of confused, yet surprisingly attentive, swallows – of more music by anniversary-boy Scarlatti, with other works by Sainte Colombe, Chambonnières and Marais, before Marco Mencoboni and Cantar Lontano offered a concert of music for Vespers. With a combination of voices and brass, the pieces were performed around the audience, which had a magical effect in the acoustic, and left the audience (and the conductor) breathless.

Although harpsichordless, the final concert perhaps offered the best treat: a modern premiere of Domenico Scarlatti's opera *Tolomeo e Alessandro*, directed by Alan Curtis with Il Complesso Barocco. Although there were cuts (though not in the libretto we had, which made following the story rather wishful thinking) the work flowed beautifully, the music was superb, and both singing and playing was excellent. Curtis obviously has a fine rapport with his band, and Klara Ek and Ann Hallenberg were out of this world in the roles of Seleuce and Tolomeo. Let's hope we hear more of this work in the future.

Being an inaugural festival, there were obviously some problems, but they were astonishingly few, and you got the impression that everything was noted to make next year's festival and school as perfect as possible. In organising this festival, Kennedy and his team have managed to strike the fine balances of professionalism without losing the friendly and personal nature an event this size invites; of big names, and new and exciting talent; of matching the wants of audiences and students without neglecting local feeling. Part of me doesn't want to say this, for fear that you'll all dash off and book your flights now – when I'd quite like to keep this gem to myself – but you could certainly do very much worse than visit Montisi next summer for the festival, or even investigate the possibilities of enrolling on one of the courses. After all, if you're going to sign up to a course of masterclasses or a series of concerts, you might as well do it in style.

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