

Key contact

A small Tuscan town has ambitions to become the world's leading centre for the harpsichord. Paul Cutts reports

This July, some of the world's leading baroque keyboard players will be descending on a tiny town in southern Tuscany. Their presence in Montisi is thanks to the singular vision of Bruce Kennedy, an American who over 25 years has developed a reputation as the world's leading harpsichord-maker.

Based in Europe since 1980 (and in Italy since 2002), Kennedy's vision is to create 'a Noah's ark' of the harpsichord – a comprehensive collection of instruments that will form the centrepiece of a training academy, festival and concert series.

Kennedy will be staging his inaugural Piccola Accademia di Montisi in a restored 13th-century castello, a permanent base for a collection of instruments spanning every period and national style. The pilot training programme will offer eligible students – those enrolled in university-level music studies or recently graduated – free tuition from the likes of Skip Sempé and Menno van Delft.

For Kennedy – who has now made more than 150 instruments and is executive director of the Montisi academy – it is crucial that his authoritative collection be a practical resource.

'I don't think the world needs another instrument museum,' he says. 'There are plenty of collections in existence – at the Met in New York, the V&A in London, museums in Milan – but each museum has them for different reasons. Some museums allow very limited access to them as musical instruments but many of them are essentially closed collections.'

'Think of life in Venice at the time of Monteverdi or Leipzig in the time of Bach and how different those cultures were,' Kennedy goes on. 'We're talking about totally different ways of thinking, of language, of culture – and the harpsichord was the centre of musical life. It was the foundation of the small orchestra; there's a reason why so many well-known directors of period ensembles – such as Ton

Koopman, Alan Curtis, Gustav Leonhardt and Christopher Hogwood – have all come from backgrounds as harpsichordists.'

'There's simply nowhere in the world like Montisi,' he continues. 'None of the official collections has one example of every type of harpsichord and until now no-one has bothered to put the whole thing together. Montisi is the mid-point between a museum and a conservatoire. The collection will be kept in working order so that students and professional artists can explore every aspect of the harpsichord and its development.'

What's remarkable about the plan is that it has been funded almost entirely from private sources. Kennedy has gathered a high-powered board of music lovers, chaired by Laurel C Powers-Freeling (director of American Express Services Europe) and including a number of financiers and management consultants. The result is an organisation with an anticipated annual operating budget to 2009 of €504,000.

Kennedy has also set a €5m endowment target which, if achieved, should provide a revenue stream of €250,000 a year to provide capital for new initiatives and to subsidise tuition and concert tickets. It will also help fund a comprehensive music library and an on-site recording facility that in due course will lead to the creation of an internet-based recording collection. Montisi will also be the site of an annual concert series and festival – an effort to bring the harpsichord and its repertoire to broader audiences.

'I'm determined that just because the harpsichord is esoteric,' concludes Kennedy, 'it's not going to become elitist.' ■

www.piccolaaccademia.org

Piccola Accademia di Montisi

