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.
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 Kilström; 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 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 sent walking back-stage to offer the 21 year old some master-classes 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 Meneghini 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 master-classes or a series of concerts, you might as well do it in style.

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