

A view of Valletta, home to Malta's new festival, taken from Marsamxett Harbour



FESTIVAL REPORT **FUN IN THE SUN**

Malta's International String Orchestra Festival is the result of the determination of two single-minded young musicians – and it's also a week among friends. **HAZEL DAVIS** went to the inaugural event

HOW DO YOU MAKE A MALTESE CROSS? TELL HIM HE CAN'T HAVE any funding for his festival. But telling Karl Fiorini that he wouldn't be receiving any assistance for his country's first string orchestra festival served only to make him even more determined to succeed in putting it on.

Fiorini, a Maltese-born composer currently reading for his doctorate at London's Royal College of Music (RCM), was inspired to start a biennial string orchestra festival in his native country after a 'long and drunken' conversation in 2005 with his friend, larger-than-life conductor

Bjørn Bantock, and after realising that it was no use complaining about a lack of music if you weren't going to do anything about it. 'My mother died and I knew I was going to have to stay in Malta for a while – and I was worried that I was going to get stuck there. My career was almost over and I was only 25. I was telling Bjørn this and he said, "Create a festival, then," and I said, "Have you any idea how much work that is?" and he said, "So what?"' So the pair, who first met quite by chance on a London tube train, set to work. 'You can do anything in life,' says Fiorini simply, 'if you set your mind to it.'

The standard of playing is much higher than it would have been if the professors had just gone back to their hotels

Despite the lack of local funding, Fiorini managed some lucrative sponsorship from the General Electric company (GE); he had composed a commissioned piece, *Imagination at Work*, for its senior counsel and director of European affairs, John Vassallo. With GE offering its full support, Fiorini secured the backing of the Manoel Theatre in Valletta and the Johann Strauss Music School next door, and two years later the festival was born.

Despite the initial problems with government funding, it seems the locals are backing the festival all the way. A concert on the neighbouring island of Gozo is greeted with deafening applause and requests for a return visit.

Bantock explains, 'The main drive for us is to get people to make music. It's as simple as that. We need to get the students of the music school to attend the masterclasses and concerts. We have had some contact with the local education authorities and next time there will be more locals involved.'

Walking down the narrow cobbled street, lined with medieval buildings, and listening to the sound of shouts of laughter from a group of excitable teenage musicians in front of me, I can see that the plan seems to have worked. Violinist Zina Levchenko agrees: 'I love that there are so few students,' she says. 'It has made us get to know each other really well.' So well in fact that after the festival many of them plan to spend a further three days together, sightseeing. Levchenko studies at the Moscow Conservatoire and is one of the festival's most talented violinists. But the joy of the event is that players such as Levchenko participate in masterclasses alongside students of (in the case of the violinists) varying degrees of ability. Fiorini explains: 'We asked for audition tapes but what we were looking for wasn't just technical ability but a musicality and a sense that the player would really get something out of the experience.'

And the closeness of the students, quite apart from the quality of the playing, is testament that they have. Levchenko says, 'The mood of the whole festival is lovely and the teachers are the most friendly and open-minded I have ever met.'

From the start, Fiorini and Bantock's mission was to offer high-quality teaching in an informal setting with players who were primarily good teachers rather than with world-class performers who weren't experienced with students. As it was they landed themselves a team of world-class performers anyway. Leading the masterclasses are Swedish cellist Mats Lidström, German violinist Matthias Wollong, violist and Royal Academy of Music professor Yuko Inoue and British violinist Madeleine Mitchell, who is giving a recital at the theatre. The festival students are all from conservatoires and represent a decent cross-section of nationalities: Kazakh, Japanese, Russian, Bulgarian, French, South Korean, British and Australian.

The string orchestra gathers before a concert performance

HAZEL DAVIS



Violinist Emanuel Salvador leads a rehearsal

BERTRAND KULIK



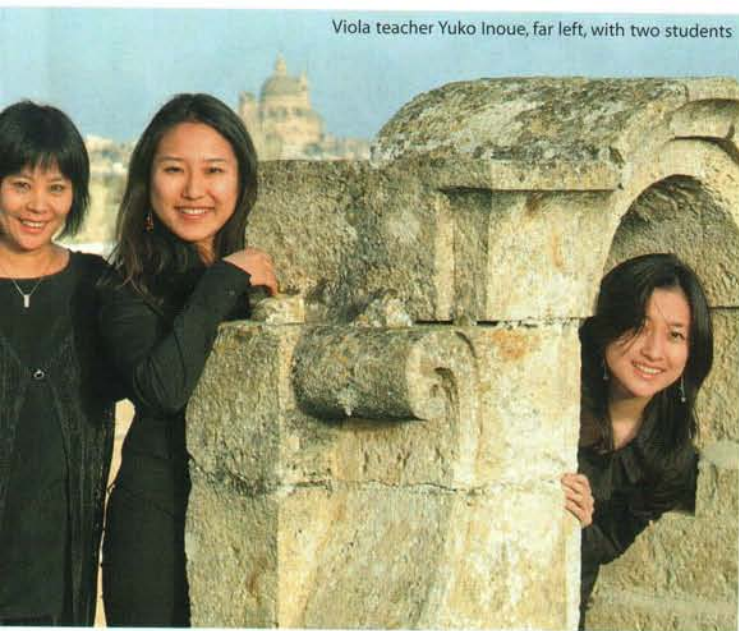
One of the festival's real fortes (pun very much intended) is the presence of the teachers in the orchestra, something unheard of in the residential festival world but which undoubtedly adds to the feeling of camaraderie. Levchenko thinks that 'it is the perfect idea'. Marine Gandon, a viola player from France studying at the RCM, says she was attracted by the thought of having lessons with Inoue. 'It's so great to be able to play in the same orchestra as my teacher,' she says. 'It's also brilliant to be in such a nice environment and it's such a change of scenery, too. To be able to have masterclasses and a concert just after is wonderful.'

Days are divided roughly into morning masterclasses, afternoon orchestral rehearsals and evening fun. Bantock directs the orchestra with characteristic verve, jostling and energising the best from the players. The team (if two overworked men can be called a team) have also planned excursions round the islands for the staff and students and evening meals together. The masterclasses are held >



Björn Bantock, co-founder of the festival, conducts the string orchestra

BERTRAND KOLIK



Viola teacher Yuko Inoue, far left, with two students

BERTRAND KOLIK

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MATS LIDSTRÖM

in the dilapidated but deeply atmospheric music school, and orchestral rehearsals take place in the theatre next door.

Unlike some masterclasses, these have an atmosphere of informality and helpfulness: each class is an exercise in teamwork and there is as much a sense of the teachers benefiting from it as the students. 'I think the way we are made to socialise every day, finishing at a fine restaurant, and to take excursions around the islands is most civilised,' says Lidström. 'It gives us time to talk and laugh together, instead of how it usually is: flying in, playing, teaching and then leaving again. And Karl is always around, so one senses this "care" on his part.'

There are marked and mutually beneficial differences between each masterclass: Wollong is practical and technical, combining phenomenal playing with a dynamic teaching method; Lidström is funny, thoughtful and inspiring, breaking off to tell anecdotes and dish out life lessons that apply as much to the violin or bass as to the cello; and Inoue is kind and encouraging, leading a selection of *sans pareil* viola players – easily the strength of the festival and the envy of orchestras the world over.

With the exception of the cellos, each section has an assistant. The violins have Emanuel Salvador, one of the finest Portuguese violinists of his generation; the violas have Andra Arnican, leader of the Gulbenkian Orchestra violas, and the double basses have Katarina Trollhagen, principal of Stockholm Mozart Orchestra.

'There is a fantastic atmosphere created by having both students and professors working in a new ensemble and experiencing the whole process from day one to the last concert,' says Salvador. 'At first I had no idea what kind of result could be achieved because there were many different variables to play with. For example, we have never played together before, the repertoire is very demanding, rehearsal time is limited, there are different levels of ensemble-playing experience and we're all from different backgrounds. But every day there is this very supportive environment that enables a healthy interchange of experiences, which, I am sure, will be important in my own musical career.' He adds, 'For me it is a really good mix of being in charge and sharing my experiences with the students.' Bantock agrees, 'All the time in rehearsals the teachers are turning around and advising how to play better. The standard of the playing is much higher than it would have been if the professors had just gone back to their hotels.'

The final night's gala concert brings with it Malta's great and good and an overwhelmingly positive response. The programme of Stravinsky, Fiorini's *Imagination at Work*, Dvořák and Mozart is ambitious and eclectic but goes down a treat. Bantock does what he does best, infecting the orchestra with vigour and extracting musical sensibility and technical excellence in equal measures. Bows all go in the same direction and the warm evening and the theatre's Baroque glamour is the perfect setting for what is certain to be a regular fixture on the Maltese calendar.

Triumphant at the post-concert meal, and just a little assisted by some local liquor, Fiorini is full of praise for the orchestra and students. There is the danger that such a sense of camaraderie will be lost when the festival grows in stature, but it's clear that for now the ethos of work hard, play hard has paid off. It looks as though Fiorini's vision for a fully subsidised course in 2009 might just be realised. ■