

## ECMTA Notes

**From the Chairman of the European Chamber Music Teachers' Association**

**First published in German in *Ensemble Magazin*, December/January,**

**Vol 1, 2011. <http://www.ensemble-magazin.de/>**

***Chamber Music Skills at the center of a Musician's Training: focus on the ECMTA Gathering in Amsterdam and the Pedagogical Activities of the Debussy Quartet***

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It seems that we speak in almost every ECMTA meeting about the need for chamber music teachers to know more about the music marketplace and to actively encourage their students to develop creative and innovative skills beyond their own instrumental ability. This is important not only because of market forces and the need to develop new audiences: it is in fact a question that goes to the very essence of the meaning and purpose of performing the repertoire that we love (and in this sense, is of equal importance for amateur musicians). The stage director Peter Sellars once told us, during a lecture at the University of Paris about his infamous Mozart trilogy, that his motivation for reinterpreting the staging of Mozart operas was not to make them more 'accessible' but to reconnect with the urgently political meaning which they originally possessed. *Le Nozze di Figaro* was indeed a provocative opera in its time, and for Sellars this meaning had been lost through generations of silk stockings, powdered wigs, and courtly elegance. For him, Mozart's message had been buried under a pile of theatrical and social codes and symbols that were in fact communicating the opposite of what his music was intended to say. The form of presentation was making it impossible to hear the music's deeper content and message.

Our recent ECMTA meeting in Amsterdam was further confirmation of the spread of this kind of thinking in the realm of chamber music pedagogy. In keeping with the ECMTA board decision to link our meetings with pre-existing events that might include exposure to innovative tendencies in the music business, we had arranged a meeting that would include both a day with teachers at the Amsterdam Conservatory and participation in events of the Dutch Classical Music Meeting (DCMM), organized by the Muziek Centrum Nederland (MCN). We expected that the DCMM would feature innovative ensembles developing new kinds of programs for broader audiences, but the surprise was the extent to which this zeitgeist has had an influence on the chamber music course at the Amsterdam Conservatory. Before we listened to our own members' forum, Michel Dispa, Director of classical music, provided an insightful overview of his school's program and its objectives.

The context in Holland is not so different from in many European countries: the number and quality of trained musicians has increased in recent decades, but the place of classical music in society is continually shrinking. Music is no longer part of the program in public schools, and although internet gives greater access to all musics, classical music remains marginal in the mainstream medias. Because of the financial climate and for ideological reasons, the government has decided to diminish dramatically the funding for ensembles, schools, and other musical structures. In such a context, as Mr. Dispa explained, the role of conservatories can no longer be only to train excellent musicians, but also must be the development of the future public for the music they are teaching and playing. This means giving students appropriate tools, and it is through the chamber music program that this can be done most effectively. Although the quality of craftsmanship remains the main concern, the question is now: "How can I make a living?" Mr Dispa was categorical: "We will kill our musical future if we teach that only failed musicians are not soloists."

The reason for this is clear: playing chamber music and developing chamber music projects demands everything that a musician of the future needs. Beyond autonomous individual abilities, this includes highly developed skills in interpersonal relations, communication, intuitive and perceptive listening, reactivity, collaborative interpretation, imagination and creativity, analysis, work and project organization, and leadership. Dispa noted that many of the excellent professional ensembles in Holland have also noticed that the traditional classical

repertoire is not enough to create a faithful public, and there are dozens of groups looking for ways to create their own niche through composing, arranging, innovative presenting, and in general developing individual approaches that will allow them to access new publics and new places to perform. For this reason, the need for innovation in programming, repertoire, and presentation have been introduced for the past ten years into the chamber music program at the Amsterdam Conservatory, where chamber music study is compulsory in every term of every year in undergraduate study. We might add however, that it is not only a question of marketing, but of *pertinence*, in the way that Peter Sellars explained it: through innovative programming, instrumentation, and presentation, musicians must help reveal the inner message of the music itself.

The student ensemble we heard, featuring arrangements for two percussion, trombone, and violin was an example of this spirit: in addition to compulsory ensembles with similar instruments, the program obliges every student to do half of their projects in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year with mixed ensembles. This involves both an approach integrating analysis with interpretation, and leads often to arranging a widely varied repertoire. Of course, this is only part of the story, but it is an indication of the evolution of chamber music study in conservatory curricula. As one might conclude after listening to Mr Dispa, chamber music playing is becoming more and more important because it gives the students the necessary professional development skills he needs in this new working environment.

The following day at the Muziekgebouw to visit the Dutch Classical Music Meeting only confirmed these arguments. In most of the professional ensemble stands and in many of the showcases – although far from all of them – one could observe that the chamber ensembles were trying to show that along with the standard literature they had something more to offer the broader public. There is no question that this juxtaposition in one weekend of specific pedagogical concerns with professional realities was especially stimulating for our colleagues (who, after all, are themselves active performers).

It was then with even greater interest during the ECMTA members' forum that we heard from the administrator of the Debussy Quartet (Premier Grand Prix, Evian String Quartet Competition 1993), who had come to Amsterdam to speak about the quartet's numerous pedagogical projects and workshops, most notably a new string quartet training program at the Regional Conservatory in Lyon. Intrigued by this presentation, we asked Christophe Collette, 1<sup>st</sup> violin of the quartet, to explain the logic and motivation behind his ensemble's pedagogical initiatives. Not surprisingly, we found that what was happening in Lyon, as a natural reaction to the evolution of society and the music world, was very much in tune with what we have been seeing across Europe.

Mr Collette emphasized two aspects of their pedagogical action: on the one hand the preservation of a tradition and on the other the conviction that musicians must respond to a changing world. This means that while the quartet engages in teaching because they feel a responsibility for passing on the heritage of quartet playing to the next generation, they also have a desire to equip younger musicians with skills to preserve the pertinence of quartet playing in the future. It is important to underline that this is not just a theoretical position, since the Debussy Quartet has been involved in numerous and highly successful interdisciplinary projects for many years, and has enviable experience in all forms of outreach activities. It is thus a combination of the heritage acquired through contact with the great masters of the past and their own professional experience that the quartet now wishes to share and pass on.

In addition to a number of workshops, the quartet will dispose of two primary tools in the city of Lyon for these projects: the new string quartet training program at the Regional conservatory and, most remarkable, the creation within a year of their own *Maison du quatuor à cordes*. It is a testament to the impact the Debussy Quartet has had locally that, in these times of financial crisis, the municipal government would agree to finance the

construction of a special venue of about 150 m<sup>2</sup>, seating approximately 80, in which string quartets can present works-in-progress and masterclasses, practice outreach presentations with school children, and rehearse interdisciplinary projects.

The creation of the *Maison du quatuor à cordes* is in part a reaction to what Christophe Collette described as the evolution of the form of a concert. The artistic life of the Debussy Quartet has been marked by the realization that the location and the nature of musical experience has been changing in profound ways, and that it is absolutely necessary and possible for chamber ensembles to evolve with them. Mr Collette cited *Boxe Boxe*, a project realized with Mourad Merzouki's Compagnie Käfig for the Biennale de la danse in Lyon in September 2010, which played 14 performances to a full house seating 1400. This project, which featured 9 hip-hop dancers performed to the music of Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Ravel, was later presented in Paris at the Théâtre de Chaillot, drawing 1000 spectators at each of its 9 performances. The show is programmed for still 90 more engagements, so many that the quartet has brought in 2 other ensembles to assure all of the dates, including a quartet which has been studying with them. Although the Debussy Quartet continues to maintain a full schedule of fairly traditional string quartet programs of the most challenging repertoire, designed to be presented in traditional concert halls, *Boxe Boxe* was just one example among the 10 or 15 projects of this nature that the quartet has realized in its 22 year career.

Mr Collette feels that young classical musicians need to understand both the artistic attitude and the professional tools necessary to make such collaborations successful. *Boxe Boxe* took almost 2 years of preparatory work, 2 months of rehearsals, and a total complicity between dancers and musicians. And yet, in spite of the obvious artistic and professional interest of such work, classical musicians are rarely trained to engage in such highly integrated interdisciplinary projects. And it is not just a question of adapting the repertoire to suit popular tastes: another of their projects with dancers made use of the music of Webern and Cage, and played easily to halls with up to 800 seats. But these are among the skills necessary to help the music of the past retain its power to speak to the public. According to Collette, if the 'classical concert' model has disappeared from many concert halls and venues, musicians must learn to respond to the new demands of program directors so that this music can continue to be heard.

What remains to be done? In the case of the Debussy Quartet's new training program, a way of connecting the activities of the *Maison du quatuor* with the Regional conservatory has yet to be elaborated, and connections with the teacher training institute (Cefedem) and the national conservatory (CNSMDL) in Lyon also remain undefined. This approach to integrating chamber music instruction into a wholly new artistic environment is not only difficult for many colleagues to accept, it is not as easy to achieve as the Debussy Quartet makes it seem. It does indeed involve a new competence and new abilities, not to mention discernment and artistic judgment in non-musical disciplines. But that such initiatives are appearing increasingly in every part of Europe is a sign of the times that all music professionals should be paying attention to.

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Amsterdam Conservatory:

<http://www.ahk.nl/en/conservatorium/>

Pedagogical activities of the Debussy Quartet

<http://www.debussystringquartet.com/>

<http://www.mezzo.tv/nos-programmes/diffusion/boxe-boxe-par-la-cie-kaefig-biennale-de-la-danse-de-lyon-12>

<http://www.ecmta.eu/en/latest-news/france/160-pedagogical-activity-of-the-debussy-quartet>