

## ECMTA Notes

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

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*Projects and Activities (3): From the Outer Frontiers of Europe*

*The VIII International Festival/Competition "We play music with friends" in Riga and the International Forum for Higher Music Training in Southern Europe (FIAPMSE) in Nigüelas (Grenada)*

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There have been a great many programs in conservatories, academies and workshops sprouting up across Europe in the past 20 years, not to mention scholarships, residencies, and competitions, and it is safe to say that the accessibility and quality of chamber music instruction for young people with professional ambitions has never been so encouraging. But the future of chamber music depends not only on better training and professional development. As one of our board, Alexander Bonduryansky, pointed out at a recent meeting, the music-making and loving society which always naturally nurtured chamber music has been disappearing, and this also needs to be nurtured. It is thus especially important to develop projects which plant the seeds of chamber music as a long term process within society. ECMTA members are also engaged in innovative projects which show awareness of the need for sustainable models which go beyond questions of excellence and address the fundamental issue of chamber music practice – at whatever level - as a life-long process.

My summer season was thus framed by events at the extreme outer borders of Europe: from the north in the jury of a young people's competition in Riga, to the extreme south reading a paper on the role of chamber music in music education at the Forum Internacional de Alto Perfeccionamiento Musical del Sur de Europa (FIAPMSE), organized by the Concerto Malaga. Each project represents a local initiative that has become a model of sustainable organization with long-term goals. They promise a real future for chamber music activity both in their respective communities and in ever widening dimensions beyond their borders.

The 8th International Festival/Competition "We play music with friends" for chamber ensembles of young performers took place in the newly renovated Jazep Medina Music School in Riga, Latvia 4-6 June 2010<sup>1</sup>. Although the basic idea is that competition and performance are effective incentives to promote chamber music practice, this event is part of a coherent pedagogical conception going beyond the usual concept of a competition. It's structure creates connections across many boundaries: between teachers and students, schools of different levels, participants from many different countries, evaluated and non-evaluated performance, formal and informal spaces, and, most interestingly, it promotes a continuity between individual accomplishment, team spirit, and a much larger sense of community.

This has been the form more or less since the beginning: organized by numerous categories according to age, the competition welcomes young people aged 7 to 19 (this year there were 132 students from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Finland in 48 chamber ensembles). The repertoire is open, there are all types of ensembles (with special categories for duos), the time limit variable according to the category. All genres of music, including arrangements are accepted: this is essential, as in elementary schools arrangements help to make chamber music practice accessible to children. There is even a special prize for the teacher who has provided the best original arrangement.

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<sup>1</sup> We have written already about the teacher-training workshop run by this admirable foundation and its director Gunta Melbarde. See *Ensemble Magazin* Issue 3/2010 (June-July).

The jury, composed of representatives from participating countries and presided by the distinguished pedagogue Gunta Sproge of the J.V. Latvian Academy of Music, vote according to an ingenious numerical scheme evaluating five criteria of performance which produce astonishingly consistent results. Each category has at least three prizes, with the possibility of sharing each prize, and special prizes exist or can be invented by the jury. Although this makes for a very long list of winners (32, not counting the prizes for teachers), this assures that the emphasis is on performance and participation: evaluation is kept in perspective as a tool for improvement. It is for this reason that prizes are never monetary, but consist of symbolic and playful tokens.

The festival reinforces the participatory aspect of the event: student groups are welcome to participate *independently* of the competition. Those who do play in both, however, generally do not play the same repertoire, for the festival is, in the words of its director Gunta Melbarde, “for the joy of music.” This year the city was filled with animated and popular collective concerts in such varied locations as the Botanical gardens, the Historical museum, on a rooftop restaurant overlooking the cathedral, in the entry hall of the music school, and in a city park.

What completes this concept is the participation of teachers. Not content to simply submit the students to evaluation, the weekend includes a seminar (50 teachers this year), which provides a framework for constructive comments from the jury concerning the preparation of the students and the organization of the weekend, and may include other topics as well (repertoire, arranging, ...). All of these elements, guided by a fundamental conception of chamber music activity, assures, according to Professor Melbarde, that the experience is not simply a festival or competition, but a life-sharing experience.

The FIAPMSE, a festival/academy in its 6<sup>th</sup> season, is a project of the Concerto Malaga, and as such is part of a constellation of activities of this unusual collectively run, 13-member string ensemble. Founded in 1996 while its members were teenage students in Grenada and Malaga, the ensemble fulfilled their unmet desire to play chamber orchestra repertoire after the example of I Virtuosi di Roma and I Musici. They wanted to make a project that would be their own, and would be something new in their communities: they were seduced by the idea of the intimacy of chamber playing with the sonority of a larger ensemble. At first they organized for their own pleasure, but in time concert projects were overseen by Professor Dabor, who was teaching most of the young students at the time.

In 2003, however, the whole ensemble went to hear I Musici in concert, and they solicited the aid and counsel of violist Massimo Paris, who has been their artistic director ever since, developing their individual sound as an ensemble and encouraging them to explore the Spanish repertoire. The ensemble now has a regular concert season at the University in Malaga, a recording of Spanish string orchestra music (Genuine), a DVD documentary (FNAC), the FIAPMSE, and, most importantly, a residency since 2008 in Donegal, Ireland, the first of its kind for a Spanish ensemble. Most remarkably, through it all, the ensemble has maintained a fairly stable line-up (7 of the 13 are original members).

While all of these projects have been developed in close collaboration with various municipal and regional partners, insuring a sense of local connection, the collective organization of the ensemble is a symbol of its sustainability. In fact, after completing their music studies, members of the ensemble each engaged high-level graduate studies in aspects of cultural management, so that they would be able to form a coherent policy of professional development. So it is that the production team of the FIAPMSE also forms the core of the performing ensemble. Founding member José Manuel Gil notes that this is in keeping with historical reality: musicians of the past were responsible for organizing their careers as well.

The FIAPMSE is also part of that sustainability. A locally popular event, the festival now attracts its audience from around the entire region. But along with the festival in which to perform, the academy brings opportunity for further study with former I Musici colleagues of Maestro Paris, Marianna Sirbu and Mihai Dancila, all present members of the Stradivari Quartet. While the academy is open to international, superior level students as well, the FIAPMSE functions as a kind of retreat for the ensemble, whose members benefit from both intensive coachings and chamber music collaborations alongside their mentors. Their coachings are paid for by the ensemble as part of a continuing education plan.

The residency supported by the County Council in Donegal, has allowed the ensemble to develop partnerships with local schools and music schools, coaching chamber music and performing with the students both locally and on tour; further, the ensemble is programmed at An Grianon Theater, where in October they will share a program with the Donegal Chamber Orchestra for the premiere of a work by Ian Wilson. Here again, a solidly based and well-conceived local project is contributing to the future of chamber music well across its borders.

**Evan Rothstein, Chairman, ECMTA**

[www.kamerfest.lv](http://www.kamerfest.lv)  
[www.concertomalaga.com](http://www.concertomalaga.com)

Mark the dates:

September 24-27 ECMTA gathering at the Ascoli Piceno Festival in Italy :  
<http://www.ascolipicenofestival.com/>

April 1-3 2011 ECMTA annual meeting at the Accademia Santa Cecilia in Rome  
[www.ecmta.eu](http://www.ecmta.eu)