

ECMTA Notes

From the Chairman of the European Chamber Music Teachers' Association

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Themes and debates 1

Members of the ECMTA met in September for a three-day informal gathering during the 14th edition of the chamber music festival *Settembre in Musica* in Ascoli Piceno, hosted by festival artistic director and ECMTA board member Michael Flaksman. This informal gathering was a new part of the association's calendar, meant to allow members to reconnect after the summer holidays, collaborate in performance with each other and festival artists, discuss current and recent projects and do some serious business as well, in this case, planning for the 2011 general meeting in Rome. Between rehearsals, meetings, receptions, and, inevitably, magnificent Italian banquets, it was a rather joyously intense encounter (I should add, for those who have not yet tried the characteristic stuffed olives "all'ascolana" of that region, it is time to make the trip). I think it is fair to say that the sense of community, which deepens at each of these meetings, is now stronger than ever: chamber music teachers across Europe are aware that they have many of the same preoccupations, and recognize that it is possible to make the field stronger and more vibrant for all concerned through cooperation, mutual support, and the sharing of cutting edge information and innovation.

One of the themes that keeps coming back in these discussions is the question of how to preserve chamber music performing in the face of dramatic changes in the way music exists in society – or inversely, questioning the way in which the music marketplace affects changes in chamber music playing and teaching. The response to these challenges can be summed up in two words: personal responsibility. Each ECMTA member confronts these issues, as do most musicians, either through his own professional projects or in thinking about how to better prepare his students. There is a shared conviction that the standard repertoire can best be preserved if it can be presented in new ways. There is the belief that chamber music can speak to larger publics if its expressive power can be accessed, free of artifice and superfluous convention. There is a determination to open the stylistic spectrum to greater variety of musical languages. There is a sense that music must come out of the concert hall and into people's lives if indeed we wish for people to come back to the concert hall.

While innovation and adaptation can be found throughout the music world, it is often in the more personal and local projects that one finds the greatest need for and demonstration of resourcefulness. At the ECMTA gathering, we heard from Emanuele Antolini, a local music teacher, who decided that *Settembre in musica* artists could help to develop interest and enthusiasm for chamber music in the local schools. It was an informal initiative based on mutual respect, common principles and goals, and the simple willingness of school officials to let something new happen. She did not wait for government support: for ten years she had already succeeded in bringing live musical performance into her junior high school on her own. The festival agreed three years ago to provide a certain number of chamber musicians to participate in these programs, and it has been growing since. At the same meeting we also met with Vito Amatulli, director of a music school whose project at first was to bring Orff-method instruction into the public schools of the province of Bari. In the past four years, however, in collaboration with Michael Flaksman, Mr Amatulli has also created the Carl Orff Music Festival, a four-concert, free admission chamber music festival which has developed into a major regional event that has attracted institutional support from the EU, the regional and provincial governments, most of the participating municipalities (Putignano, Bari, among others), the BNP Paribas group. What was fascinating was not only the public and institutional success of the project, but the fact that the idea of presenting concerts was integrated into a *total concept* to regenerate music interest and practice in the community. In other words, teaching Orff-method music to small children and the organization of an

international chamber music festival were not conceived separately: one grew out of the other and continue to complement each other.

In this respect, an exceptional example from outside of Europe deserves attention. In September, one of the MacArthur Genius Grants (\$500 000) was awarded to Sebastian Ruth, founder of the Providence String Quartet Community MusicWorks project in the poor west side of the city of Providence, Rhode Island. This string quartet musician, just out of school, decided that he wanted to devote himself to performance within a local support structure. Since this structure did not exist, he had to find the way to achieve a performance activity of some artistic quality while inventing the totally new economic and social model which could sustain it. And this model of total community immersion for a chamber ensemble has grown in a completely organic way in response to the greater needs of the community. The success of the project comes from the harmonization of artistic, pedagogical, and social concerns, all guided by quality implementation and real ideological commitment. And the result shows once again that musical practice, teaching, and ensemble playing in synergy can be a powerful motor for positive change.

In contrast to these thoughts, a recent encounter illustrates the unfortunate disconnection between the way many young chamber musicians still think about the reality of music in the world and their own careers. It is not an unusual story. An exceptional ensemble had come to ask about professional development opportunities just after having performed in a showcase concert series for rising stars. The basic question was, of course, how to get more concerts. In spite of the success of every public appearance, these excellent musicians seemed discouraged, because their concerts have not been followed by new contacts and future engagements, and they were at a loss as to where to find more opportunities. They had no manager, but that is not a major obstacle. They had tried some easily available tools, such as the remarkable French festival and concert list on the website of the Cité de la musique, but they couldn't seem to find presenters who might be interested in musicians with their profile.

It was clear that they had a major conceptual block. The young artists believed that their promotion or the creation of opportunities was simply not within their command, and their perception was that there was simply no market for them. One would think that this attitude had already long since disappeared, but it is not so: traditional conservatory training still produces artists who believe that playing well is their only task. And yet, chamber music ensembles – who have the advantage of being able to share responsibilities – have proven over and over that taking personal responsibility for creating a favorable professional environment is not only good business, it is artistically and humanly enriching. In addition, as the above examples of *Settembre in Musica*, the Carl Orff festival and the Community MusicWorks show, resourceful work on a local level can create opportunities. Certain basic tools and functions are now technically within the reach of most artists: the creation of a facebook or myspace page, the posting of concert dates, the posting of concert excerpts on youtube or daily motion, the collecting of concert organizers' names and contacts, the maintaining of regular communication with the organizers of their previous concerts, the writing of letters, publicity, and appropriate biographies in various languages, the development of networks among their peers and colleagues, the development of performance ideas and programs beyond the standard repertoire, the research of interdisciplinary projects, the exploration of non traditional performances spaces. But beyond these tools, or perhaps preceding them, is the fundamental idea that musicians *should* be doing these things, thinking of ways for chamber music to become a part of people's lives.

As mentioned in last month's column, there have been at no other time in history so many programs devoted to helping music students and former graduates adapt to professional life. But there is obviously still much to be done. Accordingly, a special session "Focusing on the music marketplace: preparing students for musical life" will be a feature of the ECMTA general meeting at the Conservatorio Santa Cecilia in Rome, April 1-3, 2011.

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ECMTA: www.ecmta.eu

Settembre in musica : <http://www.ascolipicenofestival.com>

Carl Orff Artistic Association: <http://www.associazionecarlorff.it>

Community MusicWorks : <http://www.communitymusicworks.org>

MacArthur Foundation: <http://www.macfound.org>

Cité de la musique, Service d'informations musicales, list of festivals in France.

<http://mediatheque.cite-musique.fr/masc/?url=/mediacomposite/cim/>