

## ECMTA Notes

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

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*Activities and projects (4)*

*A Young People's Guide to making a chamber music project*

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At the most recent meeting of the ECMTA we spoke about the importance for chamber music teachers at all levels to be sensitive to and aware of the activities of amateur musicians, and it is certainly a topic to which we shall return many times in the coming years. While some worry that amateur chamber music practice is in decline, along with the public for professional chamber music concerts, there is evidence to the contrary. Many of our members have been strongly committed for up to 30 years to the promotion and accompaniment of amateur chamber music practice, such as Stefan Metz's Orlando Festival in Holland and members of the Danel Quartet through numerous workshops (more about one of these later), and their projects still attract large numbers of enthusiastic participants. More recently, the spectacular work of Classical Revolution, launched in California, has created a tremendous international movement in favor of new models of informal performance which mingle professionals and amateurs in a manner reminiscent of Beethoven's Vienna. The Chamber Studio in London has naturally integrated amateur musicians as part of their continuing education scheme. And in Paris, the Maison des pratiques artistiques amateurs has been organizing the "Journées de musique de chambre amateur" for the past four years. But, as we all know, amateur musicians do not need to wait around for professional teachers to organize things for them, and professionals would do well to pay attention to the desires and needs of this public as demonstrated by their autonomous activities.

Last spring I had the pleasure of being invited to spend a day in the French countryside with one such group, made up of young amateur musicians from the Choeurs et Orchestres des Grandes Ecoles in Paris and from the Orchester des Collegium musicum der Universität Bonn. In spite of these affiliations, the project was entirely self-governed and financed, and grew quite naturally out of friendship. During the 2008-2009 academic year, a young violinist of the Collegium, Anna Bindler, spent a year studying in Paris, and participated in the COGE program: on her return to Bonn, she simply thought about ways to spend musical time with the good friends she had enjoyed while in France. At first it was thought that a Franco-German orchestra could be formed, with half the musicians from each country, but this project seemed much too complicated. And so was born an informal project, to bring a group of musicians from Paris to spend a long weekend in Bonn, 10 musicians from each city and only strings, to play chamber music in smaller groups (trio, quartet, sextet) and to join together to perform string orchestra music without conductor. Most interestingly, the incorporation of large ensemble repertoire was meant to make the session more inclusive, since it became clear that not all participants wanted to play chamber music, either for reasons of shyness or concerns about their instrumental level. The first 'test session' took place from the 27 February to March 1<sup>st</sup> 2010, at a youth hostel in an isolated village outside of Bonn, and included chamber works of Pleyel, Dvorak, and Mendelssohn, and Grieg's *Holberg Suite* for the larger ensemble. The chamber music program, chosen freely by the participants, evolved naturally as each group discovered in rehearsal what seemed to be a reasonable goal.

Anna Binder and a violinist friend Caroline Weisse took care of organization the residency in Germany and a friend in France coordinated the participation of French players, but each participant bought and paid his own way. The first day was spent sight-reading, forming groups, and choosing repertoire, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> included the presence of an

invited professor responsible for acting as a catalyst for both chamber and large ensemble rehearsals. Rehearsing went on from 10 am to 11 pm in every available space in the hostel: on the last day the entire group went to Bonn for a final rehearsal and concert at the University, but not before spending a relaxing morning visiting the city.

The experience and the work model was successful enough that a reciprocal project was set in motion. Benjamin Duval, a 27 year old engineer/violinist who had been president of the OGE association, was in charge of logistics in France, with Anna and Caroline continuing in their role on the German side. The group would be 22 players this time, about 2/3 of the participants from the first session, and since it was decided that the session would take place before the end of the season, all the travel was coordinated and purchased together to save time and money. Benjamin settled on a youth hostel in the country southeast of Paris, which included modern dorm rooms, large rooms for rehearsal and a rustic setting; a concert in the Luxembourg gardens was arranged for the final day, again after a morning devoted to visiting the city. The schedule and process were the same, including the participation of an invited professor (myself in this case!), except that the forming of groups and the selection of repertoire were facilitated by the increasing familiarity and common experience of the participants. This familiarity made it possible to include some very ambitious repertoire, including Mendelssohn's Octet. They were in fact becoming a community of players and friends, and according to the reactions of all involved, it is a project which will most certainly continue into the future.

What is of particular interest to professional teachers, aside from the inspiring model that this energetic and wildly joyous group of players presents, are the expectations of the participants with regard to the invited teachers. First of all is the fact that the participants recognized the interest of having someone from the outside to guide them – this was a universally shared interest. But the objectives were very clear: identify and explain necessary work methods, demonstrate pragmatically what needed to be done – and could be done - to achieve a set short-term goal with the means available, harmonize a common musical vision, create or maintain a high level of dynamic and positive energy. And that with repertoire chosen by the participants, and within an extremely limited time-frame. No easy task! The group had difficulties finding participating professors, partly because the task was challenging, but also because of language barriers (the professor had to be at least bilingual, if not trilingual), and time constraints. And yet this is precisely the kind of initiative that should be encouraged and facilitated, and ideally, chamber music teachers should be prepared with experience and technique to participate in this kind of venture.

Among those who pass with great ease from one kind of teaching situation to another are members of the Danel Quartet, who I was delighted to observe for the second time at the String Quartet Day at the Conservatory in Lille on December 18 (see Ensemble Magazine April/May 2010). The Danel has been working with children, amateurs, and professional level students for over 20 years, and has developed a special reputation for knowing how to take the players where they are, no matter what their level, and bring them to a higher awareness of their potential. The Danel has been involved in the string quartet program in Lille for over 6 years. It was fascinating to return a year later to see that the program in Lille grows ever stronger: 17 student quartets aged about 9 to 22 years old work together all year long under the guidance of Caroline Dooghe and several other colleagues. Twice a year all of the ensembles spend a day together, coaching with the Danel and performing a group concert at the end of the day.

As Marc Danel observed, there are now several groups that have stayed together for many years, and even more students who have been participating in the program throughout most of their adolescence, and this creates a kind of community spirit that is unusual in a

chamber music program. This is part of the special quality of the program: its emphasis on the social and collective aspect of chamber music practice. New students are quickly integrated, and groups that lose a member or two because of graduation or schedule problems are easily reformed and completed with other students eagerly waiting for a place. As was already clear at last year's visit, the program has succeeded in creating a true string quartet culture within the school.

As Marc Danel also pointed out, this string quartet culture has implications for the musical life of the children as a whole, it contributes essential qualities to their personal culture: they understand more deeply the emotional meaning of dynamics and articulations, and understand music making better in terms of relationships between parts or voices. And for the first time, a large percentage of students affirm that playing chamber music professionally would be their long term objective.

But most interestingly, this project is just as important for future amateur musicians. As Marc rightly points out, most of the young people in this program have no intention of pursuing musical careers; the older quartets include a student of medicine, a student of languages, a future grade-school teacher and a tennis instructor. These students work alongside those who are already enrolled in the professional training program! While in some schools this would be considered incoherent, here it is not only not a problem, it is considered a strength. According to Marc, aside from the purely social aspect of letting childhood friends work and perform together, it is a way of letting future professional hopefuls understand more deeply the potential for music to be a joyful and satisfying part of the life of amateur players, and opens life perspectives for them beyond the sometime constricting professional goals.

In one of his lessons with a group of very earnest and experienced teenagers playing the 1<sup>st</sup> movement of Mendelssohn's Op. 80, Marc Danel spoke with exceptional passion about the interrelationships of players. Marc reminded the young people that "you must try to do what is necessary in your own playing to encourage the others to play better, and you must learn to choose what you want to do with your own playing." A more beautiful résumé of what this project is all about would be hard to imagine.

Dr Evan Rothstein, Chairman, ECMTA

<http://www.orlandofestival.nl/>

<http://www.classicalrevolution.org/>

<http://www.quatuordanel.eu/>

<http://mpaa.fr/>

<http://www.collegium-musicum.uni-bonn.de/orchester.html>

<http://www.coge.org/>

**Mark the date: The next general meeting of ECMTA at the Conservatorio Santa di Cecilia in Rome, April 1-3, 2011. Round tables, members' forum, masterclasses, concerts. For more information : [www.ecmta.eu](http://www.ecmta.eu)**