

ECMTA Notes

From the Chairman of the European Chamber Music Teachers' Association

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Profiles and Projects (1)

"The last note of the first performance is only the beginning of the story." Roger Germser and the chamber music program at the Regional Conservatory in Lyon.

One of the greatest pleasures of working with ECMTA (European chamber music teachers' association) is meeting and spending time with devoted artist/pedagogues who, although not always well-known outside of their own particular professional circles, have been patiently and effectively transforming the musical life of their community, region, and country. Roger Germser is one such remarkable teacher. For 40 years, his dynamic teaching has not only lead chamber music to become a central part of the curriculum of the Regional conservatory (CRR) in Lyon, but he has shaped for the past 17 years the destiny of French teacher training by guiding the chamber music pedagogy section at the National Superior conservatory in Lyon (CNSM) as well. His work is an example of the profound changes taking place in French conservatories at all levels, where chamber music has found a much more important place in the past 20 years than it had ever held before. The fact that the CRR in Lyon created in 2010 a specialized cycle of study in chamber music – with Mr Germser as its director - as part of their strategy to position themselves in the Bologna process is significant: it means that artistically and institutionally, chamber music counts.

From the relatively late age of 12, Roger Germser first studied violin at the Conservatories in Alger and Caen, and continued at the Paris Conservatory, working with Jacques Ghestem and Pierre Doukan, among others, and taking his premier prix in the famous class of Gabriel Bouillon. After his prizes in chamber music and violin, he immediately began teaching at the CRR in Lyon, where he is now the head of both the strings and chamber music department ("After being a much too old student, I became a much too young teacher!"). Throughout his career he collaborated in chamber music with some of the most important figures in French music, performing contemporary music (Les solistes de Lyon, Sylvain Cambreling Forum, Mark Foster), baroque music (Les Musiciens du Louvre) and even tango, back in the time before it was fashionable to do so. From the 1980s he also had a very successful career combining music and theater for hundreds of performances, both as a musician working with actors and as an actor working with musicians. In this he collaborated with artists such as Patrice Chéreau, Maurice Bacquet, and the Quatuor Debussy. This activity alone would have been sufficient for most colleagues; for Mr Germser it was another source of inspiration to enrich his teaching.

In 1989 he started teaching as an assistant at the CNSM in Lyon for large chamber ensembles and chamber orchestra without conductor. The Quatuor Debussy was one of the first chamber groups he coached, and when they went on to win first prize at the International String Quartet competition in Evian (Bordeaux), he was named professor. But his enduring impact on French musical life is certainly both as chamber music professor at the CRR and as director of chamber music pedagogy at the CNSM. The teacher training diploma at the CNSM leads to the highest certificate for conservatory teachers in France, the Certificat d'aptitude (CA): it is open only to students who have already finished their undergraduate diplomas or an equivalent high level. For years, Mr Germser's class of 20 students would meet for three hours every Monday to work with his student ensembles brought in from the CRR, where his class included children, adolescents, and young adults. Under the watchful eye of their instructor, the training teachers would work with the children and afterwards exchange comments and criticism not only with the teacher, but also with other members of the class. This kind of inclusive laboratory training was highly innovative at the time, and has progressively been integrated into other teacher training programs: the inclusive nature is recognized as beneficial not only for the future teachers, but also for the young "test

ensembles,” who can learn a great deal from participating in the experience. Mr Germser admits with a mischievous smile that it has been also extremely enriching for him “because as I listened to the students, I could say to myself, ‘ah, that’s really not helpful to say that, and yet I say it all the time... I’d better be sure to stop!’” In spite of this humor, it is clear that he views the input from the student teachers and the process of mutual support as an entirely positive process. After many years, a survey by the CNSM of graduates of the CA diploma found that the chamber music teacher training was the most appreciated part of the program for this ‘hands-on’ approach.

This format has evolved over time, since it became clear that although the presence of all 20 student teachers led to a greater variety of comments, it was somewhat intimidating for some. To improve this, Mr Germser decided to bring to the student teachers in groups of 3 or 4 directly to the CRR to teach student ensembles ‘in situ’. The exchanges are more intimate, friendly, and relaxed, the contact with the test groups more direct and personal. It is notable that student teachers continue to return to the CRR even years after their diploma is obtained in order to observe Mr Germser’s teaching; during a recent visit, two young professional musicians were present in the class, taking notes, for many hours.

The organization of the chamber music class at the CRR is equally original and effective. The class works according to both short- and long-term projects, decided by the teacher in consultation with students, with students encouraged to choose their own partners and make their own projects. Some can be intensive (every day for a week leading directly to a performance) or stretched out over a period of 5 or 6 weeks or longer. Participation in chamber music is not obligatory for all students, but the overwhelming majority do so, and in most cases they follow the established plan. This means, of course, that the resulting teaching schedule is fairly complex, and there are almost never two weeks in a row with the same plan. Although this requires a tremendous investment of time management (almost as many hours as spent teaching!), the benefits are considerable, because it allows each student group to learn to fit ambitious projects into their schedule, and to plan and pace their work intelligently. Asked how he could possibly devote so much time to personalizing each ensemble’s instruction, Mr Germser replies typically “but you must understand, this produces a great deal of happiness [...] success and happiness come from welcoming the students’ projects and putting oneself at their service.” It goes without saying that Mr Germser does not count the hours spent at the school.

Perhaps most important is the principle that preparation leads to performance, and works should be performed as often as possible; some recent ensembles which had prepared *Verklärte nacht* or the Brahms piano quintet performed 15 to 18 times during the season. This is usual in solo repertoire, but remains less so in chamber music, especially for adolescents and young adults. A tremendous number of concerts and informal hearings are programmed for chamber ensembles throughout the year – seven in November alone - both at the CRR and in innumerable settings across the city, with both public and private partners (including non-musical institutes, the city hall, retirement homes, libraries, churches, theaters, etc). For students these concerts are not a finality, but progressive steps in the perfecting of their skills, and it is not unusual for them to add movements as they go along, slowly building up their repertoire. This activity allows students to build both repertoire and confidence, since every intervention is designed specifically to meet their needs and level of competence. This last point is crucial: according to Mr Germser, knowing how to adapt oneself to the level, ambitions, competence and personality of the students is one of the most important skills. This means knowing how to form the groups, choose their repertoire, and decide the timeframe for work and performance.

Another innovation are the “Chamber Music Tuesdays,” concerts in which students from all the chamber music classes may participate. Organized 4 or 5 times a year, these concerts feature the presence of a guest artist, who intervenes only after the end of the concert, sharing his observations and comments with the students and interested audience members in an

open forum. This is quite different from the usual “masterclass” approach, since the atmosphere remains that of a public concert, and the feedback is meant to help them develop a clearer idea of the impression they make in performance.

Since 2002, Mr Germser has also added a festival, called “2 ou 3 jours un tout petit detour”¹ which originally drew on the model of the *Folles journées de Nantes*, but now produces concerts with students during the entire month of June. This is specially calculated to come after both entrance exams to the upper conservatories and the internal year-end exams. In 2009, with 18 concerts involving 4 or 5 different ensembles in each program in a dozen locations, the festival also included a series of concerts with a chamber orchestra composed of all the festival participants performing in towns outside of Lyon.

One might fear that this constant agitation might lead to a rather stressful atmosphere. But a recent visit, which included a 6-hour marathon of lessons for 10 ensembles showed quite the contrary. Two elements were absolutely constant from one group to another. First, a heart-warming enthusiasm: the students are quite obviously eager to participate, to schedule more lessons, to play for guests, and to perform whenever possible, and that with an admirable naturalness. Secondly, a sense of openness and receptivity: each group seemed possessed of an awareness of the need for input, an eagerness for comments and exchange, and willingness to try out suggestions. This does not mean that in every case the students were at a virtuoso level. It means that they have been well-prepared for living music-making as part of their life. A great tribute to a devoted artist-teacher.

Dr Evan Rothstein, Chairman, ECMTA

For information about the specialized chamber music program (college-level):
http://www.conservatoire-lyon.fr/ressources/information/formation_specialisee__musique_chambre.pdf

For an English presentation of the program, see the ECMTA e-Newsletter 5 on our website.
www.ecmta.eu

Are you a chamber music teacher or a member of a chamber music ensemble? Share your experience with us. Visit our website and join ECMTA! www.ecmta.eu

¹ “2 or 3 days a little detour” : reference to the famous line of the devil in *L’histoire du soldat* de C.F. Ramuz, which finished “after which, rich forever.”