

## ECMTA Notes

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

First published in German in *Ensemble Magazin*, Vol 4, 2011

#### *ECMTA: Workshop models (1)*

#### *Learning respect and artistry at the London String Quartet Foundation Workshop in Manchester*

The past seven ECMTA articles in *Ensemble* magazine have emphasized that innovation and creativity in chamber music teaching are not in short supply in Europe. We have examined both members' and non-members' workshops in Latvia, Spain, Finland, France, Germany, and Italy, and they have included workshops for professional teachers, for children, for adult amateurs, and for pre-professional students. But in each case, our colleagues have been reacting to both artistic and larger human concerns, and it must be said that the overriding principles of these otherwise extremely diverse projects are those of *pertinence* and *synergy*. In other words, on every level of activity, playing well and achieving excellence is only one among many objectives. In this framework, music as a professionally practiced or a socially bonding activity takes its meaning from an appropriate use in a specific context: excellence is no longer defined exclusively in terms of the quality of the artists on display but in terms of *the quality of experience being shared*. This is a dramatic change of focus for some, but in each case examined in this column over the past year and a half, that change seems to be unleashing a tremendous potential for invention.

An inspiring example of this drive to revitalize chamber music teaching by integrating many levels of activity comes from Manchester, where Chetham's School of Music welcomed the Fourth annual National Young String Quartet Weekend, organized in collaboration with the Wigmore Hall London String Quartet Foundation<sup>1</sup>. The workshop took place for four days last March on the campus of Chetham's School, a charming and functional complex of both modern and gothic style buildings which provided all necessary facilities for rehearsals and concerts. The London String Quartet Foundation was of course established in 1977 by Yehudi Menuhin, and led to the creation of what is now one of the most important professional competitions in the world, the triannual London String Quartet Competition. Since 2007 the LSQF also organizes a String Quartet Symposium for young professional-level ensembles, thus providing a pedagogical annex to the Foundation's activities. But in collaboration with Chetham's, LSQF and Wigmore Hall now have been going a step further: this weekend brought together four generations of players and students of many different backgrounds, including both children, teenagers and their teachers from the region's municipal music services, the Junior Royal Northern College of Music and the Centre for Young Musicians, London (Junior course)<sup>2</sup>, along with non-professional and pre-professional students from major UK conservatories and at least one university music department (Senior course)<sup>3</sup>. The highly effective workshop structure encouraged a tremendous amount of both musical and non-musical sharing and dialogue, demonstrating the belief that bringing different ages and levels of participants together increases *exponentially* the potential impact of such projects.

The course has three stated objectives: "- widen access to excellent string quartet coaching ; - enable young musicians from all backgrounds to attend ; - discover and develop young talent." Other academies are of course open to different levels of students, but rarely are they all working in the same place with the same teachers, participating in question and answer sessions with professionals of different generations, observing each other's masterclasses and both informal and formal concerts in a single intensive period. Here, joining Chetham professors and weekend artistic directors Nicolas Jones and Graham Oppenheimer, was an absolutely world-class faculty including Johannes Meissl, Christophe Richter, Pavel Fischer, Raphael Todes, and Mark Messenger, as well as members of the Carducci Quartet. They all worked intensively in rotation with 7 'senior

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1 The London String Quartet Foundation merged with Wigmore Hall in July 2010. The NYSQW is a project of *Wigmore Hall Learning and Outreach at Chetham School of Music*.

2 Middle-school, and high school music instruction is principally provided by teachers employed by a network of 'music services' and not by conservatories.

3 Schools represented in the senior course were the Royal College of Music, the Royal Academy of Music, the Royal Scottish College of Music, Trinity Laban, Leeds University, and recent graduates of Chetham's School.

course' quartets (from the major UK conservatories) and 11 'junior course' quartets (the junior course also included an exceptional quartet from the Ciurlionis School in Vilnius).

The required presence of the Junior course students' teachers also meant – although this is not a formal objective – that the weekend served as a retreat for teachers as well, allowing them to meet and exchange experiences and points of view while observing their student's work with the masterclass teachers. Ruth Openshaw and Chris Davies, teachers from Solihull Music Services, emphasized the fact that the weekend was an opportunity for the children to mix with peers from other parts of the country, allowing them to "put their own achievements into a national context." Further, the LSQF weekend gives them a chance to mix with students of many different levels without barriers. As Ms Openshaw observed, "The atmosphere is very relaxed, everyone is very nice. The kids are treated like musicians in their coaching regardless of their age or level or background." The teachers agreed that the preparation for the weekend begins early in the year, and helps to give a direction and focus to rehearsals. They also find that the students who have already participated in the workshop in Manchester serve as a source of inspiration and motivation to other students in their programs. And the presence this year of many senior level quartets was provided an even greater source of inspiration and model to aspire to.

During a coffee break, Nicolas Jones explains that he is keenly aware of the difficulties faced by the municipal teachers, and thus does everything possible to take their specific situation into account. He recognizes that the key problem is that during the year the kids don't have much time for chamber music, they are very busy with other ensemble playing, and it is hard for parents to be committed to bringing them together for rehearsals and lessons. But he affirms that it is in quartet playing that they have the best chance to develop personal artistry, and whereas many kids stop playing at 12-13 yrs, if they start quartets early they will do this for life.

Jones says that the strategy is to bring in the younger groups from as many schools as possible in the region; these participating schools then bring Chetham teachers in throughout the year for preparatory encounters. What usually happens is that the preparatory encounters make it possible to include 2 or 3 additional groups which would otherwise not be able to participate directly in the weekend, thus increasing progressively the number of students and teachers involved in the project. The goal is to make an international festival of quartets, with academy, concerts, in 2013.

The involvement of LSQF brings special advantages: the weekend began with a special concert by the Danish String Quartet (LSQ competition 1<sup>st</sup> prize winners) followed by a lively question and answer session with the students and teachers. The members of the quartet explained how they met, practice, choose repertoire, survive touring, prepare scores, organize their schedules, and, most of all, what values preserve them throughout the strains of their career. This kind of structured dialogue punctuated the weekend, and formed a characteristic part of the workshop: the Carducci Quartet also performed an informal concert which was followed by a question and answer session, and the weekend was closed with a panel involving all of the masterclass teachers. It was thus possible to hear the same questions evoked by several different generations of quartet musicians. But the workshop organizers went even further: in the informal student concerts, organized throughout the weekend to allow groups of all levels to present both finished interpretations and 'works-in-progress', the student groups were also encouraged by Mr Jones to explain where they came from, how they came to play together, and whatever they might like to say about the music or their work. In this way the younger participants were empowered to take the stage with a certain legitimacy that went beyond simple categories of artistic skill – they were all thus invited to participate as complete human beings in an experience that was of both artistic and social importance.

These moments of dialogue and exchange allowed us to discover that almost every senior quartet was composed of students from as many different countries, in spite of the fact that the ensembles represented only UK schools. For example, the post-graduate quartet from Laban Trinity included students from Russia and Lithuania, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> year student quartet from the Royal College of Music were from Romania, Spain, Scotland, and the United States. The quartet from the Royal Scottish College of Music were from China.

The challenge in this kind of workshop is to know how to accept each ensemble at whatever their present level might be and take them further. Every teacher participating in the workshop seemed guided by the same principles of respect for the students, affirming, encouraging, and offering positive reinforcement. Some teachers, focused on purely technical information, indispensable at any level: how to tune a passage to a fixed pitch, how to study the score, how to match vibrato or coordinate articulations and bow-strokes, how to give a logical progression to a phrase, how to create clarity in a canon, how to manage balance. But this technical information was always part of a revealed process of rehearsal; as Graham Oppenheimer stressed, "I don't just want to tell them to play this way or that way. I want them to have tools, to know why they are trying to do something, so they can then apply to other situations." Other teachers seemed to revel in a kind of Socratic process of self-discovery, asking: "How did you choose this piece? How long have you played it? What do you know about it? What do you know about the composer? Do you know any other pieces of his?" Yet others dealt with broader principles of communication in interpretation, such as the linguistic basis for accentuation and rhythm in music of different national origins (Johannes Meissl gave a magisterial demonstration in the case of the music of Haydn, and Pavel Fischer showed through examples the relation between the uses of the anacrusis and accentuation in different central European languages). But in every case, and without exception, there was a general attitude of simple generosity to all students without priority, selection or judgment, which in itself was perhaps the greatest lesson of the weekend.

This greater lesson emerged in ever more articulate form as the weekend progressed. Already the Danish String Quartet members had introduced the theme of mutual respect in their conversation with the students, and the Carducci Quartet the following day had insisted that one of the fundamental lessons they had learned from playing together was respect and trust in their partners' opinions. The masterclass teachers came back to this theme over and over again in their respective lessons, and Nicolas Jones returned again to the subject in his closing remarks. But Jones emphasized the fact that respect, and compromise are balanced by the question of personal responsibility: "What is so special about playing quartets? It is your chance to think about music yourselves. No conductor, no professional accompanist. You have to make your own decisions."

It should be noted that one other advantage to the involvement of LSQF: some of these senior quartets were also selected to perform in a special pre-concert performance in April at the Wigmore Hall in London, before a concert of the Quartetto di Cremona, Thomas Hell and Adrian Adlam. All participants in the weekend could attend the pre-concert performance for free, and the main event for only 5 GBP.

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Wigmore Hall London String Quartet Foundation:  
<http://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk/competitions/string-quartet>

Chetham School of Music: [www.chethams.com](http://www.chethams.com)  
Carducci String Quartet: [www.carducciquartet.co.uk](http://www.carducciquartet.co.uk)  
Danish String Quartet: [danishquartet.com](http://danishquartet.com)