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Tales from the river bank

At a large villa on the edge of the Rhine in Bonn, a coachload of students is disembarking. Instrument cases in hand, they traipse into the villa on their way to a long day of rehearsals and concerts that won't be over until the small hours. They are here for the String Academy of the Rhine, a biennial event started in 2002. Virginia-born violinist, Ida Bieler.

'Every school and music college caters for soloists, but chamber music always comes a poor second!' says Bieler, who has set out to do something about it. 'As a young student I was privileged to attend the Marlboro Festival — where I played Beethoven sonatas with Rudolf Serkin — and the Christinas String Seminars in New York. The admittedly unique atmosphere of those places inspired me two years ago to start the academy.'

Based in Germany for over 20 years, Bieler was leader of the Gürzenich Orchestra, Cologne, (only the second woman to hold a similar chair in Germany) during the 1980s before joining the Melos Quartet of Stuttgart as second violin in 1993. At the same time she became a professor at Düsseldorf's Robert Schumann Hochschule. An indefatigably active presence in the region, Bieler has managed to secure logistic and financial help from the regional government and Borin's European Music Academy.

Parallel to the academy, a series of concerts makes up the second component of the project, the Festival of the Rhine. 'Since the regional government is very much involved with this project, it's only fair that we go out and show as many people as possible what we are doing,' explains Bieler. Concerts take place in Bonn and in the Rhine valley towns of Herten, Leverkusen, Kempen and Essen. Most are given by the students taking part in the course, but an opening concert at the Villa Prieger saw performances by the visiting tutors, including Bieler, violist Hariolf Schlichtig and cellist Gustav Rivinius.

All rehearsals also take place in the Villa Prieger, situated a few yards from the Rhine off Bonn's 'Museums Mile' and not far from the former residence of the German presidents. The musical organisation of the event lies firmly in Bieler's hands: she listened to every one of the hundred-plus submitted tapes to choose the 16 students who would be invited to take part in the course. On top of that, she solved the mind-boggling logistics of putting together 15 groups to play as many works, while ensuring that rehearsals didn't overlap and that the coaches could supervise every one of them. 'The whole point of the exercise is that the tutors play along the students, and not necessarily the first violin part. It can be very stimulating to have a second fiddle pushing you from below!'

Joanna Kaczorowska from Poland agrees. A student of Philip Setzer (of the Emerson Quartet), she says, 'I keep wondering just how Mr Setzer does it: with just a few hints and a minimum of fuss, he brings you further than you thought you could come. And when I have to answer a phrase which he has just played so marvellously, I feel really challenged!' My first taste of the course was a rehearsal of Mozart's early String Quintet K174 with Kaczorowska leading, Setzer as second violin, German violists Marjan Hesse and Brigitta Rose, and Hungarian Tarnas Madrasz at the cello. That's four nationalities (live if you count Bavaria as a separate land, which one should) and is typical of the event as a whole: many nations are represented, even if most of the students do study in Germany.

I was especially glad to meet a completely home-grown Portuguese talent: Vitor Vieira, a quiet, unassuming 21-year-old violinist from Lisbon, who studies in his home town with a Portuguese teacher (Alfredo Lima), and plays an instrument made by the dean of Portuguese luthiers, António Capela, which he won at a competition. Vieira had heard about the course on the radio and decided to apply. According to Bieler, 'Vitor is even better than the tape he sent, which is by no means always the case!' Vieira more than held his own when he led a performance of Dvořák's G major Quintet with Setzer again as second violin, violist Erik Wen-Bo Xu, Rivinius and Szymon Maroński, an enormously talented Polish bass player (everybody I talked to told me how unfortunate I was to have missed a performance of the Rossini Duet with Rivinius and Maroński the week before).

Sitting just behind Rivinius during the rehearsal was a lesson in itself: he plays in a completely natural way, with an astonishing economy of movements. By the same token, his contributions to the rehearsal were short and to the point, mainly concentrating on technical tips and on holding the ensemble together. Setzer (this time leading) and Rivinius produced a highly strung performance of the Mendelssohn Octet at the evening's concert, which took place at the Redoute Hall. 'This hall is where Haydn met Beethoven when passing through Bonn on his way to England,' Laurentius Bonitz tells me. Bonitz is director of the Beethoven Orchester, which is also very much involved with the event.

There was no Haydn or Beethoven on that night's programme, which started off with Bach's Third Brandenburg Concerto and was crowned by Mozart's D major Divertimento K334. Bieler has made a speciality of the big Mozart divertimentos, which for her are a never-ending school of style and ensemble. 'Last Time [at the first event in 2002] we did K287, and in two years' time we will round off the cycle with K247. Although it is musicologically more correct to do them one-to-a-part, I find them endlessly rewarding for our purposes. Imagine, many of the kids had never heard the thing, not even the famous Minuet! It is part of our duty to make sure young people get acquainted with this marvelous chamber music repertoire.'

There can be few more appropriate ways of achieving this goal than throwing the students in at the deep end as Bieler has done. The repertoire, also hand-picked by her, concentrates on string chamber music (lots of two-violin quintets this time), but she has brought in horn player Frank Lloyd for the Mozart Horn Quintet, and pianist Nina Tichman (Bieler's regular piano partner) is also on hand to coach a performance of Volker David Kirchner's Piano Trio. Kirchner, himself a former viola player, is the academy's composer in residence this year. Apart from the trio, his Sixth String Quartet is being rehearsed under Hariolf Schlichtig's guidance.

Schlichtig, long-time violist of the Cherubini Quartet (now unfortunately disbanded), quietly guides violinists Naho Tsutsui and Yumi Onda and cellist Shengzi Guo through the intricacies of the piece. This is by no means a one-way process, ideas coming frequently from the students' side, especially from the more experienced Tsutsui, another of Setzer's students. At the evening's performance the atmospheric piece (which depicts the conflicting worlds of Ariel and Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) comes over convincingly.

Kaczorowska, who with Madrasz and Tichman was involved in the performance of Kirchner's Trio, says obvious that one can't write down absolutely everything into a score: many effects only became clear after he had explained to us what he wanted and why.' Having heard the piece before and after, I can only agree with her.

Although the different groups were thrown together upon arrival, there is an exception: a quartet of students from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London came as a group. When I heard them being coached by Bieler in Dvořák's D minor Quartet, it was hard to believe they had been together for just a couple of months. 'This is only the second piece we have ever played together,' says their Philadelphia born cellist, Bart Lafollette. 'We don't even have a name — all the good ones are taken!' Well, at the academy they trebled their repertoire, adding the Dvořák and the Mozart G minor Quintet (on which they worked with Schlichtig as second viola), so they'd better keep looking for that name.

The four are a fascinating sight: petite Sulki Yu from Korea leads, and the inner parts are taken by two Belgians, Mark Derudder as an unassuming second fiddle and Dimitri Murrath, who shakes his Bashirtet-like mane at every viola solo. These very different parts mysteriously add to a very promising whole: their Dvořák performance at the evening's concert was something very special. The Guildhall School obviously has an eye on them, since assistant director of music Bernard Lanskey flew over to attend the last day of the event.

In spite of the exhausting schedule, which meant anything up to ten hours' playing a day, the students were enthusiastic about the project. Most would do it again, but of course places are limited. 'We have so many applications,' says Bieler; 'in two years' time it's got to be a totally different bunch.' But the Beethoven Orchestra wants to keep up the ties with at least those academy participants who live in the vicinity, and Bonitz has a project for involving them in the orchestra's season as substitutes. Relaxing after the last concert, plans are already being drawn for the next academy, with Setzer juggling his Emerson Quartet schedule to fit it in and Bieler reminding everybody that 2006 is both Mozart and Shostakovich year. In no time programmes have been jotted down and pieces distributed. There will certainly be worse places to be early in 2006 than the Villa Prieger in Bonn.