

# A LITTLE PARADISE

Every August, advanced young musicians flock to a remote peninsula in Denmark for intensive music making and home cooking.

SARAH MNATZAGANIAN discovers the appeal of the Thy Festival



PHOTOS: COURTESY THY FESTIVAL

Festival students gather in the garden of their hotel in the picturesque village of Morup Mølle

At the very north-western tip of Denmark lies the Thy peninsula, a narrow tract of rolling hills and woods dotted with small farms and huge power-generating windmills facing the North Sea. Even within Denmark this region is regarded as remote and yet for a fortnight each summer it stages the Thy Masterclass Chamber Music Festival, attracting advanced students and young professionals from around the globe.

The roots of the festival are humble: twelve years ago Axel Nielson, a local retired businessman, invited young musicians to stay in Thy and give concerts in return for the hospitality they received. This year's festival is organised by 25 local volunteers, employs five professors and stages 21 concerts throughout the region. The original concept is kept intact:

all young participants receive free accommodation, food and coaching in return for their performances at the festival's concerts.

The programme is intense: each musician plays in three to five different ensembles, depending on their experience and the demands of the repertory. They perform each work at least twice to give their interpretations an opportunity to mature. The participants, aged 17 to 33, play alongside professors in most ensembles, in the spirit of the schools at the Marlboro festival and International Musicians Seminar, Prussia Cove. I join the festival as it reaches its climax, intrigued to see whether an event based on such homely ideals and with such a focus on performance can nurture music making of a high standard in an enjoyable, sustainable way.

The remote location could not be more inviting, and hospitality is a key part of the

festival's appeal for players. It is based at a huge barn-like hotel annexe in the quiet village of Morup Mølle, three miles from an extraordinary coastline of sand dunes covered in pine trees and heather. The hotel houses both students and professors and makes all its large spaces available for rehearsal and relaxation. The volunteers who make up the Danish working group, led by president Aase Odfeldt, cook meals and organise the logistics of getting players to and from concerts. Musicians and volunteers chat and joke with each other in the lounge area and subsidised beer from the local brewery is very popular in the evenings.

What makes the people of Thy so keen to throw open their doors to these young players? Flautist Craig Goodman, professor of chamber music at the National Conservatory in Strasbourg, has been the festival's artistic director for the last ten

years. 'Thy is a very isolated region,' he says. 'Local people love the festival not only because it brings live chamber music to their churches, museums, schools and concert halls but because they relish the opportunity to meet talented young people from all over the world.'

All the young participants are keen to talk about what makes the festival special. Torun Stavseng, a Norwegian cellist studying at the Musikhochschule in Stuttgart, says: 'A real highlight for me is giving so many concerts; you learn to work in a very focused but flexible way and you can go deeper into a piece after each performance.' Taiwanese violinist Sean Wang is completing a PhD in Musicology; this is his second year at Thy. 'This is the ideal atmosphere for chamber music,' he says. 'Everyone is intellectually curious and musically able, the professors are sweet but honest, and I can develop naturally without feeling I'm being coached like a child.'

A glance at the festival's beautifully produced programme reveals an extensive range of repertory to be performed by a surprisingly small group of musicians. Seven violinists, four violists, five cellists, two pianists, two flautists and one clarinettist play 24 different chamber works by composers from Mendelssohn, Brahms and Beethoven to Bartók, Khachaturian and Poulenc as well as Romantic and contemporary Danish works by composers such as Hartmann, Nørgård and Langgaard. I ask Goodman how they manage to prepare so many pieces in just two weeks.

'With the help of the two music specialists in the local working group, I establish the year's repertoire before we send out application forms,' Goodman explains. 'When an applicant is accepted we tell them exactly which pieces they need to prepare before they arrive. Even so, it's a packed schedule. During the first week there are five hours of rehearsal a day, plus evening concerts, though in the second week I keep the timetable as flexible as possible to allow time for players to rest before big concerts.'

There are no signs of strain at the first concert I attend: an exuberant programme performed solely by the festival's participants. The standard of playing is high but I am also impressed by the degree to which



Participants take some time off to relax by the North Sea



Young musicians give a performance of Bartók's Contrasts at Morup Mølle

## I can develop naturally without feeling I'm being coached like a child

SEAN WANG, VIOLINIST

players from very different backgrounds manage to create a distinctive group sound. Bartók's trio *Contrasts* and Khachaturian's Trio in G minor are performed with great flair by Wang, American clarinettist Chad Burrow and French pianist Dimitri Papadopoulos. Poulenc's youthful *Rhapsodie nègre* both bemuses and amuses the Danish audience but wins loud applause. The shadowy *Dream in Violet* written by Danish composer Poul Olsen in the last year of his life is played hauntingly by a Romanian, Icelandic and Hungarian trio.

The final three days of the festival are packed with informal school concerts, rehearsals and five major performances throughout the region. The atmosphere at Morup Mølle is purposeful but cheerful and the resident whoopee cushion comes into regular play as musicians relax. A newly appointed viola professor, Hungarian Máté Szücs, leads his sextet group in a wild frisbee game to help them unwind after an intense rehearsal. 'It is so easy to relax here,' Szücs later tells me, 'because we are so cared for by >



Members of the Danish working group make preparations for a party



The Mendelssohn Octet group takes a bow after a confident and expressive performance

PHOTOS COURTESY THY FESTIVAL

the Danish working group. It gives us a chance to escape from the pressures of normal life and concentrate only on music and enjoying each other's company.'

Elisabeth Zeuthen Schneider, a formidable Danish violinist, leads an afternoon rehearsal of the Mendelssohn Octet in which she plays first violin. Her teaching style is gentle and democratic; the players discuss a difficult entry and reach a consensus with tact and humour. Their sound is joyous and balanced. Zeuthen Schneider is pleased with her group: 'Rehearsal time is short today, but the group is talented and enthusiastic and it's exciting to focus on our first performance tonight.'

Cellist Morten Zeuthen has been a chamber music professor at Thy for ten years. 'It's not just the natural environment that makes Thy special,' he says, 'though it is much easier to concentrate

here, compared with working in a busy city. The students are very talented and I love the range of repertory we cover. But what is most significant for me is that the festival embodies the ideal relationship between music and society. We musicians are befriended and supported in every way by the very people who also come and fill the concert halls. It is a little paradise.'

Brahms's Sextet no. 1 and Mendelssohn's Octet are the main feature of the last four concerts. The Mendelssohn Octet group gives its first performance in Thisted Musikteater and plays well despite challenging acoustics and some hesitant entries in the Scherzo. The second and final performance of the Mendelssohn takes place in an extraordinary domed building set into a hillside at the Folkcentre for Renewable Energy. This time the players are more relaxed, the acoustics kinder and the performance

confident and expressive. The first performance of the Brahms Sextet follows; the performers are tense and a little too absorbed in their own parts but they make a magnificent sound. The 19-year-old first violinist, Marie-Claudine Papadopoulou, plays with astonishing maturity and the audience quickly break into synchronised slow-clapping, a sign of deep appreciation in Denmark.

By all accounts I missed some great concerts before I arrived, almost all of which were played to full houses. Cellist Silvia Longaverova, who has just finished her postgraduate degree in Lugano, Switzerland, performed with piano professor Daniel Blumenthal, a renowned pianist and master of dead-pan humour. Longaverova says: 'If we had a problem in rehearsal he would always make us laugh through it but what I'll never forget is his massive sound in the Dohnányi Quintet. Hearing him play seemed to draw out my own sound until it matched his.'

The final concert in Thisted draws a big local audience and the performances of Brahms, Khachaturian and Bartók have all matured. A high point for me is *Fjeldblomster*, an early trio by Langgaard performed by professors Zeuthen Schneider, Blumenthal and Zeuthen. Their sound is radiant and at the heart of their performance is the intimacy that makes chamber music one of the most human of all art forms. The festival closes with a string of encores and a speech from Aase Odfeldt. Everyone then returns to Morup Mølle for a celebratory meal, where Goodman circulates, asking for repertory suggestions for the 2007 festival. Odfeldt looks tired but happy. 'We feel very proud of our young musicians and it's so sad when they leave. But tomorrow we have a working group meeting to discuss how we can improve things next year.' Surveying the satisfied faces around me, it's hard to imagine how the festival could improve on its core philosophy: warm Danish hospitality, inspired repertory, sensitive teaching and an ambitious concert programme make Thy a fertile haven for the developing musician. ■

*The next festival will take place 13–27 August 2007. For further information see [www.thymasterclass.dk](http://www.thymasterclass.dk)*