

Review of the ESTA Chamber Orchestra Concert in Strasbourg on 8th March 2018

The ESTA Foundation was founded by the late Hannelore Koch, a member of ESTA Germany, in memory of her father, Dr. Ernst Koch. Based in Switzerland, its purpose is to offer support to young, gifted string players whose teachers are ESTA members. Since the funds would not be sufficient to subsidise individuals, the artistic advisory board's suggestion was to invite applications from projects, open to all, which met the named criteria. It became clear over the years that the aims of the Foundation can best be fulfilled if the young musicians are given the opportunity to make music together, under expert guidance, in chamber music or as a chamber orchestra.

This year, the Foundation's Council and Swiss ESTA honorary member Werner Schmitt not only set up a 20-strong chamber orchestra, but also commissioned a new piece from the Maltese composer Joseph Vella. The orchestra members (6,5,4,3,2) come from 14 countries and, counting the Finnish conductor Jutta Seppinen, exactly two-thirds of the ensemble are female. This is significant given that their concert at the Council of Europe took place on 8th March – International Women's Day (first proclaimed by Clara Zetkin in 1911, internationally designated as 8th March and celebrated annually since 1921 – as a Communist achievement, incidentally ...)

So, back to the orchestra: the young musicians arrived and settled into their quarters at the *Centre Européen de la Jeunesse* in order to rehearse intensively from 4th March. A jury led by Jutta Seppinen had decided who should be invited to take part. The programme to be worked on took into account, on the one hand, pieces by female composers and, on the other hand, music from Northern, Southern, Western and Eastern Europe. So the first half of the programme consisted of pieces by Caroline Charrière (b.1960, Switzerland); Jean Sibelius (1865-1957, Finland); Joseph Vella (1942-2018, Malta); Sally Beamish (b.1956, UK); and Joaquín Malats y Miarons (1872-1912, Spain). The East was represented in the second half by Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings* in C major, Op.48.

The piece *Thinking Impromptu* by Joseph Vella, a famous and highly esteemed composer in his native Malta, had been commissioned by ESTA for their 46th International Conference in Valletta in April 2018, and was due to have its official premiere there. Only whilst we were in Strasbourg did it become known that the composer had just died, totally unexpectedly. Thus this piece was most probably his last completed composition.

The ESTA Chamber Orchestra made two appearances in Strasbourg. At a lunchtime concert in the *Agora*, they played a small part of their programme, framing a short speech from Cristina Bellu, an ESTA Representative at the Council of Europe (ESTA has long been an accredited NGO at the Council of Europe). Then in the afternoon came the complete concert, in the foyer of the *Palais de l'Europe*, introduced by two short speeches from a representative of the General Secretary and the President of the European Circle of Friends. The speeches' contents can be briefly summarised as: 'much has already been achieved, yet there is still much left to be done'...

As for the music: firstly, and astonishingly unexpected, was how good the acoustics are in the Palais foyer. It is a space of large-scale design, in the centre of which stands a gigantic wooden chalice, which opens upwards, taking the central staircase up to the higher floors. The Chamber Orchestra was seated below this structure, and could be clearly heard from all sides.

The two pieces from the suite *Les Temps* by the Swiss composer Charrière gave the ensemble a good opportunity to show their technical prowess. In particular, the movement *L'urgence* was convincing in its rhythmic mercilessness. In Sibelius's *Impromptu*, the conductor drew very cantabile, sonorous playing from the musicians. One could sense the assurance with which Jutta Seppinen captured the soundworld of her great compatriot.

There was an edginess about the "pre-premiere" of Vella's *Thinking Impromptu*, the first performance of which should have been a climax of the ESTA International Conference in Valletta in April 2018, but which had now unintentionally become a *memento mori* in memory of the composer. The musical language of this new piece is traditional for the most part, with the different registers within the ensemble being intelligently combined. It is such a pity that the composer did not live to hear it.

The most modern musical language of the evening came in *The Day Dawn* by the British composer Sally Beamish. Out of nothing came shimmering sounds, which were incessantly transformed, and soon turned into a recognisable Shetland fiddle tune – one traditionally played at the winter solstice to greet the lengthening days. The sounds were so interesting and fascinating that, in the opinion of the reviewer, this piece may have worked even better in a more condensed form. The first half of the concert ended with an arrangement of the *Serenata Española* by the Catalan Malats. The sheer contrast of juxtaposing this worldly piece, evocative of castanets, with the ethereal music of the Shetlands, made it seem all the more effective.

After the interval came Tchaikovsky's famous staple of the string repertoire. Here, all the instruments could play to their strengths: sonorous violas, deep double basses; likewise, agile cellos and sparkling violins. And it was clear with what exacting precision the conductor must have worked: all the transitions were carefully thought out and well together; virtuoso passages were never merely flashy; the small details in the cello part in the first movement were really exact, in tune and not overdone. The Waltz was so dance-like that it made one want to look around to find a partner to dance with. The Elegy was full of soulful sounds, and the Finale genuinely was 'con spirito'.

Jutta Seppinen, whose background as a choral conductor was plain to see, had done everything in her power, in just five days of working together, to mould these 20 individuals into a close-knit ensemble. How difficult in theory that can be (but in practice was not at all so here!) is epitomised by the front desk of violas: two ladies - one from Serbia, the other from Kosovo - sitting together, playing from the same copy ...

The previous sentence underlines the significance of such a project as this for the future of Europe. A giant mosaic is made up of many tiny pieces, each one of which has its own important place within the whole!

The ESTA Chamber Orchestra meets again in Valletta, Malta, on 9th April, and is giving a concert there on 14th April 2018.

Holger Best

English translation by Janet Thomas