

Vorsprung durch Kammermusik, **or Workshops without tears**

Does this sound familiar? You sign up for a chamber music workshop or weekend and arrive looking forward to some enjoyable music-making. As you take a first look round, getting your bearings, everyone else is saying hello – do they all know each other already? Over dinner the first tentative small talk, “And what do you play? Flute, hmm, interesting.” Pause. “And how was your journey? Crowded train? Heavy traffic?”

Dinner is over, the tables are cleared, now we’re off. But where, and above all, with whom? As if by magic, string quartets, piano trios and other more rarefied combinations have formed. Everywhere the sound of tuning instruments, the music starts. But what about you? You’re on your own with your flute, left standing. Have you done something wrong: not paid attention, come across as too stupid?

Nothing of the sort. You’re simply “new” and don’t know anybody. But the others all know each other, perhaps have arranged in advance whom they’re going to play with. And of course Mr. Smith is playing first violin, he always does!

Surely it can’t be that bad. OK, maybe the scene above is a bit of an exaggeration but it contains a grain of truth and we all recognize the worry that things will turn out that way. And in reality, how do the different chamber groups get together? Hasty discussions over dinner, or perhaps the workshop leader announces various pieces or ensembles during the meal, which you can – or rather, must – sign up to quickly, because if you don’t pay attention or shout loud enough you might get left on the shelf. And how then do you get to play those pieces that require a more unusual combination than the chamber music “classics”? A lot of questions, and real potential for frustration.



But it doesn’t have to be that way, as you will experience if you come to the workshop *Kammermusik im Waldschlösschen* (“Chamber music at the forest chateau”) near Göttingen in central Germany. Twice a year 20 to 35 amateur string, brass, woodwind and keyboard players get together for a long weekend of music. Two things about the event are special: the group is made up of lesbians and gay men ; and over the years, particular attention has been paid to improving the quality of the organisation.

The starting point after dinner on Thursday evening brings everyone together for a round of introductions: name, instrument, home town, music brought along and, last, but not least, their must-play pieces for the weekend. These are carefully noted down – and the workshop wish list gets quite long! After that, the whole group plays together as a chamber orchestra, a warm-up to the workshop, so to speak.

Chamber music proper starts at 9:30 the next morning. But how do you find out who is playing what, where and with whom? That puzzle has been solved for you in the mean time by the workshop host. For each participant he produces a card with name and instrument. He arranges and re-arranges the cards on a large table until everyone has a place to play, taking into consideration not only people’s wishes – what to play, with whom – but also, as far as possible, players’ different abilities. Mendelssohn’s Octet, for example, can be challenging for the first violin, who may prefer to have had a chance to practice in advance, and some of the other parts might also overstretch beginners.



Finally, each group has to be allocated a suitable room. Is a piano required? How much space is needed, not just for the chairs but also acoustically? A confined space will more easily suit a string quintet than a wind quintet.

After an hour and a half the first session is accomplished. People come together for a half-hour break to relax and catch up over coffee, biscuits, fruit and other goodies.

They also check the blackboard – where, what, who – to find out what the score is for the next session, 11:30 till 1 P.M. There is a lunch break until 3, a third session till 4:30 P.M. and a fourth from 5 until dinner at 6:30 P.M. From 8 till 9:30 P.M. the fifth session is usually the chamber orchestra for everyone. And after that, those who still have the energy meet spontaneously for sonatas or in

larger formations for “Salonmusik” (light music). However, most participants prefer at this point to top up their depleted fluid levels, because it’s not just brass players who exhale precious moisture when they play...



The constant shuffling of the playing combinations by the workshop host – a process similar to repeated games of solitaire – gives the musicians a chance to make sure that their favourite piece gets onto the music

stand, to play a variety of different music, to get to know new repertoire, but also to rehearse a particular piece with the same players several times if they so wish. And newcomers get to know the other participants in a relaxed and unforced way.



The climax of the workshop is the Saturday evening concert, where anyone who wants to can play. This is followed by more informal celebrations: lieder, cabaret songs, and Salonmusik draws dancers onto the floor.

At this kind of workshop everyone has their share of the fun. If by the end a particular piece hasn’t actually been covered, because of lack of time or the right players, there is another chance six months later. Indeed,

many of the players will already have booked leave, to guarantee that they can be there next time.

If you would like to take part in the Kammermusik im Waldschlösschen workshop, you would be most welcome. The working language of the event is German, though some of the musicians have English as their mother tongue, and many speak excellent English. To enjoy the workshop to the full you really need a basic knowledge of German but, in language as in music, the participants encourage learners’ attempts and accept their mistakes with tolerance.

[Michael Knoch, flute. Translation Stephen Jones, oboe. Photos Michael Zachow, cello.]