

## DIARY OF AN AMATEUR MUSICIAN

### **Amateur**

In Loches, an amateur musician is someone who loves to explore both new and familiar scores. He, or she!, is not a wannabe professional but rather plays music for the joy of making music with other music lovers. "Loches" is shorthand for a course that offers a mutual willingness to put up with each other's wrong notes in a true spirit of friendship and encouragement.

### **Friendship**

The course at Loches has been going for more than 30 years, during which many of us have made friends, and found partners for other musical adventures, unrestricted by geographical boundaries (see **Without boundaries**). The regulars meet up year after year, and with the teachers welcome the newcomers with open arms, and make Loches a friendly place. Whether we are rehearsing amongst ourselves or attending a coaching session, there is plenty of room for fun and laughter.

### **Joy**

Joy is Loches shaped. It lies, barely hidden, behind a door at which you are waiting for your own coaching session when you discover a hitherto unknown piece of music, slowly unfolding. Pianists in particular are spoilt as (after lunch) they can enjoy their coffee whilst listening to the orchestra rehearsing. At night, it radiates from the stars as you are making your way home (whether that is the simple dorm or a more luxurious setting) through the fairy tale city, after a long day full of sightreading, hard work, laughter and wrong notes. Be honest, wasn't that score a tad too difficult for me? Or was it, after all, "do-able"? How do the others feel about it? Happiness is bumping into your old Latin teacher, who used to scare the wits out of you years ago and who turns out to be a charming... violinist.

### **Singing**

Yes, we even sing at this chamber music course! Singers can also be chamber musicians. And It turns out that there are many, many scores for voice and instruments. They range from the baroque to the 20th century. A unique opportunity for amateur singers to mix with all those other instrumentalists!

### **Castles on the Loire, the little stream nearby that Schubert did NOT write a song about.**

Loches is close to Amboise, Blois and a bit further off, Chenonceau etc. Other, less well known châteaux, manors and gardens nestle in the gentle landscape, quietly waiting to be discovered. That is what the Sunday rest day is for (see Sunday).

### **Choir**

Yes, instrumentalists can also sing at this music course, no need to audition. Just try not to sing too out of tune or more seriously, hope that you are free to attend the daily rehearsals. The conductor, Yves Simard (cf. also **Talks, The Really Very Special Person, Orchestra**) puts together the perfect three star menu of choral pieces with love and care, pieces that are short, beautiful, funny or moving, often specially arranged for the occasion and always manageable. We are sometimes a bit short on male voices, never mind, we still sing like angels at the concert on the last night.

## **Concerts**

There are several kinds of concerts in Loches: those given by the "stagiaires" and those given by the teachers. All the stagiaires have the opportunity to play in public, when their group is ready. The majority of the public is made up of fellow stagiaires and teachers, but may also include the town's own music lovers and visiting tourists. The concerts usually take place in the picturesque Saint-Antoine Church (the Saint is particularly well-disposed towards all lovers of music) which also has an excellent grand piano. Generally speaking, the stagiaires give about ten concerts during the 10 day course, starting on day 3 or 4, not counting the unofficial "fringe" concert which takes place on the Sunday evening.

Then there are the two concerts given by the teachers who form small, varying chamber music ensembles. Their programmes cleverly combine the familiar and the totally unexpected, including pieces written by themselves which are introduced by the brilliant Yves Simard. These concerts are always a huge success both with stagiaires and the general public. You are advised to turn up early if you want to have a seat.

And last but not least, on the last night, just before the final festive dinner, there is a programme of short performances organised by instrument (imagine 19 pianists or 22 cellist performing together) conceived and executed by the teachers and willing members of their instrumental group. The perfect moment for unlimited inventiveness. This is usually definitely worth a special visit.

## **Talks**

After dinner, the ever indomitable, witty and fascinating Yves Simard will give one of his talks, which are usually on a historical topic, to an enthusiastic audience. You'd never think that he already has a long day behind him, conducting the orchestra and the choir and teaching the history and the theory of music.

## **Spouses and other partners**

You can come with any sort of spouse or friend. They might like to take the introduction to music course, participate in the choir, pick up a pen or brush to draw or paint (see Drawing), or just play the tourist and visit the local area.

## **Date (of birth)**

Any age between 17 and 97 is welcome, as long as you are willing to mix. There is a lot of mileage in that Brahms trio when the horn is played by a teeny weeny teenager, the cello vibrates in the hands of a 30-years old and the piano is made to speak by a brilliant lady whose age we shall not mention.

## **Drawing**

If you don't make music in Loches, you can turn your creative skills to the arts and learn to sketch, or improve your drawing skills under the guidance of a wonderfully competent and charming art teacher. Your creations will be exhibited in the school entrance hall, to the sound of music - of course.

## **Magic numbers: never fewer than three**

According to Loches lore, the organised chamber music groups start at three participants and can go up to whatever number the music requires. And if you want to play duos there is always the Fringe concert...

**Party**

Means the end of the course which comes in the guise of a candle lit buffet dinner. There is eye catching food, dancing, improvising, congratulations and celebrations - and lamentations, because this really is the last night. But see Without Borders!

**Without Borders**

Some people are so keen, they come to Loches time and time again. They come from the Caribbean, from California, from Bavaria or The Netherlands, Italy, the UK, Belgium, Switzerland or Israel. There are Transatlantic Alliances and Rhine Banks Meetings. There is the Eurostar train to take you to that quintet that you'd agreed to join on the last day. There are those who cross the Alps (crossings have become more comfortable since Hannibal's days) to meet up with a pianist in the Luberon, or those who, on a more modest scale, catch the Paris-Chartres train to play skittles with Mozart and that friendly clarinettist.

**Let's get together, or why wait until tomorrow?**

If you want to play specific pieces of music in Loches, or with specific fellow musicians, you can mention this when you register and usually, you'll get what you asked for (particularly if you enrol sooner rather than later) for at least one of the groups in which you will be playing.

**Accommodation**

Various accommodation options exist, to suit all purses. There is the dorm across the ground from the school where the course itself takes place. The rooms are available in single and double occupancy (that is the cheapest option). 2 km down the road, the "Puygibaut" building offers small self contained studios. Those with a greater need for comfort can take up residence at the Luccotel Hotel, a pleasant 10 minutes' walk from the school. Here they will find comfortable rooms (with air conditioning !) in calm surroundings, a swimming pool, a tennis court and breath taking views of the medieval town, its donjon and turrets dominating the sky line. You can also organise your own accommodation in the surrounding area (B&Bs, hotels in town - which is a 15 minutes up/downhill walk away).

**Adventures**

You don't have to be An Adventurer , but if you are so inclined, you could visit any number of castles, manors, gardens, restaurants and wine cellars. Perhaps you are tempted by the braying of a dazzle of zebras at Beauval Zoo, or the calls of the antique hunting horns at Montpoupon. Or you may want to seek out the Sunday morning market at Descartes or the 17th century model for a "new town" in Richelieu. The Loches Tourist Office is well informed, well stocked and friendly. See <http://www.loches-tourainecotesud.com>.

**Competence (musical)**

Although the course is open to players of all levels (i.e. from 2 or 3 years experience to the quasi professionals), a minimum level is necessary (see the MEV website for guidance). What matters is that you are sufficiently familiar with the two pieces you are going to play in order to make the most of working with a music coach and playing with other people. You will have been sent your parts several weeks in advance, so you will have time to practise. Teachers take particular trouble to ensure that participants (or "stagiaires") are matched and the music is suitable. It is therefore very important, if you are new to the course, that you provide them with an accurate assessment of your musical skills and experience when you enrol.

Many of those who have been to Loches more than once would confirm that our levels of skill and ease have noticeably improved as a result of practising chamber music in this friendly atmosphere and that it really pays to hang on and work! And work we do, an hour a day on each piece under the guidance of a teacher, and then whatever number of hours you decide to give to solitary practice or (part)group rehearsals. In the evening, the practice rooms are open until 10.30 pm and you can play what you like with whom you like. And there is plenty of time for improvised or planned rehearsals.

### **Wine lovers**

This is the Touraine corner of Wine Paradise. So there is white-rosé-red Touraine wine on offer with all the meals. Except at breakfast ! To the great joy of the real wine lovers, most years, one of the local winemakers comes and visits us at the school for a tasting session. How much you drink is of course entirely your decision but remember that a sleepy oboist, a wobbly harpist or plonk-lost violinist is not going to be very popular with their partners in music.

### **Fringe**

As at the Avignon or Edinburgh Festivals, the “fringe” concert is a worthy rival to the “main” events. Known as "le Off", this stagiare-generated interlude takes place on the Sunday evening and is something everyone looks forward to. You do not have to perform anything, you may just want to listen and enjoy yourself - or you may not wish to attend at all, because you have already overdosed on music. But whatever is played, acted, sung and danced is often pretty out of this world and ranges from klezmer to musicals, on kazoos or improvised percussion. This is the moment to sneak in a duet or perhaps even a reflective piece on a solitary piano. But there is more to the Loches “Fringe”. It’s about improvised rehearsals, with old or new friends, it’s about proposing a piece of music that’s been on your wish list for years to a flutist whom you have never played with before, it’s about agreeing to sight read a piece that you never thought you might, one day, play.

### **Orchestra**

Those who play an orchestral instrument can join the orchestra. It rehearses every day for an hour and a half, after lunch, under the inspiring baton of Yves Simard. His pen wrings miracles as it fills sheet after sheet with music for an unpredictable, oddly sized band of 19 cellos, 7 clarinets, not enough violas and a single oboe. Read between the lines and you'll see that higher strings, double basses, oboes and bassoons are particularly welcome. For those who have never played in an orchestra, this is the dream opportunity to find out more for Yves seasons his anecdotes with practical tips about orchestral playing. The orchestra's turn to play before an audience comes on the last night when it treats us to a slow movement from a Beethoven symphony, a Waltz by any of the Strausses or Piazzolla.....

### **Be brave!**

So you thought that 20th century music was too difficult, or too boring? That Mozart requires too much virtuoso technique or that Ravel is totally out of your reach? Help! Someone has handed you a piece that you did not exactly ask for or agree to. You have a go at it and it turns out to be playable! This is definitely more-ish. Or are you thinking "never again"? (Cf. Let's get together)

### **The Really Very Special Person**

The Really Special Person at Loches is Yves Simard. He is charismatic, his eloquence and learning are unrivalled and despite his impressive white beard he is not donnish at all. A man of many talents, he is in charge of the orchestra, and the choir. His presentation of the teachers' concerts is an example of succinctness and clarity. He teaches the history and theory of music and gives after dinner talks on every subject under the sun. To crown it all, he is an inexhaustible source of funny stories, which he never repeats. For non-native French speakers, this is also a wonderful opportunity to listen to exceptionally well-spoken, elegant French. An eloquent end to a long day.

### **Pianos**

The piano plays an important part in chamber music, so Loches offers lots of pianos, which is unusual for this sort of course. A piano is allocated to every two stagiaires-pianists, who then sort out access for practice and rehearsals between themselves. At least one room contains two pianos. There is a piano in every teaching room and two grand pianos can be found in the piano teachers' rooms. And, of course, the Eglise St Antoine has its own grand piano.

### **Picnics**

Lakes, forests and riverbanks decorate the local countryside and encourage us to take our day-off just as seriously as all the others. Time to go for a picnic, a leisurely walk under summer-rich tree canopies, an invigorating cycle trip, or to finish that detective story on the lawn.

### **Teachers and diplomats**

All the teachers are excellent soloists in the own right, or are members of major French orchestras who moreover teach their instrument or chamber music during the academic year. It is clear they love it. They are kind, considerate and dedicated! They pass on their knowledge and skills with tact and a sense of humour. As a pianist working with a bassoonist teacher you discover that being a good musician is not just about playing the piano brilliantly but about listening, a sense of structure and understanding all these other instruments.

### **Meetings**

Loches brings together so many different people, different nationalities, skills and professions, so many different instruments, there is bound to be at least one person, with whom you become friends and team up for "later". "Later" being "later in the year", elsewhere, or at the next "stage". How often do you bump into a Viennese horn, an oboe a double bass, a harp, outside music college that is?

### **Mealtime**

Mealtime is not just about physical sustenance. Meals are about hearing the programme of musical and non-musical activities for the day. They are about catching up on personal news and informal mini concerts whilst you are having your end-of-the-meal coffee. Yes, there is a piano in the dining hall.

### **Repertoire**

One of the special features of Loches is the seemingly inexhaustible creativity of the teachers and the organisers when it comes to finding suitable pieces for the most unlikely, or at least unusual, combinations of instruments. Of course we play our way through the SWOT guide to Great Composers, Bach, Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, Ravel, Schubert, Turina. But even the most experienced, best read stagiaires discover new pieces, even new composers such as Louise Farrenc, Mel Bonis, Kan, Whitacre, or Myslivecek...

**Scores**

Bring your own, as many as you like. Beg or borrow from others. And don't forget that the organisers bring a small but very useful library as well.

**An international language**

Loches is an international course in French. But fear not. Music, after all, has its own universal language: "forte" is "forte" by any other name, and so are "piano", "crescendo" and "diminuendo". If the cry "je tire ou je pousse?" leaves you completely bewildered, somebody will pick up a bow and show you. Ah, "up or down"! Many stagiaires speak more than one language and are happy to help out at coaching sessions, during meals, in the local supermarket or during a picnic.

**SEE YOU SOON IN LOCHES ?**