

GRAMOPHONE

MUSICAL JOURNEYS

Gramophone's monthly search for the best classical music experiences around the world

Idyllic bliss in Trasimeno

Geoffrey Norris visits one of Italy's loveliest lakes for Angela Hewitt's magical party with her musical friends



Hanslip, Hewitt, Simpson and Coates play Messiaen's quartet

The scent of jasmine. A picturesque castle. A balmy summer evening. Sublime music wafting through the air. What more could one ask for? And if you add to that the serenity of the Italian countryside and the matchless vistas of the Umbrian hills, the idyll is blissfully and meltingly romantic. The Trasimeno Music Festival has been weaving its magic since 2004, when Angela Hewitt conceived the brilliant notion of inviting musical friends to take part in a week of concerts in towns dotted around one of the prettiest lakes in central Italy.

This is where Hannibal and his Carthaginians defeated Gaius Flaminius and the Romans in the Battle of Lake Trasimene in 217BC, during the Second Punic War. Nowadays, though, the neighbourhood is far from bellicose, and it was the tranquillity that drew Hewitt to build a house there, where, as she says, she 'can come and find peace'. Sitting in her garden, all you can hear is the sound of birdsong and the rustle of trees. In the middle distance the sun glints on the lake's surface. 'I'm Canadian,' says Hewitt. 'I must have water.'

The idea for the festival came to her when she first went to the small town of Magione and saw the Castle of the Knights of Malta, the summer residence of the order's grand master standing atop a hill about 15 kilometres from Perugia. This breathtaking fortress has a square inner courtyard (dating from the 15th century), sizeable but intimate and open to the elements, where most of the concerts take place. The acoustics, as Hewitt says, are 'amazing for outdoors' and have been likened to London's Wigmore Hall without the roof.

It was here in late June and early July this year that we heard a transfixing performance of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, in which Hewitt was joined by violinist Chloë Hanslip, clarinetist Mark Simpson and cellist Oliver Coates. It was here also that Debussy's String Quartet, played by the Mandelring Quartet, found the ideal atmosphere for its delicacy and pastel shadings. And it was here on the last night that Hewitt held the capacity audience enthralled with her playing of Bach's complete

Art of Fugue, a work that she had previously played in London in two halves but never before in a single sitting. She will be recording it soon, but it was in Magione that we heard it first.

It was also in Magione, during an evening of words and music with Julian Barnes, that it started to rain – warm Umbrian rain and only a few spots, but enough to warrant covering the Fazioli grand with a waterproof blanket. Hewitt, however, is not one to let rain stop play: a brigade of volunteers manhandled the piano from the stage to the protection of the cloisters surrounding the courtyard and the programme continued almost as if nothing had happened. I doubt anybody minded that we didn't leave the castle precincts until well after midnight.

An added attraction of the Trasimeno Festival is that the area in which it is held is so abundant in places of architectural and artistic distinction which can be enjoyed in tandem with the music – important, miraculous frescoes by Giotto, Piero della Francesca and Fra Angelico are all within striking distance at Perugia,

'The acoustics have been likened to Wigmore Hall without the roof'

Arezzo and Assisi. Concerts took place in Perugia's richly textured basilica of San Pietro and in the church of San Domenico in Gubbio (dire acoustics, but a gorgeous town).

And, if you choose to attend one of the festival's gala dinners, you can dream about what it could be like to live in a magnificent *fin de siècle* pile such as the Villa Schnabl at Monte del Lago, with its unsurpassable sunset views over the lake.

It all adds up to a festival that is both nourishing and cordial. As Hewitt remarks, she derives 'huge pleasure from seeing friends and fans meeting each other. If someone comes here on their own, they're never alone at the end.'

The 2014 Trasimeno Festival runs July 4-11; for more information and to book tickets, visit trasimenomusicfestival.com

The unlikely Ring

Antony Craig heads for a field in the Cotswolds and dons his DJ for audacious performances of Wagner's epic cycle

Six years ago I drove to the Cotswolds to see an unlikely performance of *Das Rheingold* in a bijou opera house in a muddy field. It was really rather good and I asked Martin Graham, whose house it was, if he harboured thoughts of one day mounting an entire *Ring*. Longborough had staged a 'reduced *Ring*' in 2002 and 2004, but a complete one was something else and, if Graham did harbour any such ludicrous ambitions, he certainly wasn't voicing them then.

For three summers that *Rheingold* stood in splendid isolation as evidence that full-on Wagner did not necessarily have to be the province of the big international opera houses. Then, come 2010,