

COMPETITION REPORT

FROM DAWN TILL DUSK

With Bach suites over morning coffee and Boccherini in the small hours, the Amsterdam Cello Biennale was a non-stop extravaganza.

HEATHER KURZBAUER sampled its packed schedule

Jean-Guihen Queyras with the Amsterdam Sinfonietta, conducted by David Geringas

DIRK RIETVELD

AS A STUDENT, DUTCH CELLIST AND AMSTERDAM CONSERVATOIRE

pedagogue Maarten Mostert was perplexed by the fact that his instrument was something of an outcast when compared with the violin: 'Not only were there all sorts of student competitions for violinists but there was also a national contest and, of course, lots of international events featuring the violin. I always dreamt of making something happen for the cello.'

The idea that led to a week-long celebration of his instrument came from Mostert's desire to turn the Dutch National Cello Competition into something more than a showcase for young local talent. As a founding member of the Amsterdam Sinfonietta, he was instrumental in masterminding the group's change from superior student ensemble to a world-class professional string orchestra. 'I learnt so much from my experiences performing in a small ensemble where musicians take an active role in helping the orchestra develop. The Sinfonietta put me into direct contact with so many wonderful musicians who came as guest artists and chamber music collaborators. And of course my former teacher and mentor, Anner Bylisma, has provided me with a sounding board to test ideas.'

A mere glance at the concerts, masterclasses, lectures and workshops listed on the Amsterdam Cello Biennale's website was enough to indicate that a city known for its wide-ranging musical activities would host something even more remarkable than usual last year. The Biennale welcomed 20 master cellists, a plethora of instrument makers, numerous young players and a record-breaking audience in eight action-packed days. Ticket sales reached double the projected figure of 8,000 even before crowds gathered for the last-minute rush at the end of the week. The range of activities was staggering for even the most sophisticated festival-goer. Mostert says: 'My aim was to bring in an audience of all types and ages with one passion: to listen to, learn from and celebrate the most beautiful of all instruments, the cello.'

Amsterdam's recent architectural tour de force, the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, provided the perfect venue for the cello extravaganza.

Moored on a quay a few blocks from the bustling city centre, the ship-like structure of the city's new music centre is a masterpiece of light and air that offers spectacular harbour views and convivial open spaces. The state-of-the-art main auditorium boasts a flexible acoustic structure in which almost every surface is movable. It was amply tested by performances of solo Bach, contemporary concertos and Shostakovich's Cello Concerto no.1.

True to its origins as a festival planned around a competition, the Biennale opened with the first round of the Dutch National Cello Competition. Nine Dutch nationals aged between 19 and 28 performed a recital programme consisting of Schumann's Adagio and Allegro op.70, Boccherini's Sonata in C major, a Piatti caprice and a composition specially written for the contest by Dutch composer Theo Verbey.

The jury of illustrious pedagogues and performers included Thomas Demenga, Valter Dešpalj, Roel Dieltiens, Stefan Metz and Quirine Viersen. A free Alexander Technique workshop given by Vivien Mackie offered rest and relaxation prior to the announcement of the six semi-finalists.

The opening concert's innovative programme was performed amid a celebratory atmosphere. Elias Arizcuren's Cello Octet Conjunto Ibérico is a flexible ensemble equally at home playing Hispanic repertoire such as Falla and Villa-Lobos as Philip Glass's mesmerising *Symphony for Eight*. They delighted the audience with a powerfully reverberating sound. Ralph Kirshbaum then gave a revelatory account of solo works by Hindemith and David Matthews.

Echoing Amsterdam's tradition of open-mindedness and liberal thought, contemporary music played a significant role throughout the Biennale. Gregor Horsch and Pieter Wispelwey gave a luminous performance in which they paid tribute to Sofia Gubaidulina's unique brand of religious mysticism during a programme of her work. Thomas Demenga presented his *Solo per due* in a programme that expanded listening boundaries to include Artyom Kim's brooding masterpiece *De profundis*.

From top: Valter Dešpalj gives a masterclass; a lutherie workshop in progress; Ralph Kirshbaum; Ernst Reijseger and Thomas Demenga during a spontaneous improvisation session

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MAARTEN MOSTERT

The Biennale offered a smorgasbord of activities with something for everyone to do at all hours of the day. The mornings included Bach and Breakfast wake-up concerts that featured six great cellists performing Bach suites at the early hour of 9.30am. Mostert said: 'At first we thought this might prove too demanding for soloists who are used to performing in the evening. However, they really seemed to enjoy what several dubbed their "morning purification." Although the name of the event raised hopes of breakfast, it was music, not food, that nourished listeners in a wonderful series that could have been more aptly titled *Bach at Breakfast*.

The convivial spirit that led superstars such as Wispelwey and Bylsma to agree to perform at such an early hour defined Mostert's vision. 'I wanted the Biennale to have a family-festival feeling. Those of us who have been privileged enough to participate in international festivals know just how this special camaraderie works: no special privileges and no celebrities, just great musicians making great music and sharing this with all who care to join. I hope that ten years from now, the world's leading cellists will ask one another: did you perform at Bach and Breakfast in Amsterdam yet? Then the Biennale will become a sort of musical status symbol.'

Pre-lunch activities centred on a daily dose of masterclasses given by noted experts. There are as many approaches to masterclasses as there are pedagogues. More often than not, however, they prove more entertaining for the audience than for the young artists, who face the challenge of playing for listeners while also taking a lesson. Janos Starker commented that he has to fight the temptation to tell stories and avoid facing musical and technical issues when confronted with what he referred to as 'drive-by' students at masterclasses.

Colin Carr, however, gave some particularly eloquent and helpful advice during one of the Biennale's masterclasses. His first student crouched over the instrument as he gave a flamboyant performance of Cassadó's solo Suite. The young Brazilian inadvertently let his hair cover his face throughout the performance. Instead of embarrassing the young man with quips on coiffure, Carr focused on the issue of getting one's ideas across to the audience. He asked: 'What is the predominant feeling you would like to communicate in this piece?' The answer came loud and clear, 'Pride.' The accomplished young performer quickly realised that his body language was working against the message he sought to convey. Carr made his point subtly; the student gave a second reading imbued with confidence and a grounded position behind the instrument.

Night owls were rewarded with a late-night celebration of Boccherini's *Night Music* and jazz aficionados honed their skills with workshops by the king of non-classical cello repertoire, Ernst Reijseger. Those who were forced to miss an event could glean nuggets of interesting ▶



From top: Colin Carr; four newly-built cellos wait to be played in a presentation concert; Pieter Wispelwey gives a masterclass; late-night Boccherini

information from the comprehensive programme book, in which the witty and informative Bylsma wove his encyclopaedic knowledge of the great cellists from days of yore into interviews with modern masters. Two Netherlands-based cellist-scholars, Michael Feves and Henk Lambooi, chose the festival to launch their lexicon, *The Cellist's Companion*, a documentary project that catalogues over 40,000 titles with meticulous cross-referencing to arrangers and sources (see News, page 10).

Those interested in testing instruments had ample opportunity to play on new creations. Thomas Demenga, Dmitry Ferschtman and Pieter Wispelwey performed on new instruments created by local makers including Jaap Bolink, Ernst Meijer and Annelies Steinhauer to the delight of a late-afternoon crowd. Meanwhile the foyer of the centre was turned into an exhibition hall, where BAM showed high-tech cases and Marens Engelhard introduced his cello stands to a public whose enthusiasm knew no bounds.

A recital entitled *The Post-Romantic Cello* featured the young Israeli cellist Gavriel Lipkind with his superlative accompanist, Igor Levit. In a week in which one incomparable concert followed another, Lipkind's recital upped the ante both in terms of technicality and musical vision. His ability to alternate pianissimo phrases with declamatory fortissimos while plumbing the depths of the Franck Sonata in its tricky cello arrangement brought down the house. The audience was left breathless following Lipkind's own arrangement of Wieniawski's *Scherzo Tarantelle*. A significant percentage of listeners left the hall in tears following a short encore taken from Ernest Bloch's *Scenes from Jewish Life*. Lipkind's Biennale cello colleague Ferschtman departed in raptures repeating the mantra 'I am so happy' over and over again.

The many-splendoured cello reigned supreme at the closing gala concert. Opening a concert featuring some of the best and brightest in the cello world is no easy task. Yet the Dutch National Competition winner, 20-year-old Joris van den Berg, admirably overcame this hurdle by delivering a thoughtful performance of Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*. The Netherlands' bad boy of the cello, Ernst Reijseger, vamped onstage with his young ensemble, giving arresting improvisatory impressions during which the beat went on to transform itself into pure magic.

Following the interval, Jean-Guihen Queyras delivered an unforgettable rendition of Haydn's Cello Concerto in C major. The spirited Frenchman took the listener on a madcap musical adventure replete with humour, vigour and a large dose of impetuous energy. Queyras's formidable gift for communication prompted spontaneous laughter from the audience in response to his joie de vivre and astonishing bright tempos. He and the Sinfonietta moved in perfect harmony throughout under the baton of cellist David Geringas. If Queyras brought the champagne to the gala, Natalia Gutman served up stronger fare in a weighty reading of Shostakovich's Cello Concerto no.1 that will remain etched on many a memory. Her interpretation was hefty, physical and even raw at times, as she dared to scratch and dig into the strings. Gutman's passionate advocacy of the stark composition challenged the listener to plumb the depths of despair.

Thanks to perseverance, incredible commitment and seemingly endless hard work, Maarten Mostert has made his dream into a reality: the Amsterdam Cello Biennale is here to stay and the music world is all the better for it. ■

The second Amsterdam Cello Biennale will take place 17-25 October 2008. See www.amsterdamsecellobiennale.nl for further details

