

## IN THE BEGINNING



MARTIN HARTLEY

**ABOVE** From left to right: Tatiana Berman, Jeremy Denk, Hannah Dawson, Giles Francis and Steven Isserlis rehearse the Medtner Piano Quintet at an IMS Open Chamber Music session, September 2007

Some successful chamber ensembles owe their existence to friendships forged at summer courses years ago. If you want to begin your own group, there's no better place to start, as **CATHERINE PAYNE** explains

**What do the St Lawrence Quartet, the Haussman Quartet and the Aronowitz Ensemble have in common?** Apart from being critically acclaimed, string-based chamber ensembles, their members all met for the first time during a summer course or festival, and got on so well that they are still playing together today. In some cases, at least one enterprising soul was scouting for potential colleagues, while for others, a spur-of-the-moment decision turned into a long-term commitment.

The members of the Haussman Quartet and the Aronowitz Ensemble credit New Jersey's LyricaFest and the International Musicians Seminar (IMS) in Prussia Cove, Cornwall, respectively with giving them the time, space and inspiration they needed to take the first step towards becoming professional ensembles. The St Lawrence Quartet, whose genesis took place during courses at Canada's Banff Centre

in the 1980s, lasted 15 years in its original formation, and the individual members' associations with the centre look set to last a long time yet.

Other established groups who laid the foundations of their chamber careers during summer courses include the Doric Quartet, who met at Pro Corda in Suffolk, and the Endellion and Domas quartets, whose members are also alumni of the IMS programme. So if you love chamber music and secretly dream of making your Wigmore Hall debut with a group of colleagues and friends, then a summer course with a focus on chamber music could end up being far more than an opportunity to polish your pizzicato: it could be a smart career move.

Since the group's formation in 1989, the St Lawrence Quartet's career has included concerts in internationally renowned venues, a performance for President Clinton

at the White House, several well-received recordings, a residency at California's Stanford University and only two (relatively recent) personnel changes. It all began deep in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, at the Banff Centre. Geoff Nuttall, the group's first violinist, says the players got to know each other gradually over several summers, and had discussed the idea of forming a quartet at length, but didn't act on it until 1988. He explains: 'It was kind of like getting married. You discuss it, but it takes some time to actually make the proposal!' Once the decision was made, however, the four musicians threw themselves into the group wholeheartedly. 'We agreed that if we were going to do this, we would commit to a whole year.' Nuttall continues, 'It was pretty difficult for the first few months – you sound bad and it's hard to get concert bookings – but we got through it.'

Both he and long-term colleague Barry Shiffman, who was second violinist in the quartet until 2005, acknowledge that Banff has played a significant part in the development

of their careers. Shiffman says that the centre helped set the course of their careers by putting chamber music at the top of its educational agenda. 'When Geoff and I were at school, many musicians still had the mentality that they wanted to become a great soloist, and if they were unsuccessful then they would try chamber music, and if that didn't work they would play in an orchestra,' Shiffman says. 'But at Banff, chamber music was always seen as a high calling, and I think we benefited from that seriousness of purpose.' Nuttall adds that the teachers and the atmosphere of dedicated study were inspirational to him. He recalls a summer session with Aldo Parisot: 'We prepared a Mozart quartet from scratch in a week and he was so inspiring. We had two or three hours a day with him, and then we'd rehearse for another four. By the end of the week we could actually play the quartet pretty well. The experience taught me exactly what goes into the process, how much work is necessary. That's something that you couldn't accomplish during the school year, with classes, orchestra and work to do as well. Banff offers a very distilled experience.'

The sense of isolation and escape from the demands of daily life is frequently mentioned by musicians as an aspect crucial to both the learning process and the formation of a group. Jennifer Stumm, a violist with the Aronowitz Ensemble, says of the IMS:

'The place itself is stunningly beautiful and it's a musical utopia. You feel separate from the world and that gives you the open-mindedness to try new repertoire with new people. There is a great freedom from the everyday trials of the working musician.'

The Aronowitz Ensemble was formed under quite different circumstances to the St Lawrence Quartet. Two brothers, Magnus and Guy Johnston (violinist and cellist respectively), were looking for collaborators for a one-off concert and found that the IMS provided the perfect source of colleagues with a shared musical vision. Guy says: 'We all had different connections: we're a mix of people from different corners of the world but the IMS was what we all had in common. We were all buzzing at the time and the thought of playing together outside of Prussia Cove really appealed.' The group had just five days to prepare for its first concert in November 2004, when the players performed to a sold-out St John's, Smith Square. Johnston recalls: 'After the concert, we didn't decide straight away to form an official ensemble. We just said, "See you next year at Prussia Cove." But when we played together again we realised we were growing together and that there were endless performance possibilities.'

The Aronowitz members all have busy performance schedules away from the group, but come together several times a year to work on

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chamber music repertoire. They still regularly attend IMS courses and nowadays the annual trip to Cornwall has become an opportunity to catch up with one another. However, Stumm points out that, despite being a member of a unified group, one of the reasons she loves the IMS's Open Chamber Music sessions is the opportunity they offer to work with a huge variety of musicians. These sessions, held in the autumn, are by invitation only, and programme director Hilary Behrens explains how difficult it is to put groups together, juggling the wishes of students with the demands of programming. Despite this, in some cases these scheduling decisions have resulted in lasting partnerships. Yet equally influential are the activities that take place after hours. At the IMS there is a tradition of sightreading chamber music in ad hoc ensembles late into the evening, and it was through this >

**BELOW** The Aronowitz Ensemble, which formed after meeting at the IMS, Prussia Cove

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that the Aronowitz's members got to know each other musically and socially. Behrens says: 'At supertime the artistic direction comes to an end and there's an opportunity to get groups together in different combinations. There always seems to be lots of energy.'

This experience was shared by the members of the Haussman Quartet, who also recall staying up late to play together at LyricaFest. Second violinist Bram Goldstein explains, 'Even if you're exhausted at the end of the day, everyone wants to get together and read through great chamber music. That's how the four of us hooked up and something was clicking. We got on well straight away.' The Haussman players obviously feel a great deal of affection for the LyricaFest course and, though they are still a relatively young ensemble, they have already returned to their alma mater to share what they have learnt so far with a new generation of students. Terry King, co-director of LyricaFest, says that a talk they gave there last summer was very well received: 'The students were mesmerised to see musicians of a similar age to themselves out there in the world. There was a question-and-answer period that went on and on. I hadn't seen them that attentive even at concerts.'

The sense of wanting to give something back to the course that played a large part in helping establish your career is something close to Shiffman's heart. After 17 years in the St Lawrence Quartet, he left the group to move to Banff and become the centre's musical director. Shiffman feels it is his priority to continue the environment of support that helped nurture him and his colleagues when they were starting out. 'In society, the role of the artist is still not often perceived as being at the top of the class structure. But here, everything is designed to support artists. When you check in you are given an ID card that says "artist" and I have seen several people burst into tears on receiving it because they aren't used to recognition of their importance.'

Shiffman has, of course, invited his old St Lawrence Quartet colleagues back to the centre to pass on the knowledge and experience they have gained through almost two decades of quartet playing, a responsibility that they relish. Geoff Nuttall says: 'I think over the summer I slept more nights at Banff than at my home in Stanford. It's down to those great quartets that we were lucky enough to study with – the Juilliard, the Emerson, the Tokyo – that we had a career. They were always so encouraging and we try to do the

same thing now. If you find a passionate and committed group you try to do everything you can to make their path an easy one because it's such a challenge for any group to survive.'

Even if you don't meet your musical soulmates during a course this summer, don't discount the value of having worked with a variety of musicians, from well-established names to as-yet-undiscovered contemporaries. The experience could open up a chamber music opportunity in the future. Behrens talks about the alumni of the IMS as a kind of musical network. Several years ago, when there were personnel changes in several established young quartets, Behrens says that alumni who knew each other from IMS courses were able to get in touch with each other easily to find the replacements they needed. He also tells a story about a speech given by pianist Andrés Schiff during a post-concert reception at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall: 'He said there was hardly an ensemble group in the world that didn't include at least one IMS alumnus!' There seems to be a general consensus that summer courses are where many of the great chamber groups start out. As Nuttall says: 'There are a lot of quartets that have some connection to Banff, either through their personal studies or as a group. It's like six degrees of separation.' ■

**TOP LEFT** Joseph Kalichstein teaches a masterclass at LyricaFest in New Jersey where the Haussman Quartet has its origins

**TOP RIGHT** The St Lawrence Quartet performing at the Banff International String Quartet Competition in 1992

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