

FESTIVAL FEVER IN FRANCE



A concert in the 11th century chapel

A music festival in southwest France is not an obvious meeting point for the Master, liverymen and Company prizewinners. It was pure coincidence that an old friend had sent details of the bi-annual festival at his chateau in Queille. A lunch date revealed that he was in urgent need of a singer to give a recital in place of another who had double booked. We recommended Elizabeth Watts, the first Myra Verney award winner, who had sung at the Immediate Pastmaster's Installation Banquet and whom we had heard win the Ferrier Competition in 2006. A few months later we arrived in Queille, and almost immediately encountered members of the Sacconi Quartet, Maisie Lewis award winners. Scanning the programme of

events, we found that Liveryman Tim Garland, one of our jazz medallists of 1997, was also performing in the group called Acoustic Triangle.

A word about the venue. Queille is the most beautiful spot, deep in the foothills of the Pyrenees, in wild and unpopulated countryside. The chateau has an 11th Century chapel, which has been restored as an intimate concert hall, its walls and ceiling repaired, but not changed, and with some rather ad hoc lighting. The host, Nico Lethbridge, and his wife, Rachel, treat us all as guests, we make use of the castle facilities, and they provide all food over the three days, a mammoth task when the guests and artists together number well over 250 people. The outcome is that there



is a wonderful casual atmosphere; performers and guests mingle and chat together, and the opportunities for musical interchange abound.

The Sacconi were the first of "our" prizewinners to perform, which they did to great acclaim. They played a Mozart quartet on the first evening, which was followed by canapés and drinks on the terrace. At 10.30pm, Acoustic Triangle were to perform and then we had a surprise when the Sacconi also appeared to be programmed with Tim Garland's group. We were most intrigued. All was revealed when the quartet joined Malcolm Creese, Tim Garland and Gwilym Simcock on stage and joined in two very inventive and original pieces written by Gwilym, Acoustic Triangle's pianist. They received the most huge ovation at the end, both groups had played with such commitment and the result was simply stunning. We thought that we had now seen the last of the Sacconi.

The next morning they appeared again, this time in Bach as, together with Malcolm Creese, (double bass), and Stephen Dagg, (organist), they accompanied Christopher Field, counter tenor, in a baroque programme. Hannah Dawson, second violin, played a spirited accompaniment to *Se in Fiorito* from Handel's *Giulio Cesare* and Cara Berridge played the cello obbligato for Caldara's *Vicino in Rivoletto*. Ten minutes or so later, they were again on stage, this time on their own account, with Ian Fountain at the piano, when they played the Brahms Piano Quintet in F minor. It was, once more, a most stirring, polished, and professional performance and I do not believe that we were biased, as they were extremely warmly received by the audience. This was a demonstration of real versatility by this quartet. We spoke to Hannah Dawson, the second violin, to ask how much rehearsal there has been for the joint events. "Not much!" she replied, laughingly, "I made some mistakes in the Handel!"

A buffet lunch followed, and there was another opportunity to mingle with the musicians. We were sitting next to a lady who said that she was the accompanist Julius Drake's wife. "And this is Liz Watts." she said. A small dark-haired girl was sitting next to us. She responded shyly when we spoke to her. No sign of diva behaviour here! She told us of her forthcoming afternoon performance with Julius Drake and confided that she was also working hard for the Cardiff Singer of the World competition. We chatted for some time and then she retired to prepare