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# The Strad



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*Left and right: the Ford Theater, Los Angeles, which was home to two of I Palpiti's concerts. Both were well attended but the open-air acoustic was less than ideal*



Despite being a festival of young competition winners, the International Laureates Music Festival in LA has made collaboration the order of the day. By **Jos Rutgers**

# Soloists unite

**T**he International Laureates Music Festival, now in its second year of existence, has already managed to distinguish itself strikingly from other international music festivals. Under its auspices 30 prizewinning young musicians from all over the world congregated in Los Angeles's stylish Beverly Hills during July and August. Directed by the Russian-American violin pedagogue Eduard Schmieder in the festival's string orchestra I Palpiti, they also performed chamber music repertoire at the highest level.

Over a year ago Laura and Eduard Schmieder, both noted violinists and teachers, decided to found a music festival in Los Angeles. They had already set up Young Artists International (YAI), which provides management, financial assistance and other administrative support for young artists; now they see their ideals realised in this festival of competition winners. 'We try to promote especially those musicians who really deserve it,' says festival director Laura

Schmieder. 'We trace them through selection processes all the year round and invite them.'

By now an imposing list of artistic advisors is associated with YAI and the festival, including Vladimir Ashkenazy, Gidon Kremer, Igor Oistrakh, Vadim Repin, Lynn Harrell, Menahem Pressler and patron Ida Haendel. And with I Palpiti, which was founded by Eduard Schmieder in 1991 at the Meadows School of Arts in Dallas, as its showpiece, the potential for growth is considerable. According to Laura Schmieder: 'We want to work towards 30 annual concerts and serve as a model for an ideal picture. Young Artists International wants to be the link between the top of young musicians and perfection.'

Run by YAI, the Second International Laureates Music Festival was dedicated to one of its founders and first supporters, Yehudi Menuhin. Menuhin came to Los Angeles several times at Eduard Schmieder's invitation to teach pupils of Schmieder's, the first time being in 1987. In exchange

Schmieder travelled to London with the same purpose. According to Laura Schmieder, 'we had a wonderful relationship. Menuhin had high praise for the initiative to found Young Artists International and gave us his heartfelt support, even though he has connected his name with so many festivals.'

The first part of the festival consisted of a number of chamber music concerts given by members of I Palpiti in Los Angeles and Taos (New Mexico) in July. Ranging from solo sonatas to piano quartets, the music included works by Montsalvatge, Ysaÿe, Bach and Saint-Saëns. In addition, in the month preceding the festival in Los Angeles, I Palpiti, as resident orchestra of the Dutch festival International Holland Music Sessions, gave concerts at various venues, including Amsterdam's Concertgebouw.

After the individual chamber music concerts 23 string players from 18 different countries took up residence in two hotels in Beverly Hills. Every single one of them is a great talent with an





**Top:** Czech violinist Pavel Sporel performs the 'Devil's Trill' Sonata. **Above:** I Palpiti's leader Peter Rainer; and (right) Eduard Schmieder in rehearsals. With three concerts in less than a week, the orchestra was presented with an intensive workload



impressive résumé. Through winning prizes at international competitions they have been thrust into the position of promising talents in their own countries. The group was presented with an intensive workload consisting of a tight rehearsal schedule and an extremely heavy programme. The aims were ambitious: no fewer than three different programmes had to be practised for three concerts in less than a week.

'You play it really fantastic, but I want it to come right from your heart!': stimulating words from conductor Eduard Schmieder at the start of a long day of rehearsals. The G minor Chaconne for Strings by Purcell in an adaptation by Britten is on the stands. After a short warm-up period Schmieder pays attention to the minute details. For this he continually uses metaphors and does not hesitate to have an important section replayed many times before a satisfied 'bravo!' is shouted to the musicians after the eleventh try.

Checking his watch constantly, Schmieder realises after 30 minutes that

the time scheme forces him to turn to the second work of that morning. The four-part Concerto per Archi by Nino Rota forms one of the pillars of I Palpiti's programme. It is a brilliant work with a cinematic character, and virtuosity and emotion are combined in the four parts. Schmieder cannot help tapping his baton every now and then when it sounds good to his ears. 'I really liked that; this was so good!' he enthuses.

Schmieder is a self-taught conductor as the strict Russian system meant that he could not have conducting lessons. 'That was not deemed suitable, for as a child one has to pass through all stages of musical education before one is allowed to think of conducting,' he says. Ultimately it was his compatriot and colleague Viktor Liberman who saw in Schmieder 'a born conductor'. Schmieder consulted a fellow professor at the University of Southern California, who advised him against taking lessons because of his natural-looking technique. From various concertmasters Schmieder learnt which qualities

make a good conductor and in what way a conductor and an orchestra can best communicate.

It is precisely this communication which is striking in the relationship between I Palpiti and Schmieder. During rehearsals it is clear that Schmieder tries to achieve a collective energy transfer, thereby enhancing musical cohesion. He is aware that the coming together of over 20 soloists does not in itself imply the emergence of a great orchestra. 'They have to sacrifice a small part of their solo disposition, however difficult this might be for some,' he says.

Most of the musicians of I Palpiti have studied with Schmieder. The orchestra's 28-year-old leader, Peter Rainer from Germany, graduated as master of music after four years of study with Schmieder, and he has in the meantime been appointed concertmaster of the Brandenburgische Philharmonie in Potsdam, Germany. Rainer describes Schmieder's conducting approach as 'very individualistic and very good'. ■

Top photo: David Ross Photography; other photos: Jeroen van der Vliet

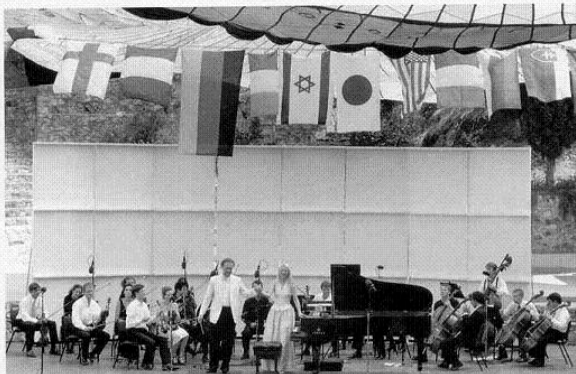


I Palpiti (left) played with striking unity and spirit and had an infectious way of making music. Above: festival soloists take applause at the Colburn School. Below: the banner of flags displayed at the final concert attested to the festival's international character

He adds: 'I appreciate the difficulty of realising homogeneity in a group that consists of so many soloists.'

The Irish violinist Catherine Leonard, currently based in Amsterdam, studied with both the Dutch violin pedagogue Herman Krebbers and Ednard Schmieder. 'Krebbers is a man of delicate violin technique, whereas Schmieder lets his heart speak while playing music,' she says, indicating that she has benefited from both approaches. The Romanian violinist Alexandru Tomescu could perhaps be ranked as the most forceful individualist within I Palpiti, who has won no fewer than 25 prizes at major competitions. Tomescu performed as a soloist in the five concerts of the first part of the International Laureates Festival, in collaboration with the German pianist Luiza Borac. He is clearly a performing artist and always seems to hold back a bit during rehearsals. After the concert period in Los Angeles he will return to Romania, where he will settle as 'soloist with orchestras', a unique position especially created for him.

However marvellous some moments were during the rehearsal period, during the concerts many of the finest details remained hidden from the public. But the unity and spirit of I Palpiti were striking. The first concert in the Lobero Theater of Santa Barbara took place after only four days of rehearsal. These early musical results were impressive; the orchestra has an infectious way of making music and produced a rich sound in the Purcell G minor Chaconne. Solo violinist Kazuhiro Takagi from Japan showed his excellent



technique in the 'Devil's Trill' Sonata in G minor by Tartini, a work which was to be winningly performed a week later by the Czech violinist Pavel Šporcl. A performance of Vivaldi's Concerto no.10 op.3 for four violins was also impressive, with Leonard, Rainer, Tomescu and French violinist Liza Kerob as soloists. All four clearly stimulated each other musically, showing mutual inspiration and respect.

Both concerts in the Ford Theater near Hollywood had a good turnout with an audience averaging 600. However, the acoustics of this open-air theatre created extra difficulties for the musicians, particularly for conductor Schmieder who found it hard to assess the balance. Moreover the orchestra had to be electronically amplified in a manner that was quite offensive to European ears. This added to the noise sweeping in from the

Los Angeles Highway made the Ford Theater a less than perfect location.

Mahler's adaptation of Beethoven's 'SeriOSO' Quartet op.95 was given a passionate performance by I Palpiti, although rhythmwise there was room for improvement. The most ambitious work of the final concert in the Ford Theater was the *Nocturnal Dances of Don Juanquixote* by Finnish composer Aulis Sallinen. Spanish cellist Adolfo Gutiérrez Arenas had to reach deep to play the technically complicated solo part, which forms the link in the melting pot of styles and influences in this theatrical composition.

After the summer of music-making, the members of I Palpiti have now gone their separate ways. However there remains the prospect of a reunion, to perform in the Main Hall of the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam next year. □

Photos: Europa Press Photography