



Eduard Schmieder  
in action at this  
year's festival

Photos: Dana Ross

# Great expectations

Eduard Schmieder transforms the young professional players of his I Palpiti Orchestra into tomorrow's first-rank musicians.

**Rick Schultz** visits the International Laureates Music Festival to find out how

For the seventh season in a row, teacher-conductor Eduard Schmieder and his I Palpiti Orchestra and soloists have given audiences a glimpse into the future of classical music. Schmieder and a group of young prizewinning professional musicians convened in Taos, New Mexico, and Los Angeles, California, for the International Laureates Music Festival, a two-week series of recitals and concerts that culminated on 1 August with a grand finale at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

On a sunny Tuesday in Beverly Hills, five days before the big event, Schmieder, who has taught masterclasses at conservatories throughout the world, rehearses with the orchestra. He is working on the second-movement waltz from Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*,

one of the works on the Disney Hall programme.

Schmieder stops the players in an intense violin passage. 'The violin sound tends to be too bright,' he says in Russian-accented English. 'This is nostalgic waltz. They were dreaming of love, of greatness.'

Maybe it's Schmieder's tender words, but the violinists make the next attempt warmer and more resonant. He often provides a context for the music he conducts, helping his players to locate the work's inner, emotional power.

Rehearsing a Shostakovich rarity, the *Prelude and Scherzo op.11*, Schmieder recalls a starving lion he saw in a Russian zoo.

'Such desperation,' he says, 'It's like exhaling.' The strings respond by sighing beautifully.

Schmieder's gentle humour and vitality belie his heavy



**LEFT** cellists Eldar Saporayev (left, Swiss-Kazakh) and Georgiy Lomakov (Ukrainian) in rehearsal

Russian demeanour. He's a tall, slender man whose sad, soulful eyes compel attention. When a back injury ended his solo violin career before the age of 30, Schmieder began a second life as a teacher. 'I live through my students,' he says, 'and I want the music to live through them.'

Peter Rainer, 31, concertmaster of I Palpiti and the Kammerakademie Potsdam, has worked with Schmieder on and off for over a decade. 'We don't concentrate too much on technical perfection,' says Rainer. 'That is secondary to meaning. It's interesting because you are always on the edge of something.'

The word 'emotion' often comes up when the musicians speak about Schmieder. His goal as a conductor, says violinist Karina Canellakis, 23, a Manhattan native, 'is to have the emotions within the phrase come across to the audience, with nothing blocking the communication. Every story he tells is about making music alive.'

Schmieder maintains that artistry counts more than mere craftsmanship. 'Rubinstein could miss notes and he always touched us,' he says. He recalls hearing Menuhin play the second movement of Beethoven's Violin Concerto, late in his career: 'He practically couldn't move the bow, but I couldn't breathe.'

At lunch the conversation is wide-ranging, moving from a detailed history of vibrato and an anecdote about Russian bass Fyodor Chaliapin, illustrating the power of pianissimo, to the origin

of Mischa Elman's golden tone. At one point Schmieder recalls what Shostakovich said after listening to young musicians play one of his works: 'I imagined something completely different, but I love it.' The story expresses another one of Schmieder's basic beliefs: 'Music is not what is written on the page,' he says. 'It is what is written between the lines.'

The International Laureates Music Festival is run by Young Artists International, which Schmieder co-founded with his wife, Laura, to bring together winners of prestigious international competitions for performances in the US and Europe. Lauding Schmieder's work with the organisation, Jonathan Steinberg, chairman of YAI's board, says that there isn't another festival quite like this one, with musicians of such high calibre just beginning their careers. 'It's not a youth orchestra, or a regular music festival with well-established professionals,' he says. 'Many of them go on to big solo careers or become concertmasters of major orchestras.'

Indeed, a number of I Palpiti members have returned home to become leading soloists or to find places in major orchestras, including Pieter Schoeman, concertmaster of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and Qing Yung Yu, principal associate concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Steinberg, who has watched Schmieder in rehearsal, says that

his seemingly minor technical advice often yields major expressive results. 'A simple suggestion about a change in bowing produces this very subtle shift,' says Steinberg. 'His so-called technical comments make the emotional impact entirely different.'

In discussing vibrato Schmieder shares a few insights, pointing out that the violin and other string instruments were developed to imitate the human voice. 'The greatest singers – Caruso, for example – were vibrating not only the notes but between the notes. This skill is practically lost. It was like constant cantilena.' He cites two master practitioners of the art: Ysaÿe and Kreisler.

Schmieder believes many young string players use vibrato ineffectively. 'They start every note anew. They do it sometimes in the middle of the note,' he says. 'Vibrato, from the technical point of view, is like electricity. If there is a short somewhere, we are losing the light.'

Great musicians, Schmieder explains, use different physiological means to achieve this effect. 'Oistrakh was vibrating with his arm; Isaac Stern, with his forearm; Perlman is vibrating with the wrist,' he says. 'Although they are using different parts according to their physiology, all of them are using the tips of their fingers too. Ida Haendel, for example, is vibrating only with the tips.'

Later, the conversation turns to the puzzling teaching career of Jascha Heifetz, whom Schmieder calls 'the greatest violinist of the 20th century'. Why didn't Heifetz, who taught at the University of California from 1962 to 1972 and 'sincerely wanted to teach', ever produce a first-rank violinist? Heifetz selected from the best international talent. Students were provided full financial support and permitted to focus exclusively on their violin studies.

So what happened? Schmieder's answer reflects a contrast in ►



teaching styles. 'The responsibility of every teacher is, figuratively speaking, to show students the way to the treasure, where to find it,' he says. 'Heifetz knew it well. They came to the place where he directed them and started digging, but the treasure was already taken. Heifetz had it, and you cannot find the same treasure twice. You have to direct people to a place where they can find their own treasure.'

Schmieder favours a more customised approach. 'When I teach the violin, I look into the physiology of the person I teach, because every player has a different type of body structure, of muscle tonus. How strong and flexible are they? Then, every individual has a different psychology and emotional upbringing.'

The conductor also trusts his intuition. 'You have to be able to see the student from inside – to open all the possibilities,' he says. 'Know every method, and match certain ideas with each personality. There is no prescribed, rigid way.'

Canellakis homes in on one of Schmieder's greatest gifts: 'He brings the same passion to every rehearsal and also projects a love for us. It's a tremendous support to all of us, because he makes us feel good about ourselves while we're working.'

Schmieder's magic touch was clear when, early in the week, in Beverly Hills, two 17-year-olds, Polish pianist Stanislaw Drzewiecki and last-chair I Palpiti violinist Maria Machowska performed Franck's Violin Sonata, capturing the work's rhapsodic character and classical rigour in a reading that was moody, exuberant and mature.

Other highlights of the week included a warm Brahms Sextet no.1 op.18, with cellists Eldar Saporayev and Abraham Feder deftly handling the outer movements' tender main themes. Saporayev joined Canellakis in a Russian-flavoured rendition of Ravel's thinly textured



**ABOVE** I Palpiti on stage at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, with flags of all the artists' nations



**LEFT** when rehearsing, Schmieder often provides a historical or personal context for the music, helping his players to locate the work's inner, emotional power

Sonata for Violin and Cello. The duo emphasised the score's driving dissonance, probing its deeply introspective character. This was a fascinating performance, even if it sounded a bit like Shostakovich.

The violin soloists were all superb, including Catharina Chen, who managed stunning virtuosity in William Kroll's delightful Banjo and Fiddle, and Carolina Kurkowski-Perez, whose playful, sweet-toned reading of Saint-Saëns' Introduction and Rondo capriccioso was matched by Amanda von Goetz's muscular piano accompaniment.

Finally, on Sunday evening, I Palpiti performed at Walt Disney Concert Hall before a near-capacity audience. Would these outstanding soloists from 17 different countries blend convincingly as an orchestral ensemble in such an acoustically hypersensitive hall? Under Schmieder's direction, they mostly did.

Warming up, the I Palpiti group took a too-careful approach to the Prelude of Shostakovich's Prelude and Scherzo op.11. In the Scherzo, however, they unleashed controlled energy, revelling in one

of the Russian's earlier attempts to push the compositional envelope. In Shostakovich's Piano Concerto no.1 op.35, muted strings memorably sustained the sprawling second-movement modal melody in a richly satisfying performance.

Slow tempos dampened the music making in the other major piece on the programme, Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings op.48. The cavernous hall, better suited for large-scaled symphonic repertoire, did not help. While the musicians admirably sustained Schmieder's long-limbed approach, the melodic and harmonic lines were often hazy.

Of the group's two encores, Shostakovich's witty Polka and Tchaikovsky's haunting Elegy, the former won the night. With each player showcased, the technically tricky Polka demonstrated the kind of high-spirited, sophisticated fun that the I Palpiti ensemble, and audiences, thrive on.

At press time, Young Artists International was planning to add a residency in Europe. Not a bad idea, since they have been invited to perform the opening concert in July 2005 at the Salzburg Festival. ■