

A Whole Lot of Music

A warm welcome, stunning surroundings, gorgeous weather, convivial company, delicious food, inspiring teaching – **Jenny Macmillan** reports on a remarkable summer course

Lot Music takes place in the Lot Valley, a picturesque area of south-west France (unexpectedly, the t is pronounced). For eight years, Anne Brain has organised these week-long summer courses. Initially one a year, Lot Music has now expanded to two separate courses. Most guests stay in Anne's spacious house, half-way up a hillside, with lovely views; while a few, who perhaps prefer occasionally to get away from the intense music-making, stay in a house nearby, or a local bed-and-breakfast. There are nine pianists on the course, but many also bring their partners to share in the holiday.

The course is in effect a house party. Breakfast is eaten al fresco on the terrace overlooking the swimming pool. Meanwhile others may be practising or taking an early morning dip. Sunshine, warmth, good food and the sound of music are everywhere.

Tuition is in the form of morning masterclasses. Each participant can expect a total of two hours of teaching, divided into three sessions during the week. Previous tutors have included Bernard Roberts, Philip Fowke and John Barstow, and the tutor on our course was Murray McLachlan. His teaching was superb. Every lesson was different, according to the personality of each participant, the music they chose to play, and the style and level of their performance. As a piano teacher myself, I was fascinated to learn from Murray's teaching. He has a global, top-down approach which is very effective. For instance, one student played a Schubert sonata movement, extremely well and with excellent observation of the dynamics and other markings, but without the character coming through, and with slightly insecure timing. Murray never mentioned timing, and approached the character of the piece through gesture. The student responded admirably to the remarkable and entertaining masterclass on the use of gesture and at the end of the lesson was giving a characterful interpretation of the Schubert with a firm grasp of tempo.

Wonderful salads for lunch are prepared in-house by Anne and any partners who have not spent the whole morning attending the masterclass, walking,

cycling or sightseeing at local chateaux and vineyards. Afternoons are devoted to a siesta and a couple of hours practising on one of the six pianos. There are two in the salon and a Clavinova for "silent" out-of-hours practice. Others are hired for the course. Personally, I loved relaxing in the afternoon and hearing in the distance one Lotite practising the *Goldberg Variations*, another a Beethoven sonata, another Bartok's *Allegro Barbaro*, while two more rehearsed the Schumann Piano Concerto in the salon. For those who would find this cacophony too much, accommodation outside the main house might be preferable!

Before attending the course, I wondered what I would do in the two or three hours of scheduled practice a day (never normally being able to fit in more than an hour even on a good day). But we were all buoyed up with enthusiasm by Murray's wonderful teaching, and even on a day of playing in the masterclass and three hours of practising, my fingers were itching to be at the piano again later that evening.

Drinks on the terrace precede an evening recital – two by the tutor, and two or three by course participants. All participants are invited to play at the final concert, on the last evening of the course. It is significant that even those of us who normally feel we cannot perform and do not wish to perform, felt able to play, and we treated ourselves to a splendid concert at which it was evident that a few pianists had learned a great deal from Murray's teaching.

Dinner is taken at various tried-and-tested restaurants in the region. The menu at each is carefully selected by Anne, as being typical of the region and utterly delicious. Pate de fois gras, scallops, quail, duck, local cheeses, all washed down with carafes of the local Cahors red wine, are much appreciated by all. It is an incredible pleasure to sit down at a long table, more than a dozen of us, with our recitalist amongst us, and chat about this and that and ... music. Several Lotites were involved in the medical profession, there were a few engineers and university dons, and people with a wide variety of other careers and interests – a



Lot Music: 'If you love music, good company and good food, and would like to improve your piano playing in the most delightfully informal, relaxed atmosphere ... then this is for you.'

motley crew, really, but all drawn together by a genuine love of music.

And the day is not yet over. Fingers continued to itch and on several nights we had a jam session including duets, the Mozart Two-Piano Sonata, excerpts of various piano concertos with orchestral reductions on a second piano, some jazz, pieces for eight-hands at two pianos, six-hands at one piano, including Gautier *Le Secret* (doubled up – 12-hands at two pianos), even Chaminade eight hands at one piano – something of a squash for four adults. And Murray joined in with enthusiasm, on one evening treating us to the cadenzas from one requested piano concerto after another. However, one evening we had to send him to bed at 12.30am – he was falling asleep downstairs, having been up until 3.30 am the night before, practising with headphones on the Clavinova! As one Lotite remarked, if the course were to extend to a second week, morning masterclasses would not start until lunchtime. Already by the end of one week we were half an hour late starting the class, and did not finish for lunch until 2.00pm!

What a life! What decadence! What a holiday! The only sadness was saying farewell to everyone and coming home – back to normality. I do not wish to wax too enthusiastic about this unique course, or there will be many disappointed pianists who fail to secure a place for themselves next year. If you love music, good company and good food, and would like to improve your piano playing in the most delightfully informal, relaxed atmosphere calmly created by Anne, then this is for you. Tutors this summer will be John Barstow (11-18 July) and Richard McMahon (21-28 July). Further information may be obtained from Anne Brain on anne.n.brain@btinternet.com, 01928 740 543