

FESTIVALS



Festive spirit

FESTIVALS CAN OFFER ASPIRING YOUNG MUSICIANS INVALUABLE EXPERIENCE AND PUBLICITY. **CHRIS HORKAN** FINDS OUT HOW SOME ARTISTS HAVE ALREADY BENEFITED FROM THEM



Lang Lang wouldn't have needed it anyway,' says 24-year-old Alisa Weilsteiner. 'But it helps.'

The American cellist is talking about the Schleswig-Holstein Festival's annual Leonard Bernstein Award. Each year judges from the festival choose a promising young artist they would like to come and perform at major German venues and in rural hubs across the Schleswig-Holstein region like the Pronstorf country estate (pictured), and this year they chose Weilsteiner.

'A committee nominated and judged me without my knowing,' she explains. 'I got a call last January from my manager telling me I'd won. I was thrilled because I had no idea I was being considered.'

The award's jury included the Schleswig-Holstein Festival's director Rolf Beck and Leonard Bernstein's daughter Jamie Bernstein Thomas, who awarded Lang Lang the inaugural prize in 2002.

American pianist Jonathan Biss won in 2005 before Weilsteiner became the first cellist to claim the prize last August. Winners receive 10,000 (\$12,958) and are invited to perform at a series of high-profile German concerts with the festival's orchestral academy.

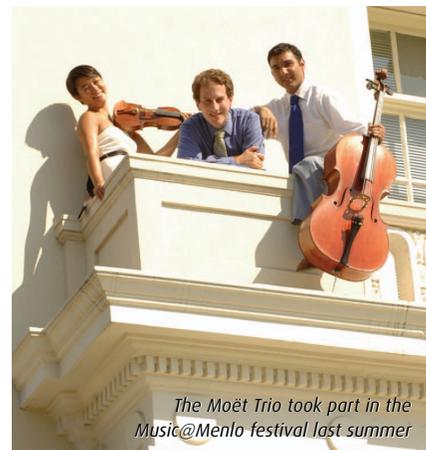
Young artist programs and prizes like this provide a wealth of experience, knowledge, and contacts to those looking to develop a career in classical music. Weilsteiner, for example, spent four intensive days at Schleswig-Holstein last August, performing Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No 1 with the festival's resident orchestra under Semyon Bychkov in Hamburg and Lübeck. 'The orchestral academy at Schleswig-Holstein works with a different conductor every week, and it's very often a very famous conductor,' she says.

Weilsteiner describes being greeted by a warm and friendly atmosphere from the young musicians of the academy. 'Playing the Schleswig-Holstein Festival was wonderful and I got to meet many different people. It's a wonderful thing.'

She believes the Leonard Bernstein Award – like many festival prizes – has helped give her exposure in ways most young artists can only dream of: 'There was so much publicity around it. It really helped me in Europe, where it's often hard for an American artist to break into the market.'

Weilsteiner, who made her Cleveland Orchestra debut aged 13, has seen the benefit of several such awards: since 2000 she has received the Avery Fischer Career Grant and gained places on the ECHO 'Rising Stars' program and the young artists' program of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. But she looks back on her Schleswig-Holstein experience with particular fondness: 'It was really fun what we got to do. The standard was great and all in all it was a completely positive and wonderful experience.'

In the US, Music@Menlo in California is a summer chamber music festival for the new century. Each year, artistic directors David Finckel and Wu Han audition young artists for its Chamber Music Institute, which works closely with a faculty that this year features violist Roberto Diaz.



The Moët Trio took part in the Music@Menlo festival last summer

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Michael Mizrahi, a 28-year-old pianist based in New York City, took part in last year's institute with his Moët Trio. 'There were 12 of us in what they call the international program. We worked very hard with the artist faculty and also with the kids, so we were right in the middle of everything.'

Advanced conservatory-level participants aged 18-29 are handed a rigorous performance schedule, but are also expected to give lectures, research the pieces they play and work with the younger players as teachers and mentors. 'It's really complete professional training – they want us to do more than just perform,' says Mizrahi.

Throughout the three-week festival, Mizrahi's days often lasted 18 hours, with little time off. 'It's a lot of hard work,' he says. 'Maybe I shouldn't say this but I've compared it to a boot camp for pre-professional musicians. A lot of schools and festivals don't train you for being out there as a touring artist. At Menlo they let us learn things quickly and efficiently.'

The organizers of Music@Menlo vary the program from year to year: last year the focus was on individual instrumentalists, while in 2005 string and piano ensembles were invited to audition. Members of the institute benefit from free accommodation and meals and complete access to the festival and faculty.

'The way that the festival is set up facilitates intensive interaction with a lot of world-class musicians,' says Mizrahi. 'Those interactions are the kind that propel you through into a career.' Mizrahi speaks of several other opportunities arising as a result of his festival appearance: 'It's who you meet,'



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he concludes. The same comment could be applied to any young artist program.

For Anglophiles, the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme (*pictured*) offers annual festival opportunities in Suffolk, a south-eastern county of England. From modest beginnings as a series of vocal masterclasses organized by Peter Pears, it has grown to include intensive courses throughout the year.

Young musicians on the program regularly perform at the Aldeburgh Festival – which was established by Pears, Benjamin Britten and Eric Crozier in 1948 and now takes place each June – and other events such as the Easter Festival, the Snape Proms and the Britten Weekend.

In 2006, for example, the Aldeburgh Festival opened with Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*. This co-production with London’s Philharmonia Orchestra featured a six-strong cast of young singers from the program, which also provided the chorus.

Irish soprano Sinead Campbell sang Anne Trulove in the production. ‘A couple of friends of mine were involved with the previous season at Aldeburgh. I went to see them and I thought it was fantastic and seemed to be incredibly well organized.’ London-based Campbell, 27, later applied for *The Rake’s Progress* online.

‘Our show opened the festival last year, which was a huge deal because so many people come to the opening of the festival. It’s a big night,’ she says. Reviews of the performance were positive, with UK newspaper *The Times* describing Campbell’s Anne as ‘almost the finished article’. ‘It’s always nice to get a good review so that was helpful,’ says Campbell.

The program welcomes different levels of participation from its members. ‘I was just involved with *The Rake’s Progress* but there were others in the cast who were involved later on in the festival,’ says Campbell, also noting that previous Britten-Pears artists returned for new recitals last year.

Young artists on the program also perform in the Britten-Pears Chamber Choir, the Britten-Pears Baroque Orchestra and the Britten-Pears Orchestra. This year’s Aldeburgh Festival opens with the latter accompanying a cast of international singers for Britten’s final opera, *Death in Venice*.

Most festival organizers are keen to involve talented young artists – as observers, volunteers or active participants. Finding a suitable young artist program means you too could be sharing the spotlight with your idols this year. ■