

## Behind the scenes at the festival

When you turn up to a music course to find your activities allocated, bed made and meals planned, spare a thought for those who make it all happen. **JANET BANKS** talks to the organisers about the challenges of planning a residential course

**E**ach year countless musicians and violin makers pack their bags and head off in pursuit of new experiences on summer courses around the globe. They arrive knowing who will coach them, who they will be playing or working with, and confident that someone has all the arrangements in hand. But who are these people labouring away behind the scenes, and just how much preparation is needed to run a successful course?

Preparations usually start early. As soon as students depart from one year's course, the wheels are often set in motion for the following year's event. Where children are involved, it's especially important to prepare as far in advance as possible. Music@Menlo's Chamber Music Institute runs its three-week young performers day programme (for players aged 9 to 18) and international programme (for players aged 18 to 29) each summer at Menlo School on the San Francisco peninsula. 'A lot of our young musicians travel from overseas with their families,' says joint artistic director Wu Han. 'We concentrate on getting the material out at least by holiday time, because Thanksgiving and Christmas are when families talk about their summer plans.' Coaching staff are booked early too: this year the entire faculty of the young performers programme will be alumni of the international programme, now professors themselves.

**ED CAMPBELL AND HIS WIFE MARY** have been running their Chimneys Violin Makers Workshops for 21 years – not in his violin shop in Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania ('I don't have enough room for that!') but in a hotel in Tucson, Arizona, 2,300 miles away. But he's in a lucky position regarding teachers, as he explains: 'I know the people who are going to be on the faculty – the same people we've had for the last ten years. We don't have to sign a piece of paper to make sure they're going to be there.' He's equally easy-going about



other pre-course preparations: as long as at least ten people have sent in their deposit by a fortnight before, he's happy to run a course. As for reserving a place, Campbell says, 'People just need to get hold of me or one of the other tutors.'

Biff Norton, administrator of the Amadeus Orchestra's International Week of Beer and Music, a training ground for professional orchestras, is another early booker: he always reserves his venue – Perrott Hill Preparatory School in Somerset – on the last day of the previous year's course. 'We book the concert venues as soon as possible, too – Exeter and Wells Cathedrals next year.' Less than 70 miles away, at St Mary's School in Calne, Wiltshire, Angela Orgill, organiser of the Grittleton Chamber Music course for advanced amateurs, makes sure she talks to the bursar during the summer course about dates for the following year.

Lenny Matczynski, director of the Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music in New Hampshire, has no need to book venues or accommodation: he and the resident Apple Hill String Quartet are on campus all year. But potential visitors expect information far in advance. 'We try to get as much as possible done through our website,' he says. 'The first thing we do is update it for next year. By November people are starting to apply.'





Apple Hill students building a cabin



→ Helpers in the kitchens at the Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music



**‘You often get a little “I do not wish to play with...” list – there was once a lady who listed about half the course members!’**

ANGELA ORGILL

**THE APPLICATION AND SELECTION** process is a big part of the organisers’ responsibilities. At Music@Menlo, there are only enough places available for one in ten of the musicians who audition. How do the organisers go about deciding who will take part? Wu Han says, ‘We look for people who are ready to make a transformation – for the intensity of the programme you need someone mature and totally willing to experiment. So you look for that little sparkle in people’s eyes!’

Back in Somerset, booking for the Amadeus Orchestra course works rather differently. The first stage is for the conductor to decide on repertoire. ‘We then say, right, we’re going to need triple wind, such-and-such brass, and as many strings as we can fit in the venues, and that’s the places available – exactly

like fixing an orchestra for any concert, except that instead of you paying them, they pay you,’ says Norton. In January, fliers are put into students’ pigeon-holes in UK music colleges, and booking continues until the orchestra is full. ‘It’s a very fluid process,’ says Norton. ‘Some are a definite yes, some a definite no, some you wait to see what happens, but we aim to have the orchestra booked by 1 May.’

Good organisational skills are clearly the key to planning the logistics of a course. But when it comes to the delicate task of creating chamber groups from players of disparate ages, abilities and nationalities, a lighter touch is needed. At Apple Hill, musicians of all abilities from anywhere in the world can apply for the summer workshop, and this diverse population of 12- to 90-year-olds must be divided into chamber groups. ‘It’s like a great big puzzle that we slowly put together,’ says Matczynski. ‘We have a huge database that has everyone’s playing level, what they’ve performed in the past at Apple Hill, their coaches, plus a CD or DVD of them playing, and their repertoire requests.’ Pieces of paper with each person’s name and instrument are tacked on to a board for the





TRISTAN COOK



▲ Angela Orgill: 'You've got to have the right sort of brain, one that can put things into order'

➤ Music@Menlo director Wu Han briefs interns on their duties

appropriate time. 'We do it by level, so sometimes we'll have really high-profile people who took up an instrument late in life in groups with much younger beginners. It's a fascinating experience.'

Orgill turns to her computer when planning the Grittleton course. She uses a database that can sort the players alphabetically or by session or instrument: 'By referencing properly I can put everybody into the program twice, once for each of the two coached sessions. But it usually takes until the end of February to see exactly how the course is panning out. It's really like doing a 3D jigsaw without a picture,' she says. Then there are the participants' personal preferences to take into account: 'You often get a little "I do not wish to play with..." list – there was once a lady who listed about half the course members on hers!'

Immense care is taken on Music@Menlo's programmes to ensure that successful applicants are grouped appropriately. Wu Han says: 'With the young performers, we want to make sure that they play at least twice with people better than them, and then once with people where they have to be a leader. You also have to group them according to temperament – you don't really want three teenage girls together who might yack away through the rehearsals.'

**INEVITABLY THE WEEK** leading up to each course is particularly busy. The Campbells arrive in Tucson a week in advance to dig their equipment out of storage. Once at the hotel, things get technical. 'We need to set up the diagnostic equipment to test resonances,' says Campbell. 'Then we've got lasers and finite element analysis – a \$7,000 computer program.' Each piece takes a morning to set up and an afternoon to test. Then comes the setting up of the work space. The hotel provides a large room, and an eight-foot table for each student, which is key: 'If you have two people on one table, and one guy is jiggering it while the other guy is trying to make a cut, it's not good!'

Biff Norton often has to cope with last minute drop-outs from his orchestra lists. 'Every year it's a different section – last year there were no oboes because there was a double-reed conference going on in Birmingham. You just have to spend a day ringing round all the people who might be suitable.' Orgill often faces similar challenges. 'You get people who suddenly find that a nagging gall bladder problem just won't go away. That's where our reserve list comes in. Surprisingly, people are often still free.'

Even the weather can sometimes threaten the planning process. Matczynski says that, thanks to the severe winters at Apple Hill, there is often a last-minute rush on campus to prepare it for the first students' arrival in June. 'We can't get started with cleaning, repainting or finishing any building work until May, as there's so much damage sometimes from the winter. Last year we had people painting, cutting the lawns and getting the garden all set, right up to the last minute.'

Luckily, help is often at hand. Music@Menlo has a team of 20 interns and 120 volunteers to help things run smoothly – they help with everything from stage managing for public concerts, fundraising and events organising to running scavenger hunts for the young performers. 'In the week before, they have to set up the studios, make sure the pianos are in tune, make sure there are enough stands and chairs, that the photocopier is ready and the library system is set up – they're very busy,' says Wu Han.

Orgill and her husband have to allow themselves a full day to set up the school before the Grittleton course begins, with assistance from her deputy and a couple of other helpers. 'We put the names on all the bedrooms, put the scores of all the works they will be coaching in the tutors' rooms, label all the classrooms and put up maps everywhere. It's a big thing organising it – you have over 200 people who depend on you and for some it's the highlight of their year. You've got to have the right sort of brain, one that can put things into order.'

Wu Han backs this up: 'The more carefully you do the ground work, the better the result you get. It's all in the preparation – we don't leave anything to chance during festival time.' ■