

ALL PHOTOS RICHARD DAVISON



Denis Vigay coaches the cello section: sectionals and personal practice are an integral part of NYSA courses

A CLASS

Now in its tenth anniversary year, the UK's National Youth String Academy sets the standard for string orchestras for young players, as JOANNE TALBOT explains

No coasting on the back desks... No flabbiness in paired quavers,' commands

Lev Parikian, conductor of the National Youth String Academy (NYSA), which is in the midst of refining Tchaikovsky's *Serenade*. It's part of a repertory with which Parikian is more than familiar, having studied in the legendary class of Ilya Musin at the St Petersburg Conservatory in Russia. There's little doubt that Parikian brings this rigorous tradition of music making to NYSA rehearsals. He doesn't waste precious time with learning notes: those are for the students to decode. His role is to piece together the jigsaw, to make the students aware of their responsibilities in the overall musical framework

and to energise them at the right moments. As the rehearsal progresses, Parikian pauses to scrutinise the score further and to issue commands regarding dynamics and tempos. 'Oh, and be precise with the ends of notes and observe the rests accurately.'

There's a tangible focus and intensity in the air. The young players work hard to characterise phrases and articulation, on the final day of a week-long course preparing for a London concert for the Emanuel Hurwitz Chamber Music Trust. The occasion is part of a year-long programme to celebrate the NYSA's tenth anniversary, which culminates in a concert under the baton of Neville Marriner at London's St John's Smith Square on 30 October.

The brainchild of violinist and course director Viviane Ronchetti, the NYSA was

established to plug a gap in the string training of young people. 'There was no course specifically designed to tackle the string orchestra repertory,' says Ronchetti, 'so our courses are solely dedicated to this purpose, exploring music from the Baroque through to the 20th century. We recently performed a work by Michael Finnissey commissioned by Borough Music School in south London. The Borough pupils received a crash course in rhythm and ensemble as they played alongside the advanced pupils of the NYSA, who had a more complex part — an experience they all found rewarding.'

'I wanted to introduce youngsters to the serious issues of ensemble playing,' she continues, 'to get them thinking about which part of the bow to play in; which fingerings will suit a passage; how to watch the people in front; and how the people in front can use gestures to send information to the back. Despite our name we're not affiliated to the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, although both my husband and I were in that orchestra in Ruth Railton's day [the founder of the NYO]. He led and I sat next to him.'



Viviane Ronchetti, course director and founder: 'I wanted to introduce youngsters to the serious issues of ensemble playing'

ready for the morning session. This is a serious and purposeful affair that continues until lunch, with only a short coffee interlude. Then in the afternoon comes the full rehearsal, taken by Parikian. 'We have a professional conductor rather than me doing windmills,' says Ronchetti. 'It sharpens the students' focus and aural skills when someone talks about balancing sections, matching intonation and generally demanding so much of them.'

Auditions take place at Queenswood for the three courses each year, and the level required for the repertory is suggested as UK Associated Board Grades 7 to 8. Applicants are expected to play a study and one piece of their own choosing as well as scales, arpeggios and double-stops in two keys. Sightreading is also featured, but is

used more as a guide to establish how quickly material is absorbed. The first few days of the initial course are devoted to sightreading new repertory, but thereafter Ronchetti sends out parts four weeks in advance. Time is at a premium with a big programme of taxing works, so there is simply not enough space in the rehearsal schedule for note-bashing as well as getting the music making to an appropriate level of excellence.

The NYSA numbers are small: 32 players in all. With daily sectionals for each instrument (cellos and basses are divided, as are the first and second violins), it means that there is only a maximum of eight students per tutor, so the level of instruction is intense. Absolute accuracy with intonation is a leitmotif through the morning. Slow practice and repetition quickly establish themselves as favourite techniques for rectifying any glitches with maximum efficiency. 'Even the greatest soloists do this,' recalls tutor and violist Andrew McGee. 'I heard Rostropovich practising before playing with the LSO. He worked at a few passages slowly and only then speeded up.'

OF ITS OWN

'What came from that experience is that all the staff on this course have known each other for years. We understand how we each work, and we have the same ideology and priorities regarding string playing. All of us are extremely experienced chamber and orchestral musicians who have played in the top London orchestras. It gives us an innate empathy that manifests itself in unified musical objectives.'

I was soon to put the whole ethos to the test visiting each sectional that morning. Typically the day kicks off with personal practice — and these students, who range in age between 11 and 21, are motivated enough to do just that. As I arrive, the 28 practice rooms at Queenswood School in Hertfordshire — one of the schools where NYSA courses are regularly held — are starting to empty as the players get

There's a tangible focus and intensity at rehearsals



As with all student ensembles it quickly becomes apparent that pianissimo is a shy dynamic that makes only reluctant appearances, despite much encouragement from tutors, while colourful imagery always proves most effective in eliciting the right sound. Violinist Roger Garland asks the students to think of skating on a frozen lake in the Tchaikovsky *Serenade*. This certainly brings the right movement to the bowing and makes a marked difference to the sound. Meanwhile, the basses under John Gray's direction are busy perfecting a crescendo. 'Composers often forget that the bass is brighter and louder at the bottom of the register,' says Gray. 'So if you want a crescendo as you go to the top you'll have to start at a soft dynamic at the bottom of the scale or you won't get that effect. Should I make >

Viviane Ronchetti leads a second-violin sectional



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you sing it? No? Well it's the best way, really, and that's no joke.'

The atmosphere is relaxed and convivial, and although there is serious intent to reach a high level of accomplishment, it is achieved through cooperation rather than coercion. Of course it helps no end when you can have a demonstration. Mapping out bowing so that the down bow occurs at the right part of a musical phrase, or planning the dynamic of a stringendo so that the phrase has somewhere to go, is rather like choreographing a ballet, but bringing an elusive tone colour to a melody is a more tricky affair. Roger Garland demonstrates a lilt to one particular theme that is not notated in the score, so you really do have to hear how it can sound to copy the quality.

The collection of cellists under Denis Vigay is working on an energised up bow — developing a forceful vitality that works well in the context of the orchestral rehearsal that follows. 'And watch each other's vibrato speeds,' emphasises Ronchetti. 'If there are three different sorts of vibrato you won't match each other's sound.' Then the students are given tips on how to find a difficult note and how to prepare the shift — all ideas that feed into individual practice.

'That's the thing,' says Sam Parker, aged 16, leader of the orchestra. 'I learn with Maciej Rakowski, and he can hear when I've been on one of these courses because I'm at the top of my game. I have been on other music courses but this is the most intense one, and there are longer hours here. But the increased amount of focus produces a better end result.'

Sixteen-year-old Philip Collingham agrees: 'I'm more willing to practise when I come home, as it helps with my motivation.' Nikki Hicks, 17, says that her teacher could really hear the difference, especially with intonation, while for Jenny Jacom, 18, the course helps keep her music going as she prepares to study a different discipline at college. 'Lev Parikian is both friendly and stern,' she says. 'He's great because he squeezes everything out of us that he can.'

The motivation of the students is apparent



Most of the students return for at least two years. 'It's really training in a currency of thinking,' reflects James Downs, 17, now in his third year. 'There's lots to learn and I still find myself applying what I learnt on my first course here.'

So often with residential courses the level of supervision leaves something to be desired. Here it's almost the reverse, with staff meeting daily to sort out extra-curricular matters. 'One child's grandmother died while she was on the course, and things like this obviously have a big effect on the student,' says Ronchetti. 'We follow a holistic approach to music: we don't just focus on training talent but on the whole individual, their behaviour and what they expect of themselves. When parents watched our Open Day, they were taken aback at how hard their children study, and the level at which they work. You simply have to be dedicated and motivated to be here.'

That motivation is ever apparent as the day of the first concert arrives and staff are visibly on tenterhooks, hoping that the careful preparation will reap dividends. Vigay is particularly delighted that two former NYSA students — Catrin Win Morgan and Hannah Dawson — have returned as the soloists in Malcolm Arnold's Double Violin Concerto. 'It really lends a continuity to the occasion,' he says. Win Morgan now studies with Maurice Hasson, while Dawson works with Ani Schnarch. Both professors would have been delighted by their committed and highly accomplished performances.

For its part, the NYSA delivers the goods, retaining an impressive amount of detail from rehearsals — no mean feat in the complicated rhythmic cogs of the Arnold. But the players particularly shine in a sensitive and passionate performance of Tchaikovsky's *Serenade*, and it's not hard to see what impresses audiences and fellow musicians alike about this focused ensemble. Neville Marriner pays eloquent tribute: 'Amidst the barren wastes of English music education, the NYSA stands as a supreme example of individual ambition and endeavour to fill the void. The last great step from gifted youth to professional commitment is raised and encouraged by a devoted teaching faculty. Schools, colleges, academies, ministers, arts councillors — for goodness' sake, pay attention!' ■