

Susan Elkin meets members of National ISIS Strings Academy, and talks to director Viviane Ronchetti about introducing the glories of the string orchestra repertoire to young players

I dropped in on their intensive weekend course at Queenswood School during the February half-term. They also convene for a full week during the Easter break and another in the summer holidays as well as for a weekend during the October half-term.

'Too many people say that in youth orchestras it doesn't matter if the string parts are too hard for the players because the brass will cover the worst bits,' says Ronchetti, to whom such cavalier disregard of the intrinsic worth of string players and string music is anathema. 'So I set out to introduce the pleasure of good string-orchestra playing and the glories of string repertoire to young players.'

do our best to assist any student who has the right level of musical ability but who needs financial help in order to join us,' says Ronchetti who runs the courses and teaches on them without herself receiving any kind of fee, although other tutors have, of course, to be paid for their work.

Meanwhile, Sir Neville Marriner has agreed to be patron and is to conduct NISA for a concert in London next year. Other patrons include Mark Elder and Jane Glover.

The musical standard is extraordinarily high. 'We do very careful work, often almost individually, which works because of our small numbers,' explains Ronchetti.

'It's intense and it's detailed but it's designed to build up their confidence.'

This year NISA is working on Bartók's notoriously tricky Divertimento, Elgar's Serenade for Strings and Mozart's Divertimento in B flat – three quite different musical experiences to maximise the learning. I watched Maureen Parrington, who is on the staff of Pro Corda, leading the second violins through a pizzicato section of the Bartók. 'You must lead rhythmically,' she tells the leader, instructing her to start the group. 'Do your job, take them with you,' explaining in passing the explosive quality of a Bartók pizzicato.

This summer for nine days NISA is to tour Washington DC where the group will give several concerts by invitation. Each player is contributing £650 toward the cost of this – and there will be time for sight-seeing and other holiday activities while they are in the US – with a little extra financial help available for those who really need it.

Although the ISIS connection might seem to suggest that NISA is a venture exclusively for pupils attending independent schools, Ronchetti is keen to point out that applications are welcome from any string player attending any kind of school. Most players are aged 11-18. 'We look for a basic standard of around grade 7 or 8 and admission is by audition,' she says. 'We really want NISA to be better known and we'd like to receive many more applications.'

For more information on NISA contact Viviane Ronchetti, Queenswood School, Brookmans Park, Hatfield, Hertfordshire AL9 6NS, tel/fax 01707 642244, email vrnisa@queenswood.herts.sch.uk or visit www.isis.org.uk/misc/nisa

Glorious strings



Viviane Ronchetti with members of NISA: 'Too many people say that in youth orchestras it doesn't matter if the string parts are too hard for the players because the brass will cover the worst bits'

I like coming to these courses because I want to make the double bass into a recognised solo instrument,' says Meherban Mino-Nahab chirpily. He is 11, although you would mistake him for much more from his manner and playing ability. A pupil at the Purcell School, Meherban also has lessons at the Guildhall School of Music.

As I meet him, he is chatting over coffee to Dominic Hargreaves, 18, an accomplished violinist from Highgate School in London, who is shortly to take a place to read physics at Magdalen College, Oxford. 'I'm enjoying being musically pushed here,' says Dominic who is doing music A level alongside physics and maths. Like Laura Streete, a talented 16-year-old from Henley-in-Arden, Dominic regards the violin as a demanding hobby but not a future career.

Meherban, Dominic, Laura and 19 others are members of a rather unusual youth string group founded in 1993 by Viviane Ronchetti, head of strings at Queenswood School, Hatfield. Players are drawn from independent, grant-maintained and comprehensive schools all over the country. They were hard at work in sectionals when

Ronchetti approached talented string coaches such as Roger Garland, John Gary and Denis Vigay, all of whom are former principals of Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields Orchestra and Chamber Ensemble. The men and women who work in NISA with Ronchetti are all highly experienced performers and teachers with whom she has worked closely for many years. They make a strong team.

National ISIS, the Independent Schools Information Service, agreed to put its name to the project which was soon nicely named NISA (National ISIS Strings Academy). ISIS also enthusiastically raised and continues to raise vital sponsorship from organisations such as Holmwood Insurance Services Ltd and the Haberdashers Company. And Queenswood School has been keenly supportive from the beginning by giving NISA a permanent home and providing accommodation and food at rock-bottom cost as well as absorbing much of the administrative expense.

All this means that participating students pay nothing for their tuition although there is a modest accommodation charge because all players are resident on courses. 'We've got some bursary funding and we