

Chamber Music Diplomacy

Leona Francombe

During the hot September of 1989, high above the winding Moravici river in northern Czechoslovakia in a flamboyant 19th-century castle, once home to the Prince Carl von Lichnowsky, East encountered West. This was no ordinary meeting. No bureaucrats, agricultural experts, journalists, or engineers delivered speeches bloated with rhetoric and formulas, their truth obscured by protocol. Instead, the sounds of another kind of dialogue spilled from an upper window of the castle into the sun-baked courtyard. This was the kind of language that leaps and shines and speaks through no interpreter: Mozart.

A violin and viola ruptured the poise of that Indian summer afternoon with Mozart's Duo in G Major. The Soviet Union was on violin, the United States on viola, and the summit was in full swing without even a single word.

Even of us made the long journey to Hradec nad Moravici from the Netherlands, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, U.S.A., Hungary, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Prague to participate in the first East European seminar of the new chamber music initiative Concorde East/West. Our sponsor in Czechoslovakia, the Czech Music Fund, had invited the musicians to the Moravian village for rehearsals. Hradec was remote and rural, known mainly for its annual music festival held at the castle and historical visits from such musical luminaries as Beethoven, Liszt, and Paganini. The castle itself sits enclosed by vast, cool forests and enveloped in the hush of lingering genius: a splendid refuge for ten



Prof. Georg Ebert (Hochschule für Musik, Vienna) coaches Leona Francombe on Khatchaturian Trio for violin, clarinet and piano.

string players and a pianist to confer through chamber music.

This was to be the longest and most public seminar yet since Concorde East/West began in Brussels in 1987 with seed money from the European Cultural Foundation and the **International Fund for the Promotion of Culture**, and later additional support from the Franz Josef Stiftung of Liechtenstein. Rehearsals spread over ten days and culminated in three concerts, two in small northern towns and a final performance in the Knights' Hall of the Wallenstein Palace in Prague.

Previous Concorde East/West events had included an introductory workshop and concert in Liechtenstein under the patronage of the late Princess Gina of Liechtenstein; performances in Strasbourg at the 40th anniversary of the Council of Europe; and appearances on concert series in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Chamber music as metaphor

Diplomacy through music is certainly not a new concept, as exchanges and international orchestras abound. But cooperation through chamber music—that is, small groups of up to eight instrumentalists without conductor—usually occurs only in random, one-time collaborations such as the recent joint performance in Brussels of the Borodin and Fine Arts quartets. In contrast, Concorde East/West was founded on the principle of establishing a permanent program with a revolving membership of young

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professionals resident in their respective countries. These artists would then perform together at regular intervals during the year (depending on their schedules) in different instrumental groupings.

Classical chamber music has a sadly restricted following, by nature requiring intimate halls and a knowledgeable audience. Concorde East/West sought to bypass these restrictions, and in fact capitalize on them, through embracing a larger concept: chamber music as metaphor. If together a Hungarian, Russian, Czech, American and German can publicly communicate the profound messages of Beethoven or Brahms on the most personal level, then perhaps the symbolism of this difficult union can reach far beyond its size. Such was our feeling of a mission: small, select, and spirited. But as missionaries we had no pretenses to changing the cultural or political face of Europe beyond the whimsical hope that sometimes a single footstep can loose an avalanche.

The idea of chamber music diplomacy may be simple in vision, but in reality proved to be an extravagant gamble. What would really happen when a Russian, American, two Czechs and an Englishwoman faced each other in the first rehearsal of the Beethoven string quintet Op. 29, a public concert only ten days away? Would chaos break loose and music stands fly? Would the Cold War stop thawing and Beethoven himself rise to arbitrate?

Stretching the limits of possibility

That chamber music can be used as a successful vehicle to promote cooperation between various Eastern and Western countries, all with their own traditions of style and performance, is a risky supposition to anyone who knows music. First, even the best ensembles must negotiate a delicate marriage between styles and personalities. Second, to obtain such marital bliss takes hours, months, years of sheer toil, and as already mentioned, Concorde East/West musicians do not live in the same cities or even countries. How, then, could the Beethoven quintet work at all, not only in rehearsal but on important concert stages in Europe?

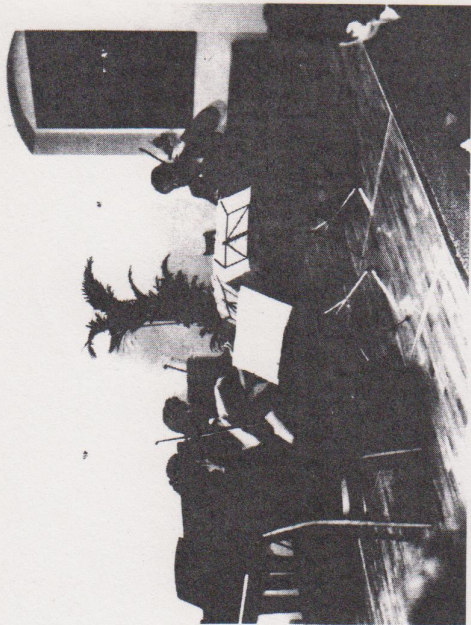
Despite the intense musical demands of such a feat, the human factor in the end played the crucial role. Those musicians rehearsing Beethoven were not only accomplished soloists and chamber musicians, but also humanitarians looking for a cause. What many of them didn't know was how long it

took for the cause to find them.

I m a g i n e placing an ad that reads: "Wanted: young professional violinist, 25 to 35, expert chamber musician, free to travel, diplomatic, knowledge of foreign languages a help, commitment to international relations, sense of humor, willing to accept low fees". One might as well advertise for a cello with wings. Even an approximation would stretch the limits of possibility; yet each quality was indispensable in upholding the project's standards.

And so the search for musicians began in a one-room, one-person office in Brussels — a search, careful and sleuth-like, that followed leads from New York to Siberia to Antwerp. The long list of possible contacts included an occasionally promising but more often spurious collection of embassies, societies for international relations, music schools, cultural ministries and foundations, newspaper articles, and friends of friends. Each time the phone rang it was impossible to be prepared. The language was anyone's guess. One day the cultural attaché of the Soviet embassy in Brussels called spontaneously to ask, in heavily accented Georgian Russian, what, exactly, was Concorde East/West. This call could then be followed by an attempt to telephone a violinist in Bucharest, the line being cut dead every 30 seconds or so. A whole afternoon was often spent tracking down the score of a rarely-performed chamber work such as Reinhold Glière's string octet.

After information bulletins to possible candidates had been flung with great optimism in all directions, a long silence ensued. Then, slowly but



Performance of Kodaly's Intermezzo by (from left to right) Maria Szabo (Hungary), Karie Prescott (USA) and Rupert Schöttle (FRG) in Opava's newly-restored concert hall.
[Photo: Concorde East/West]

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Prof. Bretislav Novotny, Concorde East/West advisor and first violinist of Prague String Quartet (centre) and Dr Alfred Hilbe of the Franz Josef Foundation, Liechtenstein (right) at reception following concert in Prague.

gratifyingly, the replies came in. Telexes arrived from Prague and Moscow. A packet came from Romania dirtied and opened, its contents a partially-crushed cassette tape and handwritten letter—and this from one of the top violinists in Eastern Europe and a prize-winner in the Tchaikovsky competition. Almost every musician who had been approached sent a positive answer.

Many of those interested in Concorde East/West to Eastern Europe had no phones, and at times it was necessary to track them down by foot to their apartments in the Eastern capitals. Usually an entertaining and slightly far-fetched scene unfolded.

The apartment bell would ring.

"Yes?" (in Czech, Polish or Russian).

"Ah, hello," (in English, Russian or German), "this is Concorde East/West — you know, the new world-peace-through-chamber-music idea? — perhaps you received my letter..." Confused pause by both parties. Then sometimes, miraculously, laughter. Very often the outcome of the dialogue at this moment decided a candidate.

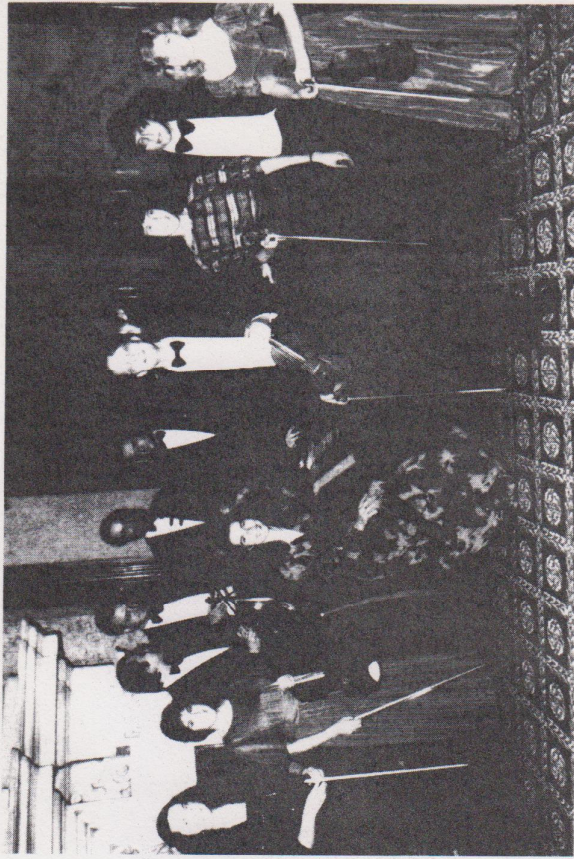
This was the sort of spontaneity, humor, intelligence, and courage with languages that could make the venture succeed. With little promise of financial rewards or extensive touring (project funds, then and now, have always been a struggle), it became readily apparent who genuinely supported the ideals of the program, and who wanted to further their own career as soloist. There is a plethora of gifted musicians in both East and West. The challenge was to find those gifted not only as musicians, but also as human beings.

Music as peace-maker

Once chosen, the participants, like all artists, required delicate handling. That meant placing them with care in ensembles with suitable partners and giving them pieces they loved. If one of the Czechs disliked Shostakovich and didn't speak Russian or English, there was no sense in putting him in a Shostakovich trio with a German who spoke English and American who spoke Russian. A speedier way to international understanding would be a quintet played by a Pole, two Americans, a German and a Czech, all communicating good-naturedly and effectively in a happy tangle of four languages.

The music itself, of course, acted as chief peace-maker, the particular greatness of each piece engendering respect and professionalism in everybody.

If the group's new-found solidarity could hold together in public performance, then the music's metaphor was complete, the message delivered.



Concorde East/West in Prague, from left to right: Mario Szabo (Hungary), Karie Prescott (USA), Pavel Perina (Czechoslovakia), Jan Opsitos (Czechoslovakia), Leona Francombe (USA/UK), Rupert Schöttle (FRG), Daniel Veis (Czechoslovakia), Daniel Schrad (FRG), Miriam van Dixhoorn (Netherlands), Mikhail Maximovich Korn (USSR), Philippa Ibbotson (UK).

There were sticky moments, though, as any human relationship can attest: "No, no!" said a Czech one day to the Russian, in English. "Your tone is too harsh!"

"What did he say?" the Russian asked another Czech in Russian.

"Aren't you being too hard on him?" Czech 2 asked Czech 1, in Czech.

"Let's try it again from measure 36," said Czech 2 to the group, in English. "And everyone: not so harsh!"

A consummate diplomat would have walked away pleased.

Yet to prevent any latent bad politicking, the project invited distinguished musicians to observe and advise at rehearsals. Professor Georg Ebert of the Hochschule für Musik in Vienna visited the first experimental workshop in Liechtenstein, and in Hradec nad Moravici, Professor Bretislav Novotny of the Prague String Quartet coached the ensembles. In both cases, the presence of an older and independent observer who could rapidly fine-tune a chamber group helped to focus work that might ordinarily have taken weeks into an intensive ten days. The concerts at the end of the seminars quickly demolished any boundaries that might still have existed between participants. In their struggle to prepare a difficult program for performance, the musicians ceased to be "East" and "West" and simply became colleagues. From the first note that sounded at the 9:00 a.m. rehearsal to the last beer at midnight, detente prevailed without anyone really noticing.

The East/West spirit prevailed in repertoire as well as membership. Composers included Dohnanyi, Kodaly, Dvorak, Martinu, and Shostakovich, in addition to Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart, Fauré and Strauss. Whether the music we performed spoke deeply to its listeners was difficult to tell among the more formal and educated audiences. We had warm and attentive responses everywhere. But concert ritual prescribes a certain distance between performer and public; a distance that can so easily feel empty and rigid. Perhaps the most revealing test is to play for the humblest and least educated listener and let him decide. Late one afternoon at Hradec, we had our chance.

We were sweating through the fugue of the Shostakovich piano quintet, the rehearsal hall door open wide to the brilliant patterns of sun and shadow in the courtyard, when a large square figure appeared, filling the doorway. She was dressed in the traditional smock and leggings of the village people and had hands enlarged and reddened by work. She could have been a peasant in the service of Prince von Lichnowsky, her century-old scythe left outside the door. In fact, she washed dishes in the castle kitchen on the other side of the courtyard and must have been lured by the alien sounds, as Shostakovich surely must have

seemed to her. But she was obviously transfixed by the music, her broad face a mask of concentration. She stood motionless for at least twenty minutes as if contemplating some ancient voice from the earth, then left without a word.

The next day she materialized again, this time bringing us coffee with cream—a rare delicacy in that village. Her bulk moved soundlessly on felt shoes and she disappeared before anyone could thank her. Through that single peasant listener we suddenly began to realize the boundless potential of our message.

The mysterious visitor never completely vanished from our consciousness when we played in Prague's grand Wallenstein Palace before ministers, cultural officials, and a capacity crowd. Their sustained applause expressed what the silent villager perhaps instinctively felt: a union had taken place, however small, between vastly differing schools, languages, styles, mentalities, and societies. The symbolism was hard-won. But as any peasant knows from field songs, work through music is infinitely easier.

Europe has changed drastically since Concorde East/West began, and the program has transformed accordingly. Its activities make less of a political statement, being more concerned with helping Eastern musicians use their new freedom in finding performance opportunities in the West. Concerts are still, according to the Concorde East/West ideal, in the form of collaboration with Western musicians. Although barriers are now open, a great lack of money and contacts still poses insoluble difficulties to young Eastern artists being introduced to the West. Now more than even is there need for a program to help them.

In reflecting back on that brooding, hot autumn in Czechoslovakia, it could appear to the fanciful observer that we were like a small band of missionaries arrived just ahead of the crusade. For only a few weeks after we played in Prague, the "velvet revolution" transformed the Czechs, the Berlin Wall fell, and Romania shattered. It's a capricious thought, of course. Surely even Mozart's sorcery has its limits. But one can only dream.

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Leona Francombe (United Kingdom and United States of America), the founder and Project Manager of "Concorde East/West", is a pianist as well as arts journalist and administrator.