



Fjord musicians: the Maggini Quartet in Sund

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

A chamber music course in the heart of Norway offers endless summer days and exhilarating coaching by the Maggini Quartet. Violinist **DAVID PIEVSKY** and his quartet travelled north to join in

SATURDAY 28 JUNE

I'm up at 4am to make sure I get to Heathrow for a very early flight to Trondheim (via Oslo). My quartet's violist has persuaded us to go on a chamber music course in a remote part of Norway. Since the four of us currently live in three different countries, we are going to arrive a day before the course starts so that we can practise together.

After an adventure at Oslo airport involving a disappearing cello, it's 5pm before we finally arrive at Sund Folk College, about 100km from Trondheim. The Norwegian Chamber Music Society has run a summer chamber music course here for over 40 years, and the Maggini Quartet has been coaching it since 1997. We walk into the village, distracted by the lovely views at every turn, eat a tasty meal overlooking the Trondheim fjord, and watch the night sky with increasing wonderment as it refuses to get any darker.

SUNDAY 29 JUNE

We're going to be on a steep learning curve here. We've decided, after some hesitation, to study Walton's String Quartet in A minor. We all love the piece, but it will be a challenge. We read through the expansive, serious, lyrical first movement and the biggest issue is going to be nailing the irregular rhythms: although the basic time signature is 2/4, many bars are written in 3/4 but with a 6/8 feel. We work on various passages, starting with the mysterious ending and working backwards.

After lunch we have a run-through of the irresistibly energetic scherzo, which goes a bit better than expected. Then we work on the rest of the first movement, which does not. We make lots of mistakes, fall apart regularly, and all get a bit stressed. I say something undiplomatic and unhelpful, and after the rehearsal slope off guiltily.

In the late afternoon and evening, the other participants arrive – quartets from

Sweden, Germany, Britain and Norway. We have a delicious meal together: locally caught fish will be the order of the day here. Later we relax by playing through some other quartets for fun (Haydn and Beethoven). The musical curfews here are generally taken seriously – there is to be no playing between lunchtime and 4pm, or after 11pm. The course itself starts tomorrow morning.

MONDAY 30 JUNE

Our first coaching session is with Michal Kaznowski, the Maggini's cellist. (Overall, we will have seven coached sessions, three of which will be with Michal.) He helps us with how to rehearse, suggesting that ensemble problems can sometimes be solved by having each of us 'leading' a passage. And he explains that balance is not always only about finding the 'tune'. Later we work on the scherzo, preparing for our next coached session. We are baffled by Walton's metronome mark (bar = 138–144), which seems so fast as to be unplayable.

In the evening, we are treated to the first of two wonderful concerts given by the Maggini's. They play Haydn, Ronald Corp and Beethoven op.59 no.3, all with remarkable energy, unanimity and style. The last movement of the Beethoven goes like the wind. Perhaps we will have to take Walton at his word.

TUESDAY 1 JULY

In our second session with Michal we work on the scherzo, focusing on getting

consistency in our accents and bowing. Because it's a fast 3/8 piece with a basic quaver ostinato, Michal suggests giving some emphasis to the first beat of each bar so that the music has shape and momentum. We practise the high passages for intonation very slowly. Michal is very clear about precisely where in the music the intonation problems are occurring, and he is equally diplomatic about precisely which of us is responsible.

In the afternoon I have an interesting conversation with Randi Selvik, a musicologist from Trondheim and the course organiser (and a participant on viola), about the history of the course. The governing idea is that the quartet experiences music as a whole (not as individuals) through a combination of coaching, practice, recitals, demonstration lectures and a final concert in which everyone performs. The demonstration lecture this week is on Rubbra's Second Quartet, which the Magginis will perform tomorrow.

WEDNESDAY 2 JULY

The sun has come out and it is going to be hot for the rest of the week. I had not

anticipated that the temperature could be 30C in a place which is so near to the Arctic Circle that on summer nights the sun sets for only a few hours and stays just below the horizon.

We are coached today by Gina McCormack, the Maggini's guest leader (who we learn later in the month has been appointed as permanent leader). She immediately solves a problem in my department: my need, as second violinist, to accompany by following the melody (which, for example, is with the viola at the very start of the work) has led to inflexibility and stodginess. Gina encourages me to be more incisive about the flow of the accompanying line and to let the violist work around it — no doubt an objection will be sounded if I go too far or fast! Gina also asks me to play some of my soloistic bars on the G string (with portamento between Walton's very wide intervals). I worry about this sounding truly dreadful if I miss the top of the slide, which seems quite likely as I have a strike rate of about two in five when I have a go at it. I'll need to work on this on my own.

We do some private practice — I find a lonely tree next to the beach to play under — and later reconvene to look at the third movement. This is a mess at the moment: it's very

difficult to hear how it should go as the tempo is very slow and the music quite episodic, with various different styles.

But then we are inspired once more, by the Maggini's second concert. They play Beethoven op.18 no.2, the Rubbra, and Dvořák's 'American' Quartet (complete with an allegedly unplayable Czech rhythm).

THURSDAY 3 JULY

We offer up our scherzo to David Angel, the Maggini's second violinist. The key rhythm to get right, which will make the movement sound exciting, typically occurs where instead of the normal three-quaver ostinato, the bar is occasionally made up of a dotted-quaver rest, a semiquaver and a quaver (the movement is a Presto in 3/8). David says that the best thing to do here is to make the semiquaver incredibly short — to 'snatch' it to a state of virtual non-existence, and to play it with the bow already firmly on the string. He also comments, fascinatingly, on altering positions in second violin passages to support the quartet's needs where necessary.

The last thing he gets us to do is very important — he reminds us to have fun where the music is asking for it. The scherzo is sounding pretty good now and we are encouraged by our exhilarating session. Later I have an interesting chat with David about tempo (he has reassured

me that we do not need to get to 138) and how quite a few composers seemed to conceive of their pieces faster than might appear natural or workable. So even if great composers supposedly knew what they wanted, the central issue for the performer is to work out ▶



Martin Outram during a coaching session



Three of the Maggini Quartet share a joke



The Magginis acknowledge applause after one of their concerts

David Angel reminds us to have fun where the music is asking for it

what the composer's real view truly is, in light of the clues (usually but not always helpful) that have been left in the score.

FRIDAY 4 JULY

The Maggini's violist Martin Outram comes to see us and we play him the fourth movement. I think this one is technically very difficult, especially the bowing. It doesn't have so many of the rhythmic or interpretative issues which arise in the other movements, but it's just as hard. Martin helps us with the range of bowing styles required, differentiating between the varying functions of staccato within the music. As with all of the coaches, Martin is totally authoritative about the discrepancies between our parts and the score in this work. Usually the score is right, he explains, but not always. There's a particular moment for the viola which would have constituted a rather startling variation on the general direction of the movement — had it not been a misprint.

We spend the afternoon swimming in the calm, cool waters of the lake, with the hot sun beating down. In the evening we

We use our last session with Michal Kaznowski to plead for help on the third movement

are invited to the family home of one of the participants who lives nearby. There is a barbecue and plenty of wine, and some of us get out our instruments and entertain the guests. Only one day to go — I am seriously going to miss this when it is over.

SATURDAY 5 JULY

This will be a busy day: we are going to have two consecutive coaching sessions, then play in a concert, eat at a banquet, and finally mess around together in a cabaret late into the night. Hangovers are to be ignored.

We use our last session with Michal to plead for help on the third movement and we apologise to him about the state it is in. But his advice is very useful, and by the end of the session the music is making a lot more sense. Michal gets us to maintain a sense of line through the very long notes



PHOTOS COURTESY RANDI SELVIK

David Pievsky (second from left) and quartet during the final night's performances

and insists that we think carefully about the tuning of our chords. On reflection, he also seems to have decided carefully which bits to rehearse with us and in which order — it is not a question of starting at the beginning.

In the final session we perform the scherzo for Gina and she asks us not to neglect the diminuendos, which should be just as exciting and dramatic as the crescendos. She helps us with bowing styles for the shocking fortissimo duplet passages near the end.

The Maggini's have been wonderful coaches on this great piece: the music is in their blood. They communicate their musical and technical insights with clarity, neither intimidating the recipient by being



Gina McCormack and David Angel let their hair down in the final evening's cabaret

Afterwards, there is a genuine feeling of shared happiness and collective pride within our new circle of friends.

After a sumptuous dinner we settle in for the evening's entertainment. Each group offers something. We go for Dudley Moore's silly but masterful version of *Delilah* by Tom Jones, written as a Beethoven pastiche. I love this routine, and I'm excited (beyond reason or logic) to learn that the Maggini's David Angel was one of the first ever violinists to play it. Gina leads a piano trio in a terrific and vicious movement by Shostakovich, and there follows a cello and then a viola choir, various items of folk music, some dancing, comedy routines and some impromptu jazz. The Maggini's perform a hammed-up Haydn movement with such increasing musical and physical absurdity that the room is eventually reduced to tears of laughter and shouts of joy. And so it goes on, until it is almost morning, and time to leave Sund, to head back to the world of jobs, dark nights and normality.

The course has been a wonderful experience — intense, sleep-depriving, but enriching. The people who attend are without exception interesting and friendly, and everyone, whether aged 18 or 80, is hungry to learn. The internationalism is good, and our nurtured love of music feels like a precious connection that binds our otherwise disparate lives together. ■