

Move over, Maestro: Spira Mirabilis, the democratic orchestra

The orchestra Spira Mirabilis is making a bid for artistic freedom by playing without a conductor



Lorenza Borrani and Annedore Oberborbeck of Spira Mirabilis Photo: Lydia Goldblatt

By Rupert Christiansen

9:00AM GMT 05 Dec 2012

I could not find Formigine listed in any guide book. It is a pleasant, quiet Italian town about 20 minutes' drive from Modena, with an unremarkable church and a heavily reconstructed medieval castello, both typical of this flat, prosperous region of central Italy. Many of the 30,000 people who live here work at the nearby Ferrari factory or in the ceramic-tile business, but Formigine itself is untouched by the fumes of industry.

Two sports stars – the World Cup footballer Cristian Zaccardo and the Paralympic gold-medal-winning swimmer Cecilia Camellini – were born here. Their framed photographs are displayed in shops and bars, but no one else has ever managed to make the place arrestingly interesting.

Yet something is stirring in Formigine. The story starts five years ago, when a letter arrived on the desk of an ambitious local government officer called Paolo Negro, whose portfolio of responsibilities included culture – in which Formigine was altogether lacking. The letter was a round robin sent to every town in the area, signed by Timoti Fregni, a hopeful young violinist.

He and three of his close friends, the violinists Lorenza Borrani and Giacomo Tesini, and the clarinetist Miriam Caldarini, all of them new to the orchestral profession, were fed up with

playing in concerts flung together at short notice without regard to anything except filling halls. 'Wouldn't it be nice,' Lorenza Borrani remembers thinking, 'if we could just spend some time with friends, and friends of friends, and study a piece of music a bit more deeply without worrying about money or selling tickets? It was as simple as that, and in some ways it still is.'

After a couple of informal sessions and dry runs, it seemed right to take the idea a stage further. The group that stuck decided to call themselves Spira Mirabilis, after the mathematically distinct growth spiral of, for example, a snail shell. The intention was to suggest something in which every element is of equal value whatever its dimensions. This is indicative of something fundamental to Spira: its radically democratic structure and infinite flexibility within a set of firmly prescribed moral principles.

But first they had to find somewhere where they could rehearse and sleep – at next to no cost.

'I must have written about 30 of these letters to local government officers,' Fregni remembers, 'but Paolo Negro was the only one who even replied.' Negro, hoping that Spira could ignite a youthful spark into Formigine, offered the free use of a sports hall in the local leisure centre, and a dormitory in the top floor of a villa otherwise occupied by an old people's home.



Spira Mirabilis never wilfully set out to be different, but it has turned into something unique in the hidebound world of classical music. For convenience it is called an orchestra, but it is perhaps better described a co-operative of young freelance instrumentalists of the highest

quality, drawn mostly but not exclusively from the European Union, who meet about six times a year for 10 days or so at a time, making its base in Formigine.

What has caught the headlines is that this is an orchestra that plays without a conductor. Yet this is not such a very unusual practice – the popular idea of the tempestuous authoritarian maestro, Toscanini or Karajan, is really a creation of the later 19th century, when composers started writing extremely complex scores for huge orchestras. Before that, the conductor was often simply the leader of the first violins, whose job it was to give the cues and mark basic matters of tempo, and today there are several small orchestras around the world (our own Britten Sinfonia, for example) that often dispense with conductors to operate in the same way as chamber ensembles such as string quartets. The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, based in New York, has not had a conductor for 40 years.

Spira acknowledge that in the largest-scale symphonic repertory of Bruckner, Mahler and Strauss, a conductor is implied by the score, almost as though there were a part composed for them but not notated. Yet Spira Mirabilis does not play that sort of music and probably never will. Its members take the view that in the smaller-scale works they undertake, they just don't see any reason to take the short cut of putting one person in charge of the decisions; they want to face the challenges collectively and work out the problems themselves.

This is a process that requires an enormous amount of rehearsal – perhaps five times what an orchestra with a conductor would – as well as levels of patience and restraint that would test the most Zen-like of temperaments. And Spira goes even further, claiming that rehearsal is in fact endless, and that its public performances are something provisional rather than end-points. 'The best rehearsals we have are usually the ones we have the day after a concert,' the violist Simone Jandl tells me.

Although Spira has a core of faithful regular members, most of whom participate in most of the sessions, there is no fixed personnel and no audition protocol; everyone who plays is admitted on the simple personal recommendation of another member. 'Occasionally it doesn't work out,' the horn player Francesco Bossaglia, who is the nearest that Spira has to a disciplinary chief whip, explains. 'But it has never been a problem: we don't want them to come back, and neither do they.'



To understand what Spira is about, you have to hear and watch a rehearsal. Every player has an equal right to speak out and present their view, so long as they can back it up with reference to the score. It is not enough to say that you feel that it should go quicker or louder: the process is intellectual rather than instinctive.

A few bars are played, until halfway through the melody someone will put up a hand. With the respectful decorum of a Quaker meeting, this player will then be invited to make his or her point – can we hear the clarinet? Did the double basses come in a fraction late? Someone answers, someone else responds, then there will be a period of silence, after which Bossaglia will ask everyone to resume. 'Fratelli', he calls them – brothers, comrades. And so the same bars are played again, and only the sensitivity of a bat could pick up the fine point of difference. But to Spira that fine point is what matters: more than that, it is what binds them

together.

Outside rehearsal, all executive and practical matters are similarly debated and decided by a colloquium of core members, a body that currently stands at 16, but is always evolving, again via personal recommendation. All decisions, both musical and administrative, have to be made by universal consent: there is no voting, no tyranny of the majority. I am not made privy to one of these meetings. 'They are calm,' Fregni tells me. 'Except perhaps for Francesco,' Lorenza adds. 'If they go on after midnight, he can start to shout a bit.'

Basically, all members of the orchestra are paid only living expenses, with any profit after costs – and so far that has never been very much – shared equally at the end of the year. They do not like to think about money: they often play free of charge in public places, and in its early days made a number of flashmob appearances – they can be seen on YouTube, playing in Ipswich Market. But even these blazing idealists have to earn their bread, and the absence of a living wage means that members have to regard Spira as the equivalent of an occasional monastic retreat, spiritually necessary but financially unremunerative.

Spending three days with Spira Mirabilis in Formigine was an exhilarating but intimidating experience. There is something almost frighteningly puritanical about the motivation of these musicians, and for all the superficial friendliness that individual members are ready to show, outsiders can be made to feel precisely that – outsiders.



The players' existence in Formigine is austere: when they are not rehearsing they lodge, often two to a room, in a spartan hotel without air conditioning, or are billeted with local families. Twice daily they pile into a cafe, where they are doled out a plate of rather nasty, basic food – one course only – washed down with water. There is unfailing good humour but not much larking about: earnestness is the keynote. All they want to talk about is the faith – the music. A unit of alcohol seems like a special treat, and as for the hotbedding for which conventional orchestras are notorious – 'Well, there's only one love affair that I know about, and that's with the music,' Christopher Scotney, a British double bass player, says.

He is not misrepresenting the position. These young people do not have sex on their minds. They live and breathe the score they are working on. During my visit this is Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which they played free in Formigine's piazza, next door to an elegantly modernist new school and community hall that will open in February. Thanks to Paolo Negro's leverage in the town council, the design of this hall incorporates features that also will make it an ideal space for Spira Mirabilis, giving the orchestra for the first time a proper performing space of its own.

Concerts always consist of one piece of music only, which is followed by an opportunity for the audience to ask questions; occasionally an encore will repeat a movement of the piece, in the course of which the bulk of the musicians will wander into the aisles and play walkabout, as if to prove that there is nobody secretly in charge via a monitor. This sort of spontaneity is the flip side of the intensive rehearsal ethos and it explains why so far Spira has refused to make any recordings. Timoti Fregni believes that would encourage 'an ideology of definitive performance, which is not what we aiming at or what we believe in'.

But as their fame spreads, things are changing. One turning point in Spira's fortunes came when Marshall Marcus, who was then the head of classical music at the Southbank Centre in London, first heard them, at a free concert in a bank in Frankfurt in 2009.

'Their combination of technical mastery, commitment, passion, revolutionary spirit and a desire to reach out to as many people as possible captured me instantly,' he told me. 'They possessed the sort of power of effect you can expect in a concert once a decade. During their encore every hair on my neck was up. There and then, I decided that I must bring them to London.'



So Spira Mirabilis came to the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 2010 and triumphed with both the audience and the critics. Later this month the orchestra will return, and it has also established a warm bond with the Snape Maltings, where it will return in 2014. Meanwhile, its schedule is busier than ever, with visits to Berlin, Istanbul and Amsterdam, as well as five periods of rehearsal in Formigine in the coming months. On the bill is music by Ravel, Mendelssohn, Stravinsky and Britten – all composers new to the repertory.

But how much further can Spira go without losing, or at least compromising, its whiter-than-white soul? One does not have to be a cynic to see that worldly success in big concert halls could bring problems, and that while one tendency in the membership will want to keep filthy lucre out of the temple, another may be tempted to take sponsorship or grants with tricky strings attached in order to finance better conditions.

Already there has been some disagreement over the questions of recording and a contract signed with a big London agency, Harrison Parrott. Pressure to appear at the alluring meccas of Carnegie Hall and the Salzburg Festival cannot be far away – then what? But for Fregni this is not about money, applause or the bright lights. 'We're only here to play music the way we want to play it,' he says. 'And as long as we stick to that, we will continue to say no more than we say yes.'

Marshall Marcus believes they can steer the course. 'Having worked with them several times, and listened and watched them in rehearsals and concerts, I'm struck by a characteristic that is

rather unusual in our contemporary culture: they are uncompromising,' he said. 'In an age in which people change their colours every which way for career, money, fame and the market, Spira sticks out as an awkward squad of people who seem to act exclusively from sheer belief. They play as they do because they have to.' With joy, one wants to add, and with love.

Musicians from Spira Mirabilis will play Schubert's Octet at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London (0844-875 0073) on December 5.

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