

Barlines

By Michelene Wandor

Overture

So oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth wherein they are not guilty,
(Since nature cannot choose his origin)
By their o'ergrowth of some complexion
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit, that too much o'er-leavens
The form of plausible manners, that these men,
Carrying I say the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,
Their virtues else be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault: the dram of eale
Doth all the noble sustenance of a doubt
To his own scandal.

Enter Ghost.

HORATIO: Look, my Lord, it comes.

(Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 4)

THE FIRST DAY

Mrs Dean hears the gravel crunch as she tucks the vacuum cleaner away in the cupboard behind the kitchen door. Mrs Dean sighs, and smooths down the front of her Liberty floral blouse, Springtime colourway, bought from a classy mail-order catalogue. As she hurries through the corridor into the main hall, she can see ahead of her the open hatchback of a car. A Black Watch tartan holdall is already on the gravel, and next to it, a large cardboard box.. Mrs Dean takes up her position behind the table facing the open oak front door, and awaits the first arrivals.

The golden sound, the golden O of sound, travelling from note to note, articulated with fingers, breath and tongue; a steady, liquid stream of breath, round and full, coming from deep, deep within the body, held at its centre by the diaphragm, the sound of a golden O, a line in the ear's air. Held in the mouth, the lips loosely clasped round the mouthpiece, with no precious air seeping out from the edges, the tongue flicking backwards and forwards against the mouthpiece and the edge of the fipple, the cheeks loose, while the fingers play up and down along the shaft. In this century the right hand is uppermost. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was quite common to have the left hand uppermost.

The wide, semi-circular drive is at the end of a long dirt track, at the top of a light incline, leading away from one of the wide arterial roads from London to the north-east. Not quite in East Anglia, Mrs Dean is careful to stress, but the landscape is already flat enough to carry a whiff of the fens, the sky at times the grey of the brooding, looming North Sea on bleak winter days. In spring and autumn the sky looks as though it goes on forever, with a luminous bright blue light which makes the place a haven for amateur painters. Indeed, the most popular courses with the clientele are the painting courses.

For Mrs Dean, however, by far and away the most popular are the early music courses. These have an enthusiastic clientele, and the most charismatic tutors. And of all the early music courses run throughout the year, this is the most special. This is the one week of the year when one substantial piece of music is explored, practised and put together for a special performance at the end of the week.

Silenus, the god with goat's hooves, the lower half of his body curved and hairy, animal and delicate, all at the same time, plays the panpipes. So does Marsyas, later flayed alive by Titian. The panpipes are a series of hollow tubes, bamboo or reed, joined together, each making a different sound, according to its length. Before and after this, came the single pipe, fashioned from a reed, and then from wood: the whistle, the recorder, producing the golden O.

Mrs Dean takes her seat at the table in the hall. Before her are rows of badges with the names of each participant hand-written on an oblong strip of paper in her best italic handwriting (learned at Dartington School, back in its postwar, progressive schooldays). Each piece of paper is slipped into a transparent plastic holder, with a safety pin at the back. Mrs Dean has before her an open book with a list of participants, names and addresses, amounts paid and

owed, and with the relevant room numbers in a column at the side. To the right of the book are the room keys, ranged in numerical order. Mrs Dean is ready.

First the piffari arrived, stereotypically drunk, their unhemmed cloaks little more than rough woollen blankets, flung over their shoulders, doubled back to allow their arms free rein, bundles on their backs, slung soft and bulging, the occasional hard outline of an instrument to raise the profile of the fabric. Mostly they walked, now and again one arrived on horseback, the signal of a court musician. The others, itinerants, defiantly swaggered into the house.

The more refined string players arrived on carts, their instruments kept carefully separate from their clothes, heavy, embroidered cloaks keeping them well wrapped against the rain. Heavy woollen cloth wrapped round the instruments, sometimes heavy, grubby canvas, sewn into the rough hour-glass shape of the instrument, violin or viol, small or large, with a long pouch the length of the instrument at the back for the bow. The heavy cotton fabric used by the Venetian viol players drew glances of envy, and later, tactile admiration from the Roman contingent.

Finally, the singers, their throats cossetted against the damp, their faces swathed. The Concerto delle Donne arrived together, Laura, proud of her Spanish ancestry, her long shawl draped over hennaed hair, sitting at the front of the cart which brought them down from Lake Garda, where they had sung at the emperor's winter solstice. Maria and Isabella sat together at the back, giggling.

'Mrs Dean,' pronounces Gabriel. 'Well, well.' Gabriel always says the same thing on arrival.

'Gabriel. And Netta. How lovely to see you both.' Mrs Dean comes out from behind the table, to touch right cheeks with Netta.

Gabriel will never shake hands, and will certainly never hug or kiss anyone. Those honours are reserved for privacy, and his revered wife, to whom he always refers as his 'better half'. Netta softens the arrival by adding, 'Hello, Mrs Dean. That's a very pretty blouse.'

Gabriel looks up and round the hall. 'Same old Catchpole Manor.' His pleasure shines through: at being at Catchpole Manor again, at seeing Mrs Dean, at knowing that everything is clean and polished and prepared; that the large tins of Instant coffee nestle by the urn behind the serving hatch, that the large trays of sticky pudding are being prepared for the first

supper, that the stainless steel dishwashers are ready for their regular load.

'Just for you,' says Mrs Dean, 'we haven't changed a thing.' They all laugh. This is a ritual. 'How was your journey?'

'Traffic,' says Gabriel.

'I'll get you some tea,' says Mrs Dean. 'Shall I get one of the girls to bring up a tray?'

'Oh, yes, please,' says Netta. 'Gabriel is a bit tired.'

'Nonsense,' dismisses Gabriel.

Netta ignores him and nods her thanks at Mrs Dean. 'Is it alright if we unload the music later? We've left a box outside. It was too heavy to bring in.'

'Of course,' says Mrs Dean. 'I'll get Deirdre to carry it into the library, if you like, and the girls can do the rest later.'

Gabriel is about to refuse the offer, but Netta gets in first. 'Lovely. Thank you.' She taps Gabriel on the arm. 'Come on, dear.'

As Netta and Gabriel climb the stairs, Mrs Dean notices that he is a little more hunched than last year. He has lost weight. His cardigan hangs more loosely.

The city of Mantua lies twenty-five miles south of Verona, and sixty miles from Padua. During the medieval period, as the Mincio became economically and strategically more important, the lower part of the river was diverted into the plains around the city. Here it formed three wide lakes, the Lago Superiore, the Lago di Mezzo and the Lago Inferiore. Until the eighteenth century, Mantua remained entirely surrounded by water, a mini Venice, with a handful of bridges crossing the few canals which wound through the island.

The course brochure welcomes participants from four o'clock. A cup of tea and a biscuit is available in the dining hall from 4.30, and dinner is at 6.30, announces the brochure. Mrs

Dean has never been happy with this phrasing. 'A cup of tea'; 'a biscuit'; as if just one each of these has to be shared between everyone. But she has not been able to think of an alternative. Cups of tea? Tea? The tea urn? Or just tea? In the end she leaves the phrasing as it has always been since the house began to run courses in the early 1950s. It offends her sense of the precise and the organised, but, like so much else, she has had to learn to live with it.

The city goes back to Etruscan times. Virgil was born here, and there is still a statue of him half way up one of the walls in the Piazza Broletto, not far from the Palazzo Ducale. The city is situated in the southern part of the Paduan plain, on the right bank of the Mincio, ten miles north of its confluence with the Po.

For the rest of the afternoon Mrs Dean is busy non-stop, greeting the arrivals, giving each a map of the house and the surrounding area, two keys, one for each bedroom and one for the main door, a name badge and a blank timetable for each to fill in. To each she says the same thing:

'Lovely to see you', sometimes with 'back' or 'again', or just 'Lovely to see you'; to each she indicates the pile of brochures on the side table: 'These will tell you about the history of the house, and you will also find a booklet in your room.'

Unjustly, the golden O has been discredited. The register of the recorder family lies high, the actual sounds being an octave higher than they appear to sound. This is because there are relatively few high harmonics in each note the instrument produces, and so the human ear is cheated, or magicked into hearing something lower than the 'real' sound. What is it that we really hear?

Isabella d'Este, who came from Ferrara to marry Francesco Gonzaga in 1490, is justly known as a patron of the arts, the fine arts, as a collector of classical artefacts, and as a patroness of music. Her husband, Francesco, died in 1519, and their son, Federico, became the ruling Duke.

Federico's rule ushered in an era of ruthless politics, cultural and sexual hedonism. It was Federico who enlarged the Palazzo del Te, on the outskirts of Mantua, on the Te island, enlisting the talents and skills of Giulio Romano and his assistants, to set up a palace of love for his mistress, Isabella Boschetti.

Just before 5 o'clock, Barton and Catherine Phelps arrive, having tramped from the station in their mountain boots, state of the art rucksacks on their backs. Mrs Dean feels a rush of motherly concern, as she always does when she sees them. Married for ten years, an inseparable musical couple, with not a baby in sight. She would never dream of asking them whether or why, but as each year passes, and each of them becomes a little more portly, with strands of greying hair streaking their matching hairstyles, she wonders whether they have a pact for childlessness.

Barton, meanwhile, never a patient man, has already picked up their room key, while Catherine collects the name badges. Catherine smiles her bubbly smile and speaks for both: 'Darling Mrs Dean, you don't look a day older.' And Mrs Dean ritually replies: 'I'm not a day older than I was this morning, Kat, dear.'

Barton is already halfway up the staircase, and as Catherine follows him, Mrs Dean reminds them about the tea.

There are many different sizes of recorder, including the garklein, so named in Germany because it is the smallest, bunching the fingers together on the finger-holes, which can, on appropriate occasions, double as a wide wooden straw, through which cider can be sucked from an evening glass.

Federico managed to juggle his political allegiances cleverly, between the Pope and Emperor Charles V, who visited Mantua in 1530, and rewarded Federico by making him the first Duke of Mantua. Before then, the Gonzaga had been Marquises, a title they took for themselves, after they had been, during the previous century - let's not beat about the bush here - after they had been little more than mercenaries, fighting for whoever would pay them the most.

Marla arrives a few minutes after Barton and Catherine. Mrs Dean has known her as long as she has known Gabriel and Netta; she was one of Gabriel's original tutors, and has been a regular every year since - except for one year's absence, the year, coincidentally, when Barton and Catherine came for the first time. Marla has brought a present for Mrs Dean, a blue and white ceramic duck to add to the collection which graces Mrs Dean's private sitting room.

The Palazzo Ducale is unusual, compared with other Italian Italian Renaissance palaces. Although it does have the familiar crenellated towers in the Castello di San Giorgio, most of

the other buildings look, from the air, at any rate, like other houses in the rest of the city. The church of Santa Barbara is the exception.

It was completed in 1562, and because Mantua was so close to Rome in its papal loyalties, was granted the rare privilege of placing the altar so that the celebrant was facing the congregation, an unusual departure from the more common Catholic practice of facing away from the congregation, and towards God.

It did not escape the notice of some people that this new move was similar to the way that the Jewish rabbis combined prayer and their relationship with their congregation.

At ten to six, Mrs Dean tidies the table, with its few remaining badges, before going to the kitchen to check on supper. A taxi draws up on the gravel, its engine running for long enough for its passenger to pay, then the door opens and a man with shoulder length blond hair and a midnight-blue crumpled linen jacket, pulls a suitcase on wheels, with a bass viol carried on his back, the long strap over his right shoulder.

When a new string is put on the viol, it must be carefully wound up to its correct pitch, and then nurtured until it settles into a tension where it can play truly with its neighbours.

'Robert Waterson,' he says, parking the suitcase, and coming towards Mrs Dean, his hand outstretched. 'I'm sorry if I'm late.'

Mrs Dean takes the outstretched hand; it is strong and warm and the clasp is firm. The piercing blue eyes make immediate contact. Mrs Dean realises that she had forgotten what it was like to blush. She mentally notes that this man may well be one of those who causes bedroom doors to open and shut frequently at night. Trouble, she thinks, then she checks the thought sharply.

'You're not at all late,' she says. 'The bar will be open in five minutes, so you could say you've arrived on time. If you drink, that is,' she adds.

'Oh - just normally,' says Robert.

'Your key,' says Mrs Dean. 'Your room is just at the top of the stairs, next door to the Phelps'.'

'Is Barton here already?' asks Robert.

'He and Catherine arrived on the four-thirty train.'

Robert is struggling to hang onto his key, heave the viol into a more comfortable position, and pick up his case.

'You can put the viol in the main hall. That's where most people have left their instruments,' suggests Mrs Dean.

'No, it's alright,' says Robert. 'I have to change a couple of strings anyway. I may as well do that in my room.'

'Let me help you,' says Mrs Dean. Momentarily forgetting about checking on supper, she acts as porter as she leads Robert up the wide, curved staircase.

Barbara was the patron saint of architects, artillery founders, prisoners and stonemasons, and she was thought to be a protector against thunderstorms, fire and sudden death. She was the patron saint of war, and thus very suitable as an emblem of the Gonzaga family.

'I've been looking forward to this course,' says Robert, as they walk up the broad, curving staircase. 'Gabriel told me about this staircase.'

'And?'

'It's fabulous.'

'It's an adaptation of the Italian Renaissance style to the English taste, in oak,' says Mrs Dean.

'Like Hatfield House?' asks Robert.

'Yes,' says Mrs Dean, pleased. 'Are you interested in houses of this period?'

'To tell you the truth,' answers Robert, 'when Gabriel invited me to Catchpole Manor, I decided to do a bit of research. I like to know where I'm going. I don't really know whether I'm interested in houses like this. But I love the feel of it already.'

'When you get a chance, go and look at the front properly. Catchpole is smaller and more domestic than Hatfield, but like Hatfield, it's built out of brick. That's unusual for the early sixteenth century - where buildings were mostly timber-framed, with infilling of wattle and daub.'

'Ah. Like the bryk place in Hackney. Bryk spelled b-r-y-k. Sutton House.'

'You have been doing your homework,' said Mrs Dead with admiration. She turns right at the top of the stairs and stops outside room number 10.

'This is yours.' She puts the key in the lock and opens the door. 'There's a brochure about the house in your room, but, if you're really interested, I'll show you round the rest of it some time.'

'Many thanks,' says Robert. He lowers the viol carefully to the floor, and again puts out his hand to shake hers. His hand is strong and warm, firm in its clasp. She feels her palm tingle as she goes back down the stairs.

An old string plays sharp on the frets; curling slivers strand along the string. Near the bridge, the rosin bleaches the string white. Along the frets, the string is a darker, translucent ruddy hue, stained by the fingers.

The story goes that Barbara was very beautiful. Her father imprisoned her at the top of a tall tower, at Heliopolis, in Syria. He then went off on some military exploit or other, and while he was away, Barbara became converted to Christianity. Because of this, she persuaded some workmen to build three windows for her tower, in honour of the holy trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

When her father returned, he was appalled, as a good pagan, at this demonstration of infidelity, and he tried to kill her. Miraculously, she was transported to the top of a mountain,

where she was discovered and sentenced to death. However, her father followed and found her, and then personally killed her. Later, he was struck by lightning.

It is 6.35. The hall is full.

The dais on which high table used to be now hosts a row of serving tables. Barton feels at home here; it reminds him of the dining hall at Peterhouse, where he was an active, if not scholarly, student. He feels more than somewhat transgressive as he walks up the stage right stairs to collect his hors d'oeuvres for supper.

On the first table are ranks of small glass dishes, each with a prawn cocktail, smothered in pink sauce, with a quarter slice of lemon as garnish. The flow of excited and hungry people crosses the dais, and descends the stairs on the other side to return to their tables. The rest of supper is served to everyone by the local girls who have Easter holiday jobs for this week.

The first night etiquette is that the tutors sit together. As for the rest, regulars greet each other, gathering from all over the British Isles. People save places for their friends by tipping chairs forward, with their backs resting against the table. Occasionally a newcomer to the course hovers a little awkwardly, asking 'May I?' at an empty chair, and being welcomed.

Robert comes into the hall, a little unsure. Gabriel beckons him, and he joins the tutors' table.

The influence of the Council of Trent earlier in the sixteenth century inadvertently introduced practices and approaches into the Catholic ritual which the Jews had never lost.

There was a distinctive Santa Barbara rite, with its own missal and breviary, developed and negotiated between Mantua and Rome, under the leadership of Duke Guglielmo, who was also something of a musician himself, and who composed parts of what came to be known as the Santa Barbara chant.

The polyphony sung in the church of Santa Barbara came from the musicians in the gallery at the west end.

The first course on this first evening is a vegetable soup, a thin broth of bouillon with some

floating carrots and onions. Then, substantial slices of roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, with horseradish sauce in a sauce boat, roast potatoes, pale cauliflower florets and diced carrots. Each vegetable is piled on a large plate, which is put on the table, for people to help themselves. Not only is this more efficient (Mrs Dean learned in her early days that the girls could be careless and drop individual plates), but it is also an aid to good eating relations, as people pass the dishes to each other.

At the north end of the Santa Barbara gallery, a corridor connects the church with the Palazzo Ducale.

Desert is fairy cakes, with the tops sliced off, in the style of a boiled egg, to reveal a golden yellow fluffy sponge inside; each top is half-upended, to look like wings, steadied on a layer of butter cream, the whole dusted with white icing sugar. At this point the serving tables are all cleared and the left hand table acquires urns of tea and coffee. When everyone is settled with their hot beverage, Gabriel taps a knife on the edge of his glass. The chatter dies down, and Gabriel slowly climbs up the right hand steps onto the dais.

Just as he turns to lean on the banister, a triumphant sound sweeps down from the gallery opposite him. Four sackbuts announce the opening phrase of the Canzon primi toni, a 8. They are joined by their fellow four, and the eight musicians make their way through the piece. Notes crack and the intonation is a bit off now and again, and the final chord dies away as lips unaccustomed to regular pursing tire. But everyone loves it and Gabriel laughs and applauds with the rest.

'Well,' he says. 'What could be more appropriate than the sound of Gabrieli?'

The Council of Trent was set up by Pope Paul 111 in 1542; to clarify doctrinal beliefs, and to legislate for disciplinary and musical reforms within the Church, as a result of the Protestant Reformation.

The Council met over a period of eighteen years, until 1563. At least one meeting was held in Mantua.

When the applause has died down, Gabriel begins.

'Welcome, everyone,' he says, in his soft Cornish burr. The dining room settles to little more than the chink of spoon on cup. 'Welcome to Catchpole Manor. As you are probably all aware, this is our twentieth anniversary, and I am delighted that we have all made it again. A few things have changed this year. We have a magnificent new dining room, and part of the new annexe is now finished. So, while you thrill to the sounds of early music, you'll be able to enjoy the very 21st century privilege of en suite facilities.'

Applause, a few thumps on scattered tables, and a heckle from one of the Midlands' sackbut players of 'About time, too.'

'I don't need to introduce our team to you - well, I only need to introduce one person. Robert Waterson, a former student of Barton's at the North-Eastern Conservatoire, is with us this year. Robert has just come back from a year at The Hague, and I'm sure he will be a welcome addition to our team. He has, I think, just released his first CD - is that right, Robert - '

Robert nods, and then stands up and says: 'Yes. I've brought some copies with me, if anyone is interested.' A glissando of interest and curiosity buzzes round the hall, joined by a few giggles from a pair of teenage girls. Robert sits. Marla, Barton and Catherine look quickly at each other without moving their heads.

'As for the others, well, it's the same old lags. My better half is here to keep me in order, and, if she can find some willing helpers, she has some new arrangements to try out on you. Then we have dear Marla Conway, still without a grey hair in her head -' (everyone laughs affectionately, including Marla) - 'and, of course, Barton Phelps and Catherine Norton. I expect we will all be worked very hard by both of them, and love every minute of it. Barton will take the first session after supper - around 8.30, in the big hall.'

Music, the Council of Trent declared, should be uplifting for the faithful; the words should be intelligible, whether spoken or sung, and any references to anything lascivious or impure must be removed. The Mass should be said in Latin.

'Now, most of you will know the form. There is a noticeboard by the front door, on which the groups for the day will be listed. Everyone will play with their regular group in the mornings, and in the afternoon you are free to make your own playing arrangements, or to request an

organised group to play particular repertoire. Your course packs include seven sheets of paper, and if you give them to me the night before, I will make the necessary arrangements.

Despite these various strictures, it could not be said that life at the Mantuan court was any the less abstemious, any the less riddled with luxury.

'Each year, as you also know, we work on one special piece of music, which is performed at the end of the week. Barton has chosen 'Orfeo' for this year, and he will organise people for that. I'm not sure - are we doing the whole thing, Barton?'

Barton stands briefly. 'Extracts, Gabriel.' He waves a sheaf of A4 pages aloft. 'I've made a list of what is needed; perhaps I could pass this round the hall, so that people can note what they would like to do, and Catherine and I will look at it tonight, and allocate parts tomorrow morning.'

'Excellent.' The paper goes to the next table along, and as Gabriel continues, gradually it moves round the hall.

'Oh, I nearly forgot. Robert has asked if we would like some talks on the background to "Orfeo". I am sure we would.' Nods and more interest, and this time Barton looks at Catherine and raises one eyebrow as he sits down and turns towards her.

Although we are mostly concerned with the early seventeenth century, we must be aware that the foundations for everything that happened then were laid a century earlier.

'The curfew.' Cheers from the Northern sackbut table. 'Well, now. The bar closes at ten, but anyone who wants to bring further liquid beverage is welcome to use the bar space. But I think, in consideration of those of us who would like to retire a little earlier, we should retain our normal times: no music after eleven pm, or before 7 am. That seems reasonable.'

At fifteen, Isabella d'Este could recite the classics. She studied Latin, the lute, the cittern and the lira da braccio. She sang and played the keyboard. During her first decade in Mantua, she increased the number of singers at court, and encouraged the composition of Italianate styles of music. She commissioned new instruments from Lorenzo di Pavia in Venice.

'Please check also that you know the location of the fire extinguishers in the building, and remember that the main door is locked at eleven at night. You each have a key, if you plan to be out after then.'

She constructed and decorated her own studiolo, a room also described as camerino nostro, in the tower of the Castello di San Giorgio, commissioning painters, including Mantegna to produce pictures for the walls, to her carefully specified designs. When she grew old, the studiolo was transferred to the ground floor, and in 1522, to the Corte Vecchio.

'Now. What else. Oh, yes. You will have your first group session, with tutors, tomorrow morning, after breakfast. My better half and I will put the music in the library tonight. The list of groups is pinned up on the board. Please make sure your music stand is clearly labelled with your name. Oh, and please, please put all the parts back into the correct folders. There is nothing more annoying than choosing the seven-part Schmelzer, and finding that you only have six parts.'

Some of the instruments commissioned from Lorenzo di Pavia can be seen painted onto the wooden panels of her studiolo.

'Finally,' says Gabriel, 'do have a wonderful week. Music does more than merely soothe the savage breast - music is a civilising influence. Music brings harmony to everyone, and making music is the most harmonic thing we can do. If all the nations in the world decided to make music instead of war, the world would be a far better place.'

Everyone has heard this many times, and still everyone applauds. Gabriel half turns away, then turns back and holds up his hand again.

'One more thing. Our kind housekeeper, Mrs Dean - it is Mothering Sunday and Mrs Dean and the girls have made nosegays for all the ladies.' The doors at the side of the dais open, and the girls come out, carrying trays like usherettes. They circulate round the hall, giving out small posies of two daffodils, their stalks cut short, each remaining length of stalk tied with a bright yellow ribbon. Everyone bursts into applause and laughter, and Gabriel goes back to his table.

Members of the Mantuan nobility staffed the bureaucracy, the diplomatic service, and the top ranks of the army. The latter had important links with the Holy Roman Empire, so that church and state were absolutely linked in the city.

After dinner, the banqueting hall is milled with people unpacking instruments, grabbing chairs, putting cushions they have brought from home on hard wooden chairs, stacking one plastic chair on top of another to make the seat higher, putting up music stands, all with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Agnes, an old recorder hand, in all sense of the word, ostentatiously places her chair at the edge of the semi-circle of chairs, and is heard to say rather more loudly than is necessary, 'God, I'm not sitting next to him.' Those who know her know this refers to Geoffrey, now in his eighties, one of the pioneers of the serpent and racket revival, and now unable to command the puff necessary to play them. 'He always plays so out of tune,' rounds off Agnes. Geoffrey is also now deaf in his left ear, and either doesn't hear her, or pretends he hasn't.

The semi-circle of chairs is four rows deep at the back, tapering down to two or three at the tips, a gigantic, scattered crescent moon, mostly of dark grey moulded plastic stacking chairs, with a few Victorian wooden kitchen chairs, with rounded seat.

The harpsichord is in the middle of the curve, its pointed Italian end towards the centre, the keyboard placed so that whoever sits at the keyboard will face everyone.

Barton comes in, clutching a sheaf of papers in his arms. His grey hair flows as he walks, tense with energy. Over the flowing chatter he raises his voice: 'Singers in the middle, please, wherever you like. Instruments - basses on my left - recorders, viols, sackbuts and the kitchen sink, and anything I haven't mentioned, please hide.'

The joke settles the chatter, so that Agnes can say loud and clear: 'Where would you like the descant recorder, Barton dear?'

'Don't tempt me,' retorts Barton. Agnes settles in her chair, and Barton flurries through a chord sequence - G major, D major, C major and back to G, then the same but with G minor this time. He senses something and looks round. Robert is standing by the door, hands in his pockets, watching. When Barton looks round, he comes over.

'Can you help me move this?' asks Barton.

'Aren't you going to conduct from it?'

Barton already has the keyboard end, holding onto the stand underneath it. 'If you take the sharp end, we can put it against the wall.'

Robert follows suit, Barton bashes a triumphant pair of chords - G major and C major and the hall rustles to silence. On his way back, he passes Agnes and stops: 'Agnes, may I borrow your music stand? You can share with Geoffrey.'

Torn between the compliment of Barton wanting to use her stand, and having to share with Geoffrey, she gives way to the first. Barton carries the stand over, raises it to a comfortable height, picks up his ring-bound file of music, opens it, puts it on the stand.

'We'll motor through the first chorus.' He sense an unspoken question from Robert. 'Anyone worried about tuning?' A few hands go up.

'Good,' says Barton, 'it's always a good idea to be worried about tuning. Instruments, choose your line. Basses, you have no option. Veni, Imeneo. Come, Hymen. Orfeo, Atto Primo. Tutti.'

As all the scores shuffle over, the sackbuts produce a cacophony of low notes and Barton flies back to the harpsichord. He holds up his hand for silence. Strings, please, you're a.'

He ripples an A Major chord across the instrument, and violins and viols produce their own thin mix of cacophony. Gradually the sounds merge into a more or less congruent pitch. Barton moves onto a D major chord,

'So,' says Barton, ' we have had the opening fanfare, played precisely and in tune by the sackbuts (laughter), as they promenade into the hall, then we have heard Laura give her La Musica (respectful movements), and we have just heard a shepherd bleating - sorry, singing (laughter) about Orpheus and Eurydice. You will gather that I have not yet cast the shepherd,

so Robert, perhaps you could look at the music (curiosity). A song fit for Orpheus is what he wants - the shepherd, not Robert - so let's go there.'

Cesare Gonzaga's most important artistic achievement was the foundation and sponsorship of the Accademia degli Invaghiti, in 1562. In 1565 Giaches de Wert came to the Mantuan court as the maestro di cappella. The accademia, based in the Palazzo Ducale, patronised musicians from the start, as well as fostering poets and dramatists.

Barton paces quickly over to the harpsichord, plays the opening chord of g minor, sings the notes of the triad as he returns to the centre, his arms raised, lifting himself onto his toes, and brings down a powerful downbeat. The sound is magnificent, loud, soprano and bass instruments dominating, notes wavering round their correct pitches, phrases staggering in, and he continues relentlessly and determinedly on until the celebratory hymn to marriage has finished.

Agnes' wobbly soprano recorder finishes a bar after everyone else; sympathetic and adrenalised laughter follow.

Barton turns over a couple of his pages. 'That was so good, we'll move on to the balletto.'

The Accademia degli Invaghiti was very important because it offered an outlet for new ideas, new writing and new thinking. One of the most important things it did was to champion the 'volgare', the use of the vernacular as an effective medium for scholarly and poetic discourse, as against Latin, which was the language of the church, and therefore considered as the language most fit for high ideas.

Barton sings the first soprano melody in G major: 'Lasciate I monte, etc. ready, and -'

He goes for a very fast speed and some of the singers fumble with their fast notes. The opening section is repeated, and then the music goes straight into triple time. Although the notes are relatively simple, the pace is breathtaking, and the music falls to pieces, with some remaining stalwarts. All the bass voices have dropped out, and Robert picks up the music and obliges in a resonant bass.

'Very good,' says Barton. 'That's what I like to hear. A complete mess. Otherwise, how can I earn my fee?' Everyone relaxes, Barton turns the pages back and begins to take sections through the music.

Mrs Dean, who has been hovering just outside the door, unseen, leaves, to go back to the kitchen.

The words of 'Orfeo', as we all know, are in Italian. It was the Invaghiti who sponsored the first performance of Monteverdi's 'Orfeo' in 1607, to a libretto by one of its own members, Alessandro Striggio.

Carrying their cups of tea, with biscuits tucked into the saucers, with folders, papers and files and notebooks, the tutors gather in the library.

Gabriel is sitting in a chair with a deep leather back, stirring his tea, a biscuit in the saucer. He wears one of his many cardigans: hand-knitted by Nesta, in a sludgy green boucle wool, the pockets sagging with tissues, pencils, diary and notebook. His grey trousers are crumpled, and he is wearing moccasin-like shoes. Nesta sits near him, slightly back from the table, and passes him two pink pills, which he adds to the saucer with his biscuit.

Nesta smiles at people in the queues at supermarket tills. Her shining white hair waves softly over her face, in a deep, halo-like white bob. Her spectacles have heavy brown rims at the top, fading to transparency at the bottom - the up-to-the-moment style of the late 1950s. She wears a maroon jersey dress, even in the balmy spring weather, bunched into a belt over her comfortable middle. Her shoes are brown, sensible and laced.

Robert has changed into a rich brown corduroy jacket, with leather patches on the elbows, and a pair of loose white trousers. He wears a black cotton polo neck, and carries a shiny blue file, plump with papers.

Marla wears light-blue faded jeans, probably bought from M & S, and a blue and purple striped rugby shirt. Her hair swings down, determinedly straight to her shoulders, with a neat, severe fringe. A subtle scattering of grey nestles just by each ear, almost in protest at Gabriel's earlier joke. One of the recurrent topics of conversation on these courses is whether Marla dyes her hair.

She is a recorder player from the old, just postwar school, with a slightly wobbly tone, and careless articulation, but she knows the history of the instrument, and her musical education was founded on a solid, thoroughly grounded, grammar-school experience. Her school-teacherly manner manages to be both patronising and reassuring, especially to the elderly and loyal course members.

Barton and Catherine arrive last. Barton carries a bottle of whisky, and Catherine has a tray of glasses, which she balances so as not to dislodge the old brown school satchel she has over her left shoulder. As Gabriel swallows his pills, Barton pours glasses of whisky and hands them round. Robert and Nesta take theirs eagerly. Nesta fields Gabriel's, and Marla puts a hand up to refuse, showing no sign that she is thinking bloody hell, he should know by now. Know by now that once she was an acknowledged alcoholic, now she is reformed. Know by now that she knows that the whisky he has brought in, carefully purchased from the bar, is as nothing compared to the bottles in his and Catherine's room. Marla is well aware that Barton can't face his first morning group without a decent slug of red wine.

'How's college?' asks Gabriel.

'Well, wonder of wonders, no complaints this year. They have asked me to conduct a college performance of "Samson" at the Albert Hall. Soloists and orchestra from the college, and mass singalong in the tutti. Should be fun.'

Robert holds his glass out for a refill.

'Robert has suggested a lecture series to give the background to "Orfeo",' says Gabriel. 'You'll be able to fit that in?'

Barton nods. 'No problem.'

'What are you going to talk about, Rob?' asks Catherine.

'I thought I would do a talk about the Mantuan background. Just run through some history.'

Barton nods approvingly. 'And then,' continues Robert, 'I could do one talk on Monteverdi,

and perhaps another on early opera - ' he turns questioningly to Barton - 'unless you - ?'

'No, no,' says Barton. 'I'm going to need every second I've got on the notes.'

'Even with our trilly three?'

'Even with our trilly three,' says Barton.

'Ah,' says Nesta. 'I collected the casting sheets. Shall we go through them?'

Catherine holds her hand out. 'Barton and I can do that later,' she says.

'Oh,' says Robert. 'Don't we do that together?'

'No problem,' said Catherine, tucking the loose sheets of paper into her brown school satchel.

'I thought I could also talk about Ferrara a bit - just in the context of Renaissance spectacle and opera - the importance of the Concerto delle Donne - '

Barton snatches a quick look at his watch, gets up and makes for the door. Catherine picks up the whisky bottle and says: 'It's twenty past.', and Gabriel says: 'Well; same time tomorrow, folks.'

Barton opens the door, waves a goodnight and has gone. Catherine scurries after him, closing the door behind her.

Gabriel continues as if nothing has happened. 'Perhaps you could do your talks after coffee, at 11.15?'

'Of course,' says Rob. 'I'll put the titles up on the board, shall I?'

'Good idea.'

'There's one more thing.'

'Oh?'

'I've brought my viol - I haven't been playing for very long - but -'

'I'm sure one of the groups won't mind you joining in now and again. Barton and Catherine might even organise a session.'

'Oh, I'm hardly good enough for them.'

'You're a tutor. Anyway, you've pipped them to the post with your CD. Forqueray, is it?'

'Yes. On harpsichord, of course. That's why I want to play the viol properly, so that I can play the pieces on the instrument for which they were originally written.'

'Which reminds me: the harpsichord is in the drawing room upstairs. I suggest you tune it before breakfast finishes. In case Barton needs it.'

Nesta gets up and collects Gabriel's cup. The tutors' first meeting is over.

The Invaghiti had an initial membership of thirty people, and their influence on Mantuan musical life was considerable. Membership was open to the clergy and non-clergy, and it was typical of similar aristocratic and courtly academies in its emphasis on chivalric ceremonial, and the arts of oratory and versification. Learned disputations were common. On some occasions, even members of the public were admitted.

A letter of 1568 notes payments to Leone Hebreo, presumably a reference to the Mantuan Jewish playwright, Leone de Sommi, author of an important treatise on stage production. Also known as Leone de Sommi Portaleone, he began writing his treatise in 1556, probably completing it in the 1560s, the decade in which Shakespeare was born. De Sommi acted as the scrittore, the scribe, to the Invaghiti. He died in 1592.

At 10 pm tea and coffee are served in the dining hall, along with thick, sticky slices of the Yorkshire brack, which is the only thing that links Mrs Dean to her origins. Currants and tea-

flavoured flour, with a dash of ginger to add her own touch of eastern spice. The brack is most easily eaten with the fingers, leaving musicians hurrying for the sinks, to wash their hands before dwindling into the bar, back to public and private rooms for more playing, to take a turn round the gardens, or to bed.

At eleven o'clock, Mrs Dean makes her final tour of the house before closing and locking the large, double oak front doors. As she looks out of the front door, for a glimpse of the slim crescent moon, she hears a recorder playing an unaccompanied sonata by Telemann. In d minor, she thinks, but she hasn't got perfect pitch, so she can't tell. She recognises it. Many years ago, she spent weeks working on it. With her teacher.

The excitement in the house finally hushes into silence at around midnight. Mrs Dean, so attentive to arrangements throughout the day, now finds she can't sleep. She puts on her pale blue candlewick dressing gown, and comes down the main staircase. There is a window open in the hall, and a pale ivory curtain furls in the night breeze. Softly she closes the window, and walks along the long corridor, now lit only by night lights along its walls, like a monastery cloister, towards the big hall.

The hall doors are open. As she nears them, she hears the gentle sound of a viol, the bow drawn slowly along one open string after another. She stops at the door. At the other end, sits a man, his silhouetted back to her, his long hair curling down over his shoulders.

An opening g minor chord splays across the viol, exploding with resonance, gently and firmly. The bow lingers on the top D string, the low open G string still resonating as the bow reaches up to a high b flat, a semitone above the highest fret on the top string. Mrs Dean remembers 'Captain Hume's pavan', 1605, written in tablature. The man playing has no music in front of him, no sign of tablature, no six line stave with letters of the alphabet placed along the lines, with the duration of each note indicated above the stave. The pavan is stately, with a rhapsodic melancholy, tiny trills at cadences, chords and melodic shapes hurrying, held back, catching the heart at two points where there is an interrupted cadence, first from A to b flat, then from D to e flat. These surprises are the more startling, sneaking as they do between the simple chord progressions of I IV V I. Excitement and reassurance alternate in leaps across the instrument, notes displaced in different octaves, the juxtaposition and resonance of double and triple-stopped chords against single-note melodic phrases. Amateurs do not play chords on the viola da gamba, nor do they rise above the frets. They lodge comfortably within the

instrument's simplicities, never testing it to any limits. They do not decorate their cadences, because that would be showing off, and they certainly do not improvise, nor dare with rubato, or allow their fingers to lean into a vibratoed note. This is not within the requirements of the Golden Age which they believe they are recreating, the authentic rendering of the music as the composer intended it. Whatever that is. This man has all the time in the world. As Mrs Dean stands by the door, she feels the regular, steady pulse which underpins every phrase he stretches, then hurries on. always with a deep, steady, regular pulse, unheard, as he lingers on the first note of a semi-quaver run, before completing the race to the main note, as he lingers in the silences at the ends of each section, before he returns to its repeat. The hall is in darkness, lit only by a security light outside the window, in front of the figure. The back is broad and tense, rounded forwards over the viol, the right arm elegantly out at the elbow, to allow for maximum flexibility across the seven strings of the viol. The third and final section comes out into the open spaces of G major. The chord is gently touched, hardly sounding the third, the b natural at the top of the chord, as though the player can't quite believe the note after the previous minors. Then the section is repeated, falling back into a more melancholy g minor, growing in confidence as he sounds the b flat below middle C, and then reaches up for its octave companion, again the b flat above the frets. She hears his breathing as he prepares for the beginning of the next phrase, and again, when he touches a low b flat, on the open G string, she feels her upper body contract. She can feel his body on hers, his warm breath full in her ears. Mrs Dean turns and walks rapidly away from the hall, back up the stairs, her slippers soft and silent, her heart pounding, knowing that she must reach her room before the music stops.

HAMLET: The Mouse-trap: marry how? Tropically: this play is the image of a murder done in Vienna: Gonzago is the Duke's name, his wife Baptista: you shall see anon.

(Act 3, Scene 2)