

MUSICAL DESTINATIONS

A TUSCAN RENAISSANCE

La Foce, Italy

Deep in the heart of rural Italy a forgotten community is being revived, thanks to an enterprising arts festival in the historic Val d'Orcia, discovers **Elizabeth Davis**

Gazing out from the Italian estate of La Foce, there's not a modern building in sight, the only nearby road a zig-zagging dirt track lined by cedars.

The Val d'Orcia, a remote valley in southern Tuscany, is a Unesco World Heritage site with undulating hills that could be straight out of a Merchant Ivory film. What the valley is not, however, is an obvious place to hold a concert: the roads that connect the scattered towns were built for carts rather than cars, and sign-posts are laughably absent so even getting to the next village feels like an expedition. And yet...

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the 'Incontri in Terra di Siena' chamber

music festival, founded by cellist Antonio Lysy and held each year in the valley and the surrounding hill-top towns.

Lysy is the head of strings at the University of California in Los Angeles but his grandparents, Iris and Antonio Origo, came to the Val d'Orcia in 1924 and – much to the horror of their friends and family – bought a dilapidated estate here. La Foce, as it is known, was spread across 3,500 acres and included 25 farms as well as the central 16th-century villa.

'It's all tied to the idea of bringing the community back'

But there was no electricity or bathrooms and most of the farms were little more than ruins. The couple set about regenerating the area, building a school and rekindling agriculture, and during the Second World War La Foce served as a refuge for prisoners of war, evacuees and partisan soldiers who had fled to the hills from the Germans. Iris, who was a writer, documented her experience of the war in the book *War in Val d'Orcia: An Italian War Diary*. But the house is most famous for its gardens which were designed by the English architect Cecil Pinsent.

Yet by the 1990s the estate was about a third of its original size and was in a much sorer state, as Lysy explains: 'I would come here and see that this place was depressed. A lot of the farmers were no longer able to survive on the land, my grandparents had

settled down here but they were old and the area seemed to be just decaying.'

On a whim, Lysy decided to take his cello to the estate's *castelluccio*. 'It was really an abandoned fortress – maybe one person lived there. My mother took me inside, I took my cello and I ended up playing some Bach in the courtyard. It had a great acoustic and the music, the quiet, the inspiration made me think how other musicians had started festivals in beautiful places.'

So he set up some informal concerts at La Foce, invited his musician friends and the festival began, he says, as a sort of 'retreat for people who loved to play with one another'. Gradually word spread, people began to come to the concerts and 'Incontri in Terra di Siena' – a name which means 'meetings in the Province of Siena' – started to take shape. The festival has grown from those first few performances to encompass art exhibitions,

olive oil tasting, lectures, guided tours and concerts in historic churches, castles and courtyards across the region.

Iris Origo lived to see the first two years of the festival and it now continues in her memory, with this year's edition (19-28 July) celebrating not only its own quarter-century, but also marking the bicentenaries of Verdi and Wagner in its programming.

The festival may attract the likes of tenor Ian Bostridge and pianist Julius Drake – who opened last year's season – but at its heart, 'Incontri' is about preserving the culture, food and community of the Val d'Orcia, as Lysy explains. 'Imagine what it was like during its heyday, with the school and hospital, the farms active and the Dopolavoro [village hall] full of people going there after work: it was a thriving community. This festival is all tied to the idea of bringing that community back.' ■

GETTY, LIZ NAGASAKI



NIGHT MUSIC: a chamber concert in the medieval *castelluccio* at La Foce; (below) the estate's famous Cecil Pinsent gardens



A ROOM WITH A VIEW: a cedar-lined road in the Val d'Orcia valley; (left) festival founder, cellist Antonio Lysy

LOCAL HERO

Senesino

Francesco Bernardi, known as 'Senesino', was born in Siena (about an hour's drive north of La Foce) in 1686 and became one of the most famous singers of his day. The castrato – whose nickname came from the name of his native city – is best known as the singer for whom Handel created no fewer than 17 of his roles. He arrived in London in 1720 and was a huge success in operas including *Giulio Cesare*, *Alessandro* and *Orlando*. His final performance was in Popora's *Il trionfo di Camilla* at the Teatro San Carlo, Naples. The composer Johann Quantz described Senesino's voice as 'powerful... with a perfect intonation and an excellent shake'. The singer died in Siena around the end of 1758.



TUSCANY

5 MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Incontri in Terra di Siena

This year's festival at La Foce includes an evening of orchestral Verdi and Wagner, concerts from the Cremona Quartet and 'Te Amo Argentina', featuring tango dancers and a light show. itslafoce.org

Cantiere Internazionale d'Arte

A near neighbour of La Foce, this festival in the beautiful town of Montepulciano was founded by composer Hans Werner Henze. The 2013 edition takes the theme of 'water' and includes performances from cellist Justus Grimm and soprano Sylvie Valayre. fondazionecantieri.it

Puccini Festival

Since 1930, music by one of Tuscany's most famous exports has been performed in Torre del Lago. This year's edition includes performances of *Turandot* and *Tosca* as



well as operas by Verdi and Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*. puccinifestival.it
Musica Reale
A group of musicians from the Royal

Concertgebouw Orchestra each year head to the town of Montalcino – famed for its wine – for a week-long chamber music festival. Details have yet to be announced but last year's programme featured music by Mozart, Mahler and Shostakovich. musica-reale.it

Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

Florence's annual celebration of classical music is on a massive scale. This year there is a staging of Verdi's *Don Carlo*, for example, conducted by Zubin Mehta (left) and starring tenor Massimo Giordano in the title role. maggiofiorentino.it