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The Slow Lane: The art of bridging divides



By Harry Eyres

It is ‘very challenging to hate someone sitting next to you playing a Beethoven symphony’

One of the strangest, most surreal moments in War in Val d’Orcia, Iris Origo’s diary of 1943-44, occurs when the Anglo-American writer, married to a Tuscan aristocrat, meets a German archaeological expert called Heydenreich, in charge of protecting Tuscan art treasures. He tells her how Piero della Francesca’s “Resurrection” was taken away from San Sepolcro in a lorry, which then stopped at Arezzo as that town was being bombed; a bomb landed close to the lorry but failed to explode. He also reports on the moving back to Florence of the great bronze doors of the Baptistery, which had been stored in a tunnel for safety. She finds him to be “a gentle, cultivated human being”, who looks back fondly on the year he spent at Windsor Castle studying the Leonardo drawings. Origo describes this as “a queer, comforting conversation, a reminder of eternal values, which may outlast the present madness”.

I thought about this conversation repeatedly during a recent stint in central Italy. Nowadays the T-shirted battalions trooping through the Tuscan hill towns are peaceable. It is jolting to recall, through Origo’s sober and self-effacing prose, the atrocious conditions of the summer of 1944, as the Allies fought their way painfully up the peninsula from the beachhead of Anzio.

One June day, Marchesa Origo and her husband, who had run great risks sheltering partisans and British PoWs, led a party including 28 children and four babies from their estate of La Foce to Montepulciano on foot, a long day’s march on mined roads, exposed to Allied shelling and machine-gun fire. Though they made it to safety, the atmosphere in the town was full of fear and poison. In the event both La Foce and Montepulciano got off lightly, though the retreating Germans blew up the Medicean town gate. Other towns were less lucky.

One of the children who made that epic journey was Origo’s elder daughter Benedetta, who, with her sister Donata, presides over La Foce, beautifully situated in the still-empty land looking towards Monte Amiata, with its lovely part-English, part-Italian garden.

For the past 26 years Benedetta Origo has been president of the chamber music festival Incontri in Terra di Siena directed by her son, the cellist Antonio Lysy. This year Lysy, who combines his career as soloist and chamber musician with the post of professor of cello and head of strings at the University of California, Los Angeles, gave the festival a youth-oriented theme.

I caught some outstanding chamber-music-making by the youthful UCLA Camarades ensemble and VEM quartet. But the main talking point was unquestionably the appearance of students from Israel’s Polyphony Conservatory, founded in Nazareth by the Palestinian Israeli violinist Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar. Nabeel and his brother, the distinguished pianist Saleem Ashkar, were brought up by a classical music-loving engineer father.

The immensely thoughtful and intelligent Nabeel studied both physics and music at Tel Aviv University, joined Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said’s West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and, after further study in Germany, came home in 2006 to launch his remarkable project. This is a music school aimed primarily at Palestinian Israelis, who number 20 per cent of the population but have never enjoyed equal opportunities in music education. But, beyond that, Nabeel told me, was the desire “to help [divided] Arab and Jewish communities in Israel come together”.

Polyphony has grown and flourished; now there are 130 students, up from the original 25, and a small additional conservatory in Jaffa. Polyphony also runs programmes of music education in primary schools. The two conservatories now welcome Jewish as well as Palestinian students. The first time he taught Jewish students to play Mozart, Nabeel admits, he “was nervous. But it didn’t take long to feel the most natural thing.”

All was pretty peaceful in Tuscany this summer, bar the unseasonable stormy weather, but not, tragically, in Gaza and parts of Israel, where bombs, shells and rockets rained down to deadly effect. Nabeel admitted that the terrible events made the atmosphere tense at times. To my ears this tension had no adverse effect on the music-making. I have never heard a more searching account of Dvorak’s A major piano quintet than that given by four string players from Polyphony, with Saleem Ashkar playing the piano part with magisterial finesse.

When I spoke to Saleem and some of the young players afterwards, the talk was not of war but of how they’d had the confidence to change phrasings right up to the last minute of rehearsal.

Nabeel prefers not to speak about the wider geopolitical issues, concentrating on what can be done in the garden of fraternity he has created, which one hopes will continue to do its vital humanising work, whatever rains down from the sky. As he says, it is “very

challenging to hate someone who is sitting next to you playing a Beethoven symphony”.

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