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Notes on a Tuscan Paradise

La Foce, a mansion that was once a 15th-century pilgrims' hostel, is at the heart of Incontri in Terra di Siena, a chamber music festival

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By RICHARD HOLLEDGE
June 19, 2014 7:37 p.m. ET

FROM WHERE I SIT in the shade on a broad Italian terrace, the view stretches over squares of primed box hedges and the checkered patchwork of harvested fields to the hazy peak of Monte Amiata. I can hear the sound of a cello being tuned, a little burst of Mozart.

The Mozart—and the view—come with the mansion. La Foce, 60 miles south of Siena in Tuscany, is at the heart of Incontri in Terra di Siena, a chamber music festival that fills the area's tiny churches, piazzas and even a castle with the sounds of Bach, Mozart and Schubert every July.



La Foce La Foce

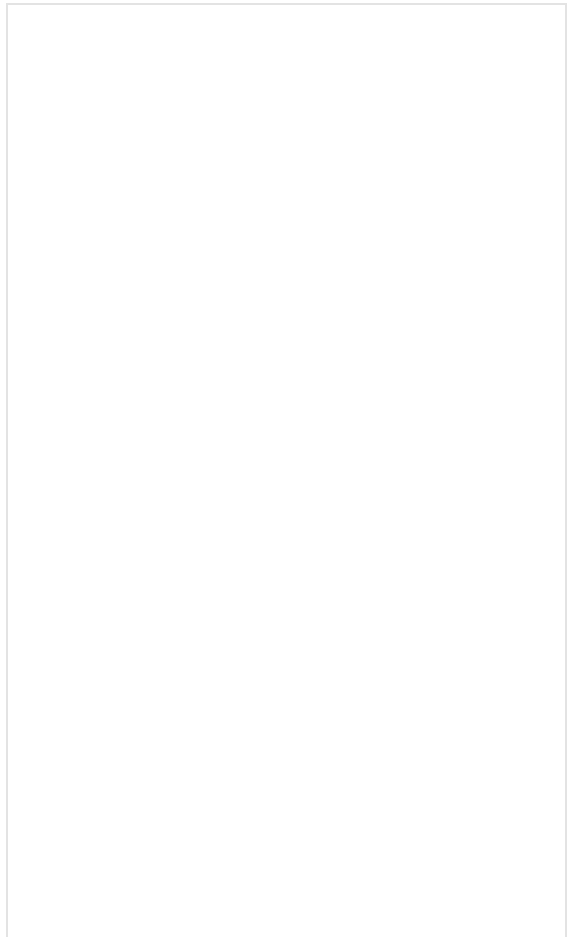
The house, once a 15th-century pilgrims' hostel, was bought in 1924 by Antonio Origo, an Italian nobleman from Florence who, with his Anglo-American wife Iris, created a thriving agricultural community with 57 farms. They also helped build a school for local children, a cottage hospital and a social club for workers. During World War II, the couple continued their humanitarian endeavors, sheltering children evacuated from the various war zones and soldiers escaping from the Germans. But after the conflict ended, most of what they had achieved eventually fell into disrepair.

"My grandparents were getting old and unable to stem the tide as the little farms were abandoned again," says Antonio Lysy, a professor of cello at the University of California, Los Angeles and artistic director of the festival. "It started to look

ugly, decayed and neglected, so we decided to start the festival the year before grandmother died in 1988. In a way it is a similar idea to hers—trying to revitalize the area using culture."

Since that first festival, many of the neglected farmhouses have been restored and made available as holiday homes. Wreathed in vines and honeysuckle, they combine rugged rural charm with sophisticated trappings. Many have pools and tennis courts, with inspiring views over the valley. Accommodation ranges from the B&B Palazzolo (*from* €120; [lafoce.com](#)) to the Villa Sassaia, with its seven bedrooms ranged around an old barn converted into a summer room (*price upon request*; [bellinitravel.com](#)).

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Musicians perform during the festival *Paul Flanagan*

If you're lucky enough to stay during the festival, which takes place this year July 19-28 (itslafa.org), you'll be in a prime location. Stroll down to the courtyard for the opening night with the Soquadro Italiano singers giving a concert of Italian music spanning from the 16th century to the 1960s. Or walk from the Palazzolo to the flower-decked courtyard of the Castelluccio, an abandoned castle on the hill above La Foce, for a concert in the place that helped inspire the festival. "One day I brought my cello here and I played some Bach," recalls Mr. Lysy. "The acoustics were perfect. Wow, I thought, maybe we could start a festival here to help bring people back."

And increasingly, people are coming back. This year, there are 10 concerts held in 10 separate venues around La Foce and, in what is a recognition of the festival's growing prestige, British conductor John Eliot Gardiner will give a talk based on his recent book "Music in the Castle of heaven: A Portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach." Meanwhile, Russian violinist Maxim Vengerov will conduct Switzerland's International Menuhin Music Academy and an ensemble of young Arab and Jewish musicians from Nazareth and Jaffa will play together in the restored 19th-century Teatro degli Avvaloranti in Città della Pieve on July 23.

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