

Three of them might be related, but there are no family politics in the Mandelring Quartet, as **Paul Cutts** finds out

Social

There can't be many ensemble performers in their 30s who can boast a repertoire of 150 works. But then three of the four Mandelring Quartet members have been making music together for more than 20 years – the advantage of being siblings raised in a music-filled German home. Violinists Sebastian and Nanette Schmidt and cellist brother Bernhard have been devoted to chamber music since their father introduced them to it in childhood.

'Our father was a pianist and there was always music at home,' remembers Sebastian, the eldest brother and first violinist. 'Each of us took up one or other string instrument so we have been playing together from a very early age. It was sort of an experiment – but it took off!'

It's been a steady rise to international acclaim ever since. The Mandelring Quartet (named after the street on which they lived in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse) first captured attention in 1991 with victory at the ARD competition in Munich. At the end of that year they gained the international press jury award at the Evian competition. Three years later, the Paolo Borciani competition in Italy awarded them a gold medal.

Benefiting from the artistic guidance of leading musicians (including the Bartholdy, Brandis, Amadeus and LaSalle quartets), the Mandelrings – whose line-up is completed by violist Roland Glassl – are today among Europe's most fêted performers, with a growing discography and international concert tours under their belt. They average 60 concerts and at least one new recording a year.

A typical Mandelring concert is memorable for its penetrating sense of architecture, artistic insight and clarity of tone. Each member has a distinctive sound; the Schmidts all play early 19th-century Italian instruments and Glassl a viola made by his father. There's never a sense of imbalance, but always of four individuals working together to achieve their artistic ends. A recent Wigmore Hall performance of Borodin's Second Quartet was revelatory for its energy and profundity – not two words always associated with the work.

Even allowing for its relatively long experience, the group's diverse repertoire is impressive. While the most important Classical and Romantic works form its

core performance material, the quartet has championed neglected pieces as well as modern music. It was largely responsible for the rediscovery of Georges Onslow's quartets and it's not unfair to credit the ensemble with bringing those of Berthold Goldschmidt (1903–96) back to widespread public and critical notice.

Such exploration has been a deliberate policy, born not only of innate musical curiosity but also of the demands of modern audiences and concert promoters. 'Groups like ours have to have a very wide repertoire to appeal to audiences and to attract the attention of promoters as well,' explains Sebastian. Nanette concurs: 'There are far more string quartets than there used to be, say, 20 years ago, so every quartet likes to discover an unusual composer – but of course we still play Schubert.' Certainly the Onslow quartets rank as unusual today, although in the period immediately after Beethoven's death Onslow (the French-born son of an English nobleman) ranked as a leading figure in European music circles. The Mandelrings have committed several of his quartets to disc for the enterprising German label CPO.

'There are many strong pieces out there by composers who are not well known,' explains Bernhard. 'And there are one or two pieces that we think are very good.' One of them is the F major Quartet op.7 by Felix Otto Desoff, a champion of Brahms's music and the conductor to whom Brahms entrusted the premiere of his First Symphony. The Mandelrings have recorded the piece with Brahms's op.51 no.2 Quartet in A minor, the first in a series of CDs for Lotus Records called *Vis-à-Vis*. The series will pair each of Brahms's three quartets with an interesting piece by one of his outstanding but lesser-known contemporaries.

The Mandelring's relationship with modern music equally has been informed by a desire to cast new light on overshadowed repertoire. 'It's very important to apply to modern music the same respect you would to all other repertoire,' Bernhard insists. 'You have to work hard to play Mozart well and that should be the same for modern music.'

To that end, the members of the quartet have valued their exposure to contemporary composers.

democrats

'The best thing about the relationship with a living composer is that it is living,' says Nanette. 'When we were recording Goldschmidt's Second Quartet, the composer attended the sessions and even wrote an extra measure at one point to enable us to turn the page more easily. So there's now a Mandelring version of the piece!'

'It can sometimes help a composer form a work in his mind if he is working with people he knows and trusts,' says Sebastian. 'We have always found it very inspiring to work with a composer. This was certainly true in the case of György Ligeti. We had looked at his music and thought it was really interesting and he, apparently, heard a performance by us of his quartet

that he appreciated. Playing Ligeti is very risky; we knew that he easily objects to people not doing what he likes with his music. But we believe that is a composer's right while they are alive. Working on music in the absence of the composer is like seeing a black and white image of a colour photograph.'

There are enormous benefits for audiences as well, adds Glassl, the youngest and newest member of the ensemble. 'If you as a group have a personal relationship with a composer it somehow means people can relax with your interpretation,' he argues. 'I think as a player you have to be convinced that what you are doing is good, that you are ▶



choosing pieces that are constructed in a certain way that will appeal to your audience as well as to yourself. Music longer than ten minutes with no discernible rhythm is too much to expect an audience to listen to.'

Sebastian agrees: 'Audiences like to have something that they can relate to. You have to find a good artistic reason for performing or recording something.' Nanette points out: 'The problem with some pieces is that they take a lot of work to learn and we might only have the opportunity to play them once. When you invest so much time, you have to be realistic about the performance opportunities.'

Such pragmatism is partly what convinced the quartet to form its own chamber music festival, the Hambacher MusikFest, in 1997. It now comprises eight concerts held over five days in summer – many of them in the Schmidt family home, a former winery surrounded by vineyards. There the ensemble can bring the core repertoire to local audiences and simultaneously explore new territory.

'We started doing concerts locally 20 years ago,' says Nanette, 'so we built up a regular audience over the years. We invite six or eight other musicians to join us and most of the concerts are themed, which helps keep the local radio station interested enough to broadcast them. The number of concerts has almost doubled and



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the range of music we're performing there is changing and growing every year. The audience really loves it and they really trust our judgement.' Smiling, Glassl adds, 'Where else could we try out the Enescu Octet?'

For the Schmidt siblings, staying true to their roots is all part of the social and democratic life of a quartet. That's something Glassl – who had an established solo career before becoming the fourth Mandelring in 1999 – has quickly come to appreciate. 'Chamber music wasn't something that interested me,' he admits, 'but when I went to study at Bloomington we had to play in chamber groups. My career started very differently but what I have learnt in the last three years I would never have learnt if I had just continued playing solo. No teacher can give you what you learn in this type of environment.'

His return to Germany from Indiana coincided with the departure of Michael Scheitzbach from the Mandelring viola chair. The quartet had a try-out rehearsal session with Glassl and it was immediately obvious that they would all benefit from a permanent relationship. 'Every musician has a certain perspective on music, their own personality and view,' explains

Nanette. 'Sometimes change encourages you to explore and question your own sound. That's what happened with us and Roland.'

'Chamber music has such a social aspect to it,' states Sebastian. 'It's about how

you learn to behave, react and interact. It helps you develop as a wholly democratic person. In the end, being a dictator in the group is useless – it's so different from playing in an orchestra.' Bernard concludes: 'With Roland we just play and play without being conscious of what is happening. And that is the most intriguing and magical thing about chamber music.' ■

ABOVE three siblings and a violinist: the quartet has its own music festival in the Schmidt's home town of Neustadt an der Weinstraße

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