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Mutual exchange

A new two-year masters programme is set to give young European string players an edge in the competitive chamber music market. What's the thinking behind the initiative?

By Peter Somerford



The Paris-based Métamorphoses Quartet, an ECMA ensemble and one of the groups taking part in the ECMAster programme

A new European masters programme for chamber musicians aims to give emerging ensembles the benefits of an international education as well as a professional advantage. The two-year European Chamber Music Master (ECMAster), which begins this October, has been developed by the European Chamber Music Academy (ECMA), a network of European conservatoires, festivals and concert presenters that was established in 2004 to provide training and career-building opportunities for young ensembles. The ECMAster involves partner institutions in seven cities: Manchester, Paris, Vienna, Oslo, Vilnius, Fiesole and The Hague. Ensembles will study at their home institutions for semesters 1 and 4, and at two other partner institutions in semesters 2 and 3, with funding coming from the EU's Erasmus+ programme. The first intake comprises four ensembles: the Karski Quartet, the Chaos Quartet, Trio Aralia and the Mestizo Saxophone Quartet.

Chamber music masters-level programmes are nothing new, and young string quartets have often committed to periods abroad to study with top-flight groups, but the ECMAster's scope and duration make it an intriguing proposition in this highly specialised sector. David Horne, the head of graduate school at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in Manchester, which launched its

own String Quartet Studio programme in 2018, says: 'There haven't been many specialist masters programmes for chamber music across the European conservatoires sector, and that is partly down to a lack of demand on account of the commitment that is required from students.' ECMA's artistic director Johannes Meissl, who teaches chamber music at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna and is second violinist of the Artis Quartet, argues that the 'high-end, positively elite' nature of the ECMAster demands an appropriately high level of commitment: 'Every member of an ensemble has to realise that if someone drops out before the end of the course, the other members will not be able to finish.'

For those groups that embrace the two-year commitment, the ECMAster presents an array of opportunities. First, the students are plugged into the ECMA network of pedagogues, festivals and concert presenters, with the requirement to participate in at least six ECMA training sessions across Europe over the two years. They also get to experience life at three different institutions, in three different cities, and will be able to study electives that reflect the specialisations of each institution. Thus the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague plans to offer classes in historically informed performance, improvisation and collaboration with composition students. Incoming groups at

MILAD GHOLAMI / NORWEGIAN ACADEMY OF MUSIC

'The market is certainly competitive but we believe it can be shaped and influenced' – Johannes Meissl, artistic director, ECMA

the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo will have courses on contemporary music and commissioning, and being a 'socially responsive musician'.

Ensembles that already have a strong sense of their artistic direction will be able to harness expertise to explore their specific interests, says Meissl. 'We're trying to get as close to a tailor-made study programme as is possible within academic regulations.' The Chaos Quartet, which formed in 2018 and has been studying in Salzburg and Vienna, wants to pursue as part of the ECMAster an interdisciplinary project exploring the concept of chaos itself. The group's cellist, Bas Jongen, explains: 'I also study physics, and I would like to combine scientific insights into chaos theory with a practical creative approach, in areas such as improvisation, physical theatre, and working with composers to create new music. How would composers respond to the idea of non-linearity and unpredictability? I'm even thinking about exploring human versus non-human composition, such as using AI. As a group we are at the beginning of all this, and our thinking is wild right now, but over two years we will develop a more finished concept.'

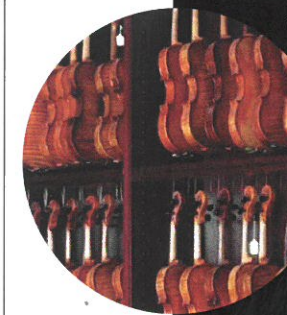
Besides continuing their artistic development, many musicians who choose to study at masters level do so in the hope of building professional connections. 'The big advantage of the ECMAster is that it multiplies these connections by three, and also multiplies the exposure that is so important for any young chamber ensemble,' says Horne. Violinist Kaja Nowak of the Brussels-based Karski Quartet (named after the Polish World War II resistance fighter Jan Karski), which formed in 2018 and has just spent two terms on the RNCM's String Quartet Studio programme, says: 'To study in three different European musical centres over the course of two years is a great opportunity for a young group looking for concerts and promoters. We certainly hope it will help us establish more concert opportunities.'

Still, there is no guarantee that every group graduating from the ECMAster will be able to launch and sustain a successful career. How do the programme's architects deal with the reality that conservatoires and universities across Europe are producing more musicians than the market can feed? 'The market is certainly competitive,' says Meissl, 'but we believe, as collaborating partners in ECMA, that it is a market that can be shaped and influenced. One of the goals of ECMA and the ECMAster is to develop new performance opportunities, so groups are not just trying to squeeze into the familiar select places that give opportunities to the happy few.'

COURTESY/NANCY JOSEPHSON

NEWS IN BRIEF

David Bromberg violin collection faces being broken up bit.ly/2K0gC7F
US violin dealer David Bromberg's collection of 263 American violins is likely to be broken up after fundraising efforts to donate it to the US Library of Congress stalled. Bromberg signed an agreement with the library in 2016, by which they would receive \$1.5m in return for two thirds of the collection. However, the agreement lapsed in 2018 before the necessary funds had been raised.



Music students score better in certain academic disciplines than non-musical peers, says study bit.ly/32HONtv
An American study has shown that music students at high school score significantly better on exams in maths, science and English than their non-musical peers. Published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, the study involved more than 112,000 student records. It found that 'on average, the children who learnt to play a musical instrument for many years, and were now playing in high school band and orchestra, were the equivalent of about one academic year ahead of their peers with regard to their English, mathematics and science skills, as measured by their exam grades.'

Bees make home in reclaimed cello bit.ly/2y4FFAZ
A swarm of 20,000 bees has been encouraged to set up a hive in a reclaimed cello near Nottingham, UK. The resulting noises are being collected and recorded in order to create a musical soundscape, which will contribute to a musical performance later this year.

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