

ASTONISHING ASTONA!

30 Years of Believing in Talent

ASTONA INTERNATIONAL SUMMER ACADEMY AT 30

John York

The history is long, the list of alumni and faculty illustrious...

When cellist Nancy Chumachenco, back in the 1980s, began to feel the need for a place in Switzerland where highly-gifted, young musicians, with their many individual needs, could meet, share their experiences, enjoy intensive work with highly-qualified, international tutors and like-minded, equally-talented peers for a few weeks in the summer, she could only have dreamt that her creation would survive for several decades – and yet it still thrives! In 2018 Astona celebrates its 30th anniversary!

Nancy, now retired, has lived in Switzerland for the past 50 years, playing in the Zurich Chamber Orchestra and Zurich's Tonhalle Orchestra and teaching cello at the city's music school. In the 80's she was blessed with several outstanding young cello pupils and was surrounded by some very gifted violin and piano students as well, working with them in chamber music for national competition. But how to nurture this young talent in a world which often views these outstanding children with no understanding whatsoever just at that stage in their development when they need strong guidance and inspiration if they are to develop and realise their potential?

Nancy's idea was a summer school with a difference – an intensive central European course, based on her own memories and experiences at Meadowmount in the USA in the 60's. From the very start she was determined that this wouldn't be just another summer course, of which there are so many around the world – not just another opportunity for 'musical tourism'. At Astona there would be no succession of big-name stars 'parachuted in' to preside over masterclasses. Astona would be "hands on", every single student would be active, occupied and integrated at all times.

Students and the teaching faculty have always shared the same facilities, taking their meals together, attending the daily house concerts together, allowing for exchanges and communication at every level. Thus, students at Astona have plenty of opportunity for an informal chat with a teacher. Lessons are always private and frequent, the best recipe for true progress during the duration of the course. Well-balanced chamber music groups, assigned and organised by the director in advance, are coached daily by the assigned teacher. Astona is only for string players and pianists, and there is a string orchestra formation rehearsing very demanding concert repertoire nearly every day in preparation for public performance.

Students live in private rooms, where they can also practise during the time periods allotted for individual practice. A piano is placed at the disposal of each piano student. The concert hall has always featured a concert grand of prime quality. The daily 'house concert' is not open to the public, but attendance by all students and faculty is obligatory. The house concerts are a central focal point of Astona, and each participant performs once during the session. No backbiting, just lots of positive enthusiasm and support. String players are partnered in their concerts by the faculty pianist, which was my function for over 25 years – a wonderful but tough, demanding daily duty which I loved. Public concert performances start in the later stages of the course and are based on the performances in the house concerts, culminating in the final orchestral, chamber music and solo galas. Over the years these events have become an essential part of the summer music season in the area.

Astona offers, in Nancy's own words, "a free and protected space" where the student has absolute priority. There is no exploitation of these young people, no "marketing" or invitations to managers looking for lucrative prospects. This is the founder's ethos – talented young players from many lands, brought together for their mutual benefit and development, nurtured and (yes) protected, able to devote themselves exclusively for a little while to that which they share and love most, under intensive and caring guidance.

Since 2016 Astona struggles to compensate for the the death of its only sponsor and patron over all the 30 years, Private Banker Dr. Hans Vontobel. The loss of his immense financial support is a daunting challenge. To this end, on March 18, 2018 two special benefit concerts took place, one in Zurich, the other near Zug. Six outstanding Astona alumni were invited to perform, two of whom have gone on to forge fine careers as soloists while the other four are still outstanding students at various institutions. The cellists Christian Poltéra, Linda Heiberga and Marcel Kits, violinists Katariina Kits and Roman Reshetkin and pianist Dmitri Demiashkin together presented a brilliant concert line-up of special, unique calibre. I retired from my position as Head of Piano at Astona after the 2016 session but was invited back to be their concert partner as I had been over all those years. The halls were full. The public enjoyed the highest class of music-making, and a lovely reception in the interval. Most of the visitors had never experienced what Astona sounds like, as they are always away during the summer sessions. They were indeed truly "astonished"!

When an initial idea is as focused as Nancy's was, over 30 years ago, it deserves to continue to flourish as Astona so evidently should.

www.astona-international.ch

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