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A recent festival dedicated to the cello demonstrated how the wisdom of great pedagogues can stretch far and wide. **Ariane Todes** reports

IF PROOF WERE REQUIRED OF THE enormous influence of a teacher such as János Starker, who died on 28 April, a good place to start looking would be the recent Texas Christian University Cellofest, which took place in Fort Worth in March. Started in 2007 by cellist Jesús Castro-Balbi, the exclusively bass-clef festival featured 15 cello professors offering masterclasses to 75 students, as well as concerts every night and a cello competition alongside.

Since some of the professors had been Starker students and colleagues, many of the teaching tools and words of wisdom came directly from him, and so such musical DNA is passed on. The other professor whose influence could be felt was Aldo Parisot, and as Castro-Balbi had studied with both, he acted as catalyst for a meeting of former students and colleagues. This gave the festival a particularly congenial atmosphere (although cellists seem to be clubbable by nature) in which there were no major egos and everyone was happy to share their time and wisdom.

THE FESTIVAL'S FORMAT was to have seven 50-minute masterclasses, a different professor and two students each, all in a row, from 9am to 5pm,

with an hour for lunch and 10-minute breaks, over three days. The relentless pace of this immersion might not have led to in-depth problem-solving, but then how much can be achieved in a masterclass anyway? The best classes tackled one or two problems and just nudged the students to think in a different way. For example, Bion Tsang (a Parisot student), in the limited time, encouraged the students to listen to themselves properly, and to learn how to teach themselves. He asked, 'What can you self-assess?', 'Can you tell me what you're doing to work on it?'

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After getting one student to work on the consonant sound of a chord in the Elgar Concerto by singing it, and working out if she wanted a 'ya' or a 'bam', he said, 'You have to experiment on your own – a teacher can only tell you so much.'

Dennis Parker (who studied with both Starker and Parisot) focused on hand position to encourage one player to look for maximum relaxation on each note, especially those that would normally involve stretches. 'What position gives the best balance for every

single note?' So rather than just getting used to finger patterns, you should 'customise them in a way that's best for you and for your body'. Thomas Loewenheim, a former Starker student whose playing posture had been helped by the great cellist, passed on insights based on these principles to one student to try to help him reorganise his position. Patrick Jee, who studied with Parisot, lay on the floor to explain the principles of relaxation. These sorts of shifts are not necessarily easy for a participant to assimilate quickly, but they certainly gave everyone something to think about and try out in practice.

CLASSES GIVEN BY Dmitri Atapine and Claudio Bohórquez focused more on the musical side, drilling into the harmonic structure of pieces. Bohórquez particularly highlighted how music consists of tension and release, focusing on helping students to hear this and play accordingly. Castro-Balbi himself coached a couple of talented younger students, finding a few things to think about, whether it was how to create 'sparkle' with the right hand rather than relying on vibrato, or how to breathe in such a way as to communicate with the pianist.

Whether or not it changed any students' minds or technique, it was fascinating to watch all of the approaches. It was also gratifying, though probably unsurprising under the circumstances, that most of the professors sat through each other's classes and even referred to what they'd picked up in other sessions. As Castro-Balbi told me, 'It's interesting because we share some approaches and we learn from slightly different ones. There are different colours and I enjoy that. It's a nice exchange of our teachings, our ideas and approaches. At the same time we are able to keep a collegiality because we all know each other from before.'

By way of light relief from the intense information transfer of the classes, there were concerts every night. The first included Castro-Balbi performing the *Lord of the Air* cello concerto by Jimmy López, documenting in sound the journey of the condor, from first steps on a ledge of a mountain through its flight and ascent, to its return. The piece managed to be programmatic and evocative without straying too far into film music territory.

A HIGHLIGHT OF THE EVENT was Claudio Bohórquez's meaty solo recital of Ligeti's Sonata, Hindemith's Sonata no.3 and Bach's Suite no.1 in G major. His Ligeti was accurate and clean yet flexible and dramatic; his Hindemith demonstrated exactly how an understanding of tension and release he talked about in his class creates a sense of inevitability to the music; and his Bach found a different sound world from either of the preceding pieces, and managed to be unfussy, poised, intelligent and absolutely riveting. It can't be easy for a cellist to play to an audience of colleagues, but his was a class act that the crowd seemed fully to appreciate. Indeed, there was no room for shyness for anyone – the Friday night concert showcased most of the professors in one way or another, providing students with the chance to see them in action, and to watch the variety of styles and personalities.

Carlos Prieto gave a charming talk about his cello, the 1720 'Piatti' Stradivari, whose history and provenance he has spent many years researching. It certainly made for some good anecdotes – including one in which Felix Mendelssohn's relative Francesco Mendelssohn leaves the cello on the street one night when he has drunk too much gin, only for it to be rescued by a cleaning lady. Prieto's passion and love of his instrument were infectious. He concluded with a performance of Bach's Suite no.3 in C major that stressed the dance qualities of the music, bouncing along elegantly.



Pedagogues such as Thomas Landschoot gave masterclasses at the festival

If some of this format of cello concerts, masterclasses and events sounds familiar, it might be because Castro-Balbi was inspired in his idea by his visits to the now defunct Manchester Cello Festival, which ended in 2010

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with its director Ralph Kirshbaum's move to the US. Castro-Balbi might not yet have Kirshbaum's bulging little black book of cello contacts, but he certainly has ambitions for the festival, the imagination, and the drive to keep it moving forward. This was the biennial event's fourth incarnation, and each one has had more features. This year there was live streaming of the concerts and classes. Another aspect that has developed is the participation of cello ensembles – something that is a key part of the Parisot training, with his Yale Cellos group. Some teachers brought ensembles made up of their students, and as well as the members taking part in the masterclasses, each group performed in the final concert.

This culmination involved a wide-ranging programme that showed what a versatile and exciting instrumentation massed cellos can provide. At one end of the spectrum was a sonorous

arrangement of the Bach Chaconne performed by Bion Tsang's Longhorn Cellos, sounding more like a Walton film score in this sound world, and taking on a romantic life of its own. At the more modern end was Kaija Saariaho's *Neiges*, performed by Rhonda Rider's Boston Conservatory Cello Ensemble, showing off the more delicate possibilities of the instrument – more sound effect than lyrical, sometimes. The concert ended with over 90 cellists on stage for Villa-Lobos's *Bachianas Brasileiras* no.1, the crowning moment of the whole event.

IT WAS REMARKABLE to think what an international and widely dispersed group was represented on stage for this highly charged concert. There were professors originally from as far afield as Israel, Spain, Taiwan and Belgium, now teaching all over the US, and their students, also from all over the world. It was a perfect example of just how cosmopolitan the classical music world is, and of the mechanisms of this continental cross-fertilisation. A teacher of the calibre of Starker attracts students from all over the world and sends them back out to disseminate their learning. Festivals are a vital part of this process and transmission, and Cellofest has hit on a formula that will no doubt continue to grow and develop. ■



Ninety cellists performed on stage at the final concert