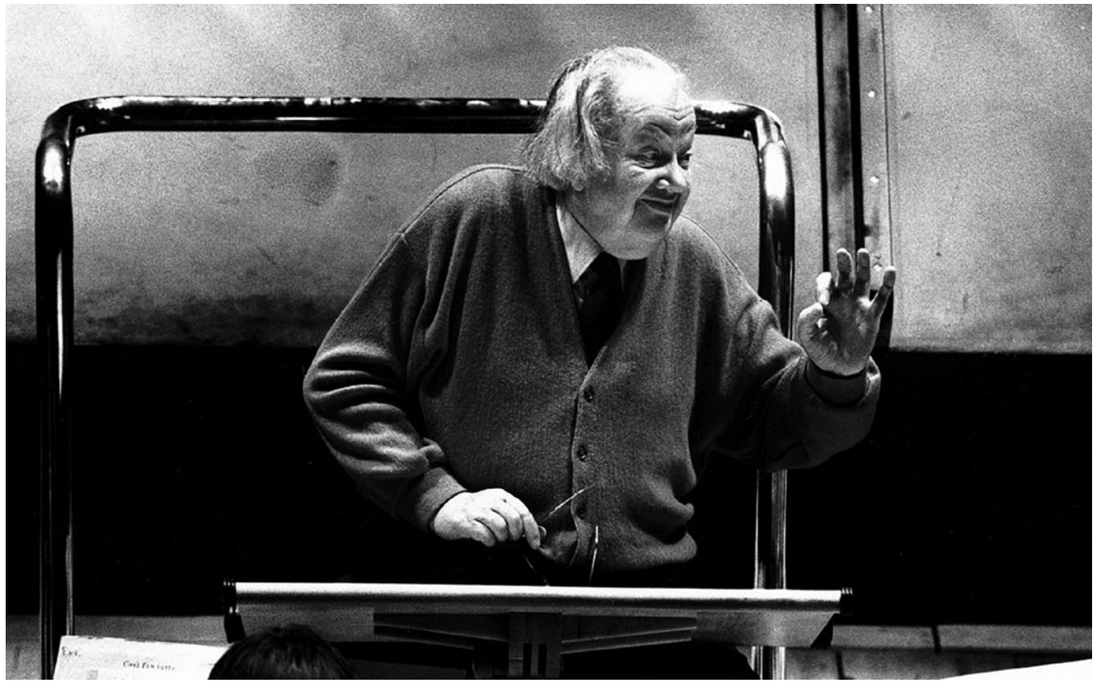
THE FOUNDING AND HISTORY OF IMS PRUSSIA COVE JONATHAN GAISMAN KC

In 1971, a corpulent Hungarian violinist with a passing resemblance to the actor Charles Laughton accepted an invitation to play Beethoven's violin concerto in Truro Cathedral. It would prove to be a visit of great significance for thousands of musicians and a vastly larger number of listeners. He was enraptured by the wildness of the south Cornish coast and immediately saw its potential as a place for music-making and teaching. The following year, Sándor Végh, together with the man who had suggested that he come to Cornwall, Hilary Tunstall-Behrens, founded a masterclass seminar there which has endured, expanded and prospered to the present day, half a century on.

Végh, then in his sixties, was always a musicians' musician. Sir András Schiff, who collaborated with him over decades, called him an *Urmusiker* – one who in an age of mediocrity was 'like a breath of fresh air.' Végh was a pupil of Jenö Hubay, who himself had learned with Vieuxtemps and played with no less a figure than Brahms. As a young man, Végh became close to Bartók, who paid him one of the great musical compliments of the 20th century. Végh asked him why the scores of his string quartets contained so many detailed instructions, since they felt so instinctive. The composer replied: 'Ah, that is for ignoramuses, not people like yourself who have such natural musicianship and understanding.'

As a young man, Végh was given a decisive piece of advice by the great singer Chaliapin: 'You can sing well on the violin, but you don't speak enough.' Végh only understood this remark much later when the cellist Pablo Casals demonstrated to him the art of playing *parlando*. Music has many voices, and singing is only one of them; there are numerous other modes of narration and communication. This idea became close to the heart of Végh's playing and teaching style. The pianist Susan Tomes (formerly of Domus and the Florestan Trio) listened to him performing a Bach partita towards the end of his playing career, and wrote about it in her perceptive book *Beyond the Notes*. 'It was partly an illusion caused by his 'speaking' tone on the violin, and partly it was the very real contours of his sound, like the contours on a map, but I felt that instead of listening to music I was listening to information, and that I could not afford to miss a single link in the sense of it. I had no urge to drift in and out of the music as I so often do. It was like being lost in a maze, and hearing someone explain, just once, the way out of it.'

Végh had initially played in the Hungarian Quartet before founding in 1940 the quartet which bore his name. The Végh's recordings of the Beethoven quartets (still available) capture the extraordinary and sometimes elusive characters of these 16 masterpieces as successfully as any recordings before or since.



Sandor Végh © IMS Archive

They had a tremendous following among discerning critics in the 1970s, so much so that it was reputedly the Végh Quartet's recording of late Beethoven which, together with a few other examples of terrestrial music, travelled on the Voyager 1 craft into interstellar space.

Hilary Tunstall-Behrens © Clive Barda

Végh, who called himself a 'chauvinist European,' always emphasised the importance of the whole European tradition, and in particular the central and eastern elements – those idiomatic, earthy instincts that are present or implicit in so much of the classical canon. The neglect of that central European element in music-making was exacerbated by the continent's partition after the Second World War, to say nothing of the loss of so many Jewish musicians from that region in the Holocaust. The ethos of the academies of America, Western Europe and Russia, he felt, lacked the naturalness inherent in making music, wrongly emphasising technique, beauty of tone for its own sake, conformism and a literal approach to the printed score, which inhibited the freer expression of imagination and emotion – the interpretation of the music behind the notes. The fact that each 16th-note in a passage of semiquavers, say, was written identically did not mean that they must be played in an even, uniform way. Yet this interpretative freedom was not an egotistical licence to impose the player's own personality on the music, but rather a quest to liberate the soul of the work, undertaken in the spirit and traditions of the great Viennese masters.

Tunstall-Behrens' horn-playing elder brother Michael owned the perfect site for the establishment of the International Musicians Seminar, as it was first known. (A 1979 BBC film portrait of the seminars was called *An Ideal Place*.) The Porth-en-Alls estate lies on a rare stretch of what, by a near miracle, remains completely undeveloped coast, just east of St Michael's Mount. The principles of environmental conservation practised by the family (and continued by the present owner, Peter, a cellist) matched and supported the profound sense of place, of tradition and of unspoiled nature which Végh believed underlay healthy, breathing music-making.

'The waves of the sea are symbolic of our waves of sound,' he said, urging the need for the closest attention to the ever-changing light on the sea visible from the windows of the Great Room in which he held masterclasses. This mirrored the constant regard that a musician must have to the myriad changes within a piece – a shift of harmony, the change of character from one phrase to the next, or even within a single note. In an era where most learning and concert-giving takes place in ferro-concrete cities, Végh recognised the importance for young musicians of a lengthy immersion in a quite different environment.

From the start, the courses were to be of a full three weeks' duration. The students were to come from all over the world; they were to be allowed to attend up to the age of 30 and must be of conservatory standard or above, so that technical competence in the most demanding repertoire should be assumed and could therefore be ignored in lessons.

One of the coastal inlets on the estate is named after an 18th-century smuggler, John Carter, whose successes may have earned him the envious or ironical nickname 'the King of Prussia.' The King of Prussia's Cove over the years became contracted to Prussia Cove, and the seminars set up by Végh became known as IMS Prussia Cove. The estate included a massively-built house – designed by a follower of Lutyens and situated on the very edge of the sea, with the Escher-like feature that all three of its levels are on the ground floor – and numerous surrounding cottages. It was indeed the ideal accommodation for housing up to 100 people at any one time.

In the beginning, there was a violin class and a cello class. Végh's first pupils included Erich Höbarth, who later founded the Quatuor Mosaïques, and Gerhard Schulz, subsequently a member of the Alban Berg Quartet. (Both were to become violin professors at the seminars.) There was almost no money. Volunteers were persuaded to keep house and cook. That first year and thereafter, they included my wife Tessa who went on, until her untimely death in January 2022, to serve

as Chairman of the board of trustees for 26 years, a tenure which flagrantly and triumphantly flouted the norms of modern corporate governance. Back then, the materials for the kitchen often had to be scavenged from the surrounding land. The coastal path is strewn in spring with wild flowers – coconut-scented gorse, starry celandines, blackthorn, the pink of thrift and light-blue squill. But there were also herbs and leaves to be found for salads, as well as mussels on the rocks below the main house or further afield. Local markets, long since gone, provided inexpensive vegetables and fish. Professors, students and volunteers all ate together in a refectory adapted from an old squash court (as they still do) – an expression of idealistic common purpose and community which remains to the present day among the most striking features of a visit to the seminars.

Soon, a viola class and a piano in chamber music class were added. At an early stage, a Gulbenkian-funded study into musical education in Britain identified IMS Prussia Cove, together with Aldeburgh and Dartington, as the only residential courses making provision for the training of young instrumentalists at the highest international level. Instead of British students going abroad to complete their musical education, the flow was reversed, and musicians came from countries far and wide to make the cumbersome journey to West Cornwall in order to imbibe the spirit of IMS Prussia Cove. Early champions of the enterprise included Lord Menuhin, Nathan Milstein and Sir Michael Tippett.

Végh's teaching style was both authoritarian and highly eccentric, the latter not least due to his defective but energetic English,

Tessa Gaisman © GM Isserlis

which he employed simultaneously with many other languages of which his command was however no greater. He was outspoken in his rejection of playing in the 'American style' – the use of big sound and constant, suffocating vibrato that had no connection with the music; for him, phrasing and articulation had to be responsive and in proportion to what the music was expressing at that moment. When a student was on the way to grasping this point, Tomes recalls that Végh would utter an extended falsetto cry of 'Quasi!' (pronounced 'Kvasi'); if he was particularly pleased, he would beam and, swivelling inelegantly to face the class, would repeat 'That is! That is!' in heavily-accented but rapturous tones.

In 1975, an important expansion of the seminars took place. A second course (which came to be scheduled for three weeks in September) was added to the Easter masterclasses and called Open Chamber Music. Végh remembered as a 17-year-old being spontaneously recruited by Kreisler to join him at an after-concert party in playing Schubert's A minor string quartet. So when in 1974 he visited Rudolf Serkin's Marlboro summer music festival in Vermont, which was built around the idea of young musicians playing with established artists, he was readily convinced of the value of this combination as an educational method. It provided another means by which senior musicians could pass on the best of the old traditions. However there was an important difference from the masterclasses: within each chamber group every participant was (at any ratein theory) to have an equal voice in arguing how the piece should be performed. The chemistry between those students who had excelled at the Easter masterclasses and their celebrated maestri proved highly productive. Musicians who had neither taught nor learned at the seminars could also be invited (some of whom – like Schiff – in due course became professors).

Thus, by the end of the 1970s, the essential pattern of the biannual seminars at IMS Prussia Cove was set. By common consent among the participants, it has required very little by way of adjustment in the 40-odd years since. Its model and spirit have been copied in many other festivals, often founded by IMS Prussia Cove alumni.

Végh himself carried on teaching at the seminars for 20 years, though towards the end he was no longer able to play (he had developed a successful second career as a conductor). Shortly before his death in 1997, he passed on the baton of artistic direction to cellist Steven Isserlis, whose own exceptional musicianship, no less inspiring personality and vivid teaching methods reflect the principles, if not the style, of his mentor. Isserlis has been instrumental in introducing new faces among both teachers and other participants, but always in the context of an overriding respect for the founding aesthetic inculcated by Végh.

Ferenc Rados, Rita Wagner, David Waterman © GM Isserlis

There has from the start been a strong Hungarian influence, no more keenly felt than in the totemic presence over many years of Ferenc Rados. This Hungarian pianist, unknown in England except to a circle of devotees, is among the most rigorous and enigmatic of pedagogues (he taught the young Schiff and Zoltán Kocsis in Budapest) and stories of his gnomic, caustically humorous style of teaching abound. Like Végh before him, he is scathing of mere 'performances' and of 'interesting' playing, because these entail that the student is not attending sufficiently to what the music calls for, but is rather foregrounding his own personality or facility. Some pupils understand better than others epigrams such as 'Scales are ornamentations upon harmonies', or 'There is no democracy among the notes' – but those who do bear the benevolent hallmark of having been 'Rados'd' for evermore. After all, if a listener leaves a concert thinking only that she has heard beautiful playing, something has gone awry; it is the music that should be vibrating in the memory.

The names of the distinguished participants who have attended the seminars read like a list of many of the most respected figures in classical music – not just string players and pianists, but also leading composers such as György Kurtág, Thomas Adès and Jörg Widmann, and singers such as Mark Padmore. Representatives of the most distinguished string quartets (all four members of the Amadeus Quartet; the founder and leader of the Takács Quartet) have taught new generations of quartets formed in Cornwall (such as the Endellion, the Belcea and the Heath). Former participants do not all become soloists (though Natalie Clein, Nicola Benedetti, Guy Johnston and Sheku Kanneh-Mason are among more recent attendees); they also form chamber groups or become leading players in the world's great orchestras.

The length of the queue of those applying to play at the seminars is matched only by those wanting to work as unpaid volunteers in the kitchen, driving or making beds. The helpers are no less distinguished and perhaps even more varied than the musicians. You may find a celebrated BBC correspondent peeling potatoes alongside an anaesthetist, a London Underground driver, or an instantly recognisable actor. During seminars the house is full of 'sounds and sweet airs, that give delight'; and if the diet is less austere, the finances more secure than in the early days, the same genius *loci* presides and lures people back year after year.

So it is that IMS Prussia Cove reaches its 50th birthday, an unqualified success story and an enduring beacon of excellence in a cultural world threatened by compromise and decline. It is a byword for musical integrity and the maintenance of essential traditions – qualities for which it was honoured with the Royal Philharmonic Society medal in 2008. The musicians who are performing during this weekend of celebration have reached the highest levels of individual attainment, but they also think that the sublime conversation of chamber music is the pinnacle of their art. They are surely right, for the greatest composers produced many of their supreme creations in this more private and intimate genre. And where there is chamber music, there will be IMS Prussia Cove – to which congratulations on 50 years of achievement.