

School's out

Music seems to bubble up from the ground each summer on the Dartington Hall estate. **Harriet Clifford** meets 2020's new artistic director, Sara Mohr-Pietsch, to discuss the vision behind her Summer School programme

You don't need to be talented to go to a summer school,' insists Sara Mohr-Pietsch, radio broadcaster and artistic director at Dartington Summer School and Festival, which runs from 25 July to 22 August this year. 'That's the really unique thing about Dartington – there just isn't anywhere else that mixes the amateur and the professional in such a comprehensive way, and that's what's really special about it.' In each of the four weeks, she explains, there is a choral course which can be taken with

no musical experience, for which reading music is not a requirement. At the same time, the Summer School attracts highly qualified conservatoire students, who hope that music will one day be their career.

The rich, 'hot-house' environment created on the Dartington Hall estate in Devon each summer brings together musicians and singers from all walks of life, offering four weeks of self-contained, week-long courses taught by professionals, performers, composers and practitioners. 'The other

thing is the serendipity, in that an amateur pianist finds themselves sitting next to Alfred Brendel at breakfast ... For amateur musicians or people who go to concerts regularly, it's not often that you get to have in-depth conversations with the people whom you're watching perform.'

Taking over from Joanna MacGregor, who curated her fifth and final Summer School and Festival in 2019, Mohr-Pietsch grew up attending Dartington, both as a participant and, later, as a volunteer. 'My earliest memories >

▼ Sara Mohr-Pietsch takes on the role of artistic director for Dartington Summer School and Festival 2020



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▲ The Big Choir comes together each morning to rehearse and perform a variety of repertoire, often alongside the Summer School's orchestras and soloists

◁ are of that sense of being in the broadest possible community and making friends across the ages ... I'd only ever hung out with people my age before, and becoming friends through a musical experience was really amazing. The other thing was just the feeling of this place being alive with music. You turn a corner and there's a bunch of people singing madrigals under a tree – it sounds ridiculously idyllic!

'I'd love to fill the place with as much singing as possible; that feels really important' – Sara Mohr-Pietsch

Idyllic, perhaps, but attending Dartington as a volunteer is a rigorous experience: 'You get a short burst of having to do everything. You learn so much – I know a lot of people who work behind the scenes in music who did a stint as a volunteer at Dartington.' For the participants, the experience can be as intense or as relaxed as they would like it to be. Someone who lives locally can drop in for the Big Choir each morning, but someone else might choose to stay on site, take several advanced courses and attend all of the concerts that week, the programme for which runs alongside the Summer School. 'You

could come with the family and take part in the Children's Choir and the Community Chorus, and go to the beach in your time off. There are lots of different ways of configuring it.' Camping is also available, making for a more affordable and accessible way of attending the event.

Since the Summer School started in 1925, it has been a tradition that each day begins with people singing together. Today, this takes

the form of the Big Choir, an SATB choir of mixed ability, but for which singers must be able to read music. The bursary students – particularly the advanced singers – are invited to participate too, and in each of the four weeks, the Big Choir courses focus on a different theme. 'I'd love to fill the place with as much singing as possible – that feels really important,' says Mohr-Pietsch. Week 1 sees the choir take 'A Mayflower Journey', marking the 400th anniversary of the pilgrim fathers' voyage from Plymouth and taking in repertoire from Gibbons, Campion, Byrd and Schütz to a new commission from US

composer-in-residence Nico Muhly. Week 2 presents the opportunity to sing Bach's B minor Mass, culminating in a performance with the Dartington Festival Baroque Orchestra and Dunedin Consort soloists.

With a nod to Beethoven's 250th anniversary year, in Week 3 the Big Choir takes on a new commission – *JOY!*, inspired by Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and written by composer John Barber and librettist Hazel Gould. Mohr-Pietsch explains, 'We don't want to do the Mass in C again, we've done that. I actually thought the more interesting thing would be to take the Ninth Symphony's Ode to Joy as a starting point, because I think Dartington is a place to experiment and contemplate the way we live, together and in community and society. I feel as though we're facing extraordinarily challenging times at the moment – one of the things that an experience like Summer School can offer is a chance to look at that and to explore it together in community.' The text for the piece will be developed through workshops with children, refugees and local climate activists, rendering it 'really specific to Dartington and the community there.' In Week 4, the Big Choir tackles Duke Ellington's *Sacred Concerts*, a 'big, meaty, juicy piece of work, which not a lot of people know or get to perform in.'

As well as the Big Choir, there are many other opportunities for singers. Participants can learn renaissance polyphony with William Lyons and The City Musik in Week 1, and sing with members of Stile Antico in two courses throughout the week; vocal masterclasses with Simon Wall and Iestyn Davies are also on offer. In Week 2, masterclasses are run by Kate Semmens, Ben See and Dame Emma Kirkby, and the Dunedin Consort leads a Vocal Ensemble course in baroque motets. Week 3 offers the opportunity to take a Chamber Choir course with Alice Farnham, as well as a Song Class with Kitty Whately. In the final week, Exaudi's James Weeks leads the Chamber Choir, Black Voices a Gospel Choir, and Simon Lepper a Vocal Class. Harpsichordists can take courses with Jane Chapman in Week 1 and Steven Devine in Week 2.

Throughout the four weeks, more general courses are also available, including Future Sounds: Finding the Words, led by Mohr-Pietsch, in which she explores the complexity of using words to talk about music. Alongside this Future Sounds strand, Mohr-Pietsch has introduced Open Space in place of the fourth session each afternoon. One-off workshops and taster classes will be available, but also the opportunity to do something else: 'There are things that I see in Dartington which are bubbling under the surface, and I just want to bring them more into consciousness. One of them is around conversations, because interesting conversations happen at Dartington all the time, and they tend to happen accidentally. But setting up the Open Space and running courses in writing and radio making, which are specifically about music, are ways of encouraging people to engage in conversation about music.'

Part of Mohr-Pietsch's vision for Dartington is sparking these conversations and raising questions about how people talk about classical music: 'We're stuck in some place where classical music is not something that culturally we feel comfortable discussing. That's something in my work that I'd like to help shift.' As a presenter on BBC Radio 3, Mohr-Pietsch feels that her perspective as a listener and communicator has informed her approach to programming at Dartington: 'I think the best skill is curiosity. I spend all of my time not just listening to music and

listening to artists talking about the music that they make, but also really listening to our audiences.' Her predecessor, whom she describes as an 'extraordinary programmer', was a concert pianist, so Mohr-Pietsch believes that she brings something a bit different.

The 2020 programme focuses on new works more explicitly than in previous years, which Mohr-Pietsch explains helps to bring classical music to the here and now. 'If we're not engaging dynamically with music as something that is alive and as something that needs to be responded to in the present moment, we'll never learn from it what we all know we can achieve from music – how to live better together.' She believes that now is a 'uniquely interesting moment', as young audiences are coming to classical music without preconceptions about its being irrelevant or stuffy.

What would success look like for Dartington's artistic director? 'I think for

me, success will be if everybody leaves Summer School in 2020 having tried something new, having learned more about themselves and about music through other people, and having made friends.' She also hopes participants will have experienced a personal journey: 'You might be someone who sings in choral societies all the time but you come in Week 4 and sing Duke Ellington for the first time, and it opens up a whole new thing for you. Or you've always been a little bit shy about singing in front of people and you take a singing workshop and stand up and sing in front of people, and that's your leap. It doesn't really matter what the leap is, but everyone there is encouraged to feel safe to do that.' ■

Booking for Dartington Summer School and Festival is now open at dartington.org/summerschool or by calling the office on +44 1803 847080. The concert programme running alongside the courses will be released in March.

▼ Bursary students are invited to sing with the Big Choir



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