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## Iris Origo: the author honoured by a music festival

Origo was an aristocratic Italian writer who dreamed of creating a new society. Selma Dabbagh visits the magnificent Tuscan estate where her grandson has set up a yearly celebration

Selma Dabbagh

The Guardian, Friday 6 July 2012 17.55 EDT

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Garden estate ... La Foce, the Tuscany home of Iris Origo and her husband Antonio. Photograph: Paul Flanagan

Each July an annual music festival is held in the magnificent grounds of La Foce, a Tuscan estate in the Val D'Orcia, in memory of Iris and Antonio Origo. The Origos rebuilt the house from a crumbling osteria, developed the gardens – today celebrated as among the finest in Italy – and transformed the volcanic moonscape of the hills and valleys into an expanse of fields and woodlands.

Iris Origo, a plain girl who turned herself into a woman of great elegance, was, by all accounts, an obsessive writer. "She always wrote in the morning and came down to lunch in a terrible mood as she had to stop," her daughter Benedetta recalls. Several of her books were international bestsellers when published and many remain in print decades later. Origo is best known for her diary, War in the Val D'Orcia, and her ability, as critic and biographer Quentin Bell put it, "to bring even mountains to life," in her biographical work, such as The Merchant of Prato: Francesco Di Marco Datini – Daily Life in a Medieval Italian City, which enabled her to convey the vivacity of long-dead Italian personalities. In 1947, Origo persuaded Count Gamba to let her have access to his great-aunt's papers; the considerable cache resulted in her internationally acclaimed book, The Last Attachment, an intimate account of Lord Byron's affair

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Origo's grandson, Grammy award-winning cellist [Antonio Lysy](#), was inspired to set up the festival 24 years ago by the acoustics of the courtyard of Castelluccio, which forms part of the La Foce estate where he used to practise. The festival began as a private affair, starting the year after Iris's death in 1988, with her blessing. The beauty and isolated surroundings encouraged the musicians and their families to stay for longer periods, which made it, Lysy says, "like a retreat", allowing them to present a repertoire of complex pieces rarely heard at festivals.

The [Incontri in Terra di Siena chamber music festival](#) has branched out since then, gathering regional and international support. It is a key part of a wider initiative to sustain the area, the passion that originally drove the Origos. "When I used to return to La Foce, my grandparents were getting old, people were moving from the area into the cities; the festival is a way of keeping this area alive," Lysy explains. This year concerts including string quartets by Bach, Debussy and Schubert are to be held in the intimate settings of churches in Castiglioncello as well as in [Pienza](#), [San Quirico d'Orcia](#) and [Montepulciano](#). Musicians such as tenor [Ian Bostridge](#) are returning to the festival, where he will perform with pianist [Julius Drake](#).

Origo (née Cutting) was born in 1902. Her father, an American, died when she was seven. He wrote to her Anglo-Irish mother Sybil Desart: "All this national feeling makes people so unhappy. Bring her up somewhere where she does not belong ... I'd like her to be a little 'foreign'." Origo was brought up in the Villa Medici in Fiesole. Her choice of husband, a man a decade her senior who "grew up in the laundry with the servants", was not what was expected of her at all. Her mother spent the wedding day in bed. When the Origos decided to live at La Foce, their friends and family thought they were mad. No one moved to the countryside like that, particularly not to such a ramshackle estate on a windswept hill, with no running water and – worst of all – no polite company.

The desire to reconstruct a new society ("our shared youthful dream", as Origo referred to it) drove the couple. Their decision to do what they felt to be morally right, rather than what was socially acceptable among their class, came to be what La Foce and the Origos were remembered for, as one of the only aristocratic families in Italy who helped escaping prisoners, partisans and deserters during the second world war. In this, and in other ways, they were unique.

The writer [Caroline Moorehead](#), met and interviewed Origo for a feature in the Times in 1988 and later decided to make her the subject of a biography. "I was a little daunted when I began," Moorehead says, "I worried that I wouldn't have anything to add, as Origo had already produced such an excellent autobiography. But although she was such a remarkable woman in many ways and a fine biographer, she was also most discreet and retiring, and in the course of researching her, a lot of riveting and totally unexpected stuff came up."

"What a fine long journey we have travelled together!" Iris wrote to Antonio in a 1976 letter to be read in the event of her death. It was premature. She outlived her husband, but the challenges had already been considerable: a harsh terrain, superstitious Tuscan villagers and a war that made itself felt with air raids, prisoners of war, orphans and evacuees, partisans fighting German soldiers in the hills. She also had two girls to bring up, an estate to run, a job to do, books to write as well as a husband to attend to and travel extensively with (Egypt, Libya and Cambodia were among their destinations).

The Moorehead biography quotes the intimate correspondence between Iris and her lover [Colin MacKenzie](#) and her later affairs with the British novelist Leo Myers, who killed himself in 1944, and, in her 50s, with William Hughes, the chief of staff to the general commander of the Allied Forces ("I'm too old to be doing this sort of thing, darling," she is reported to have said to a friend in a Scottish pub during a rendezvous with Hughes). That Antonio had mistresses is presented as a given.

The unresolved torment of her son Gianni's death aged seven from meningitis also aches through the biography. Unsettlingly, Moorehead also alludes to Antonio's sympathies with Mussolini's fascist government, which subsidised the extensive development of La Foce's land, while revealing Iris's sense of alienation from her husband's political proclivities. But, as Moorehead concedes, Antonio never comes through clearly in the documents and photographs left behind. He remains a strong but undefined presence and there is a hint that Origo, ever aware

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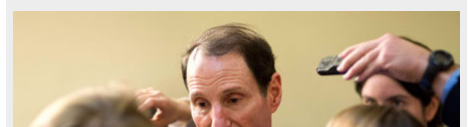
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of the reconstructive powers of the biographer, a woman who was, for example, at pains to type up and preserve correspondence with her lover MacKenzie, was keen to keep him as such.

The tension between the said and the unsaid, the exposed and the contained, is an influence on the composition of [Francesco Cilluffo's song cycle](#) "Land to Life Again", which will be premiered at this year's festival. The piece encapsulates what the festival symbolises: its title emphasises the spirit of revitalisation that the Origos stood for and the clipped lyrics drawn from *War in Val D'Orcia* delivered against a searing musical score reflect the Origos' way of living – an elegant form controlling hidden passions within.

• La Foce music festival is on from 20-29 July. For programme details visit [www.itslafoce.com](http://www.itslafoce.com)

• This article was amended on 9 July 2012, correcting Iris Origo's maiden name.

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**magnolia12**

07 July 2012 3:59 PM

Correction please: Iris Origo was nee Cutting not Bayard; the latter was her father's Christian name; he was Bayard Cutting



**tetegrondona**

07 July 2012 8:58 PM

I wish the guardian stop highlighting so many words and phrases -"Italy"?, "festivals"? why???, it's very annoying for us readers.



**alphawhale**

08 July 2012 2:17 AM

Interesting article, thanks Guardian.

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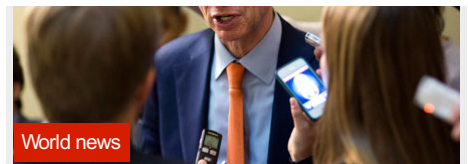
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