

Italian magic

One of the best kept early 20th-century gardens in Italy is the fragrant setting for a festival that has spent 25 years celebrating music, visual arts, history, literature – and of course, being Italian, food and wine. It's magic, writes **Michael White**

It's the smell I most remember – which would be a curious thing to say about a music festival except that this one happened in the courtyard of a Tuscan castle, with the scent of lemon trees and rosemary and Christian Dior heavy in the air.

The festival was called Incontri in Terra di Siena – Encounters in the Siena Region – and I was there some years ago, taking time out from the very different festival Hans Werner Henze used to run in nearby Montepulciano.

Where Montepulciano was all temperament and ideology as fierce Italian musicologists – the worst kind – generated angry feuds in stifling seminars, the neighbouring Incontri was civility incarnate: chamber music played under the stars and followed by exquisite suppers in walled gardens. It was pure Italian magic. And it doubtless still is, after 25 years' operation.

This year marks the quarter-century with a special anniversary programme. But the format will be much as I remember – although spread, now, through a wider range of venues. And as always, it remains the private venture of a single family: the Origo clan which runs the festival out of its noble 'fattoria' (a peculiarly Italian combination of palazzo/farmhouse) called La Foce.

People know La Foce partly for its gardens, which are open to the public, but above all as the home of the Anglo-Italian author Iris Origo who spent world war two sheltering Allied soldiers there and subsequently turned the experience into a book called *War in Val d'Orcia*.

Over time, the estate passed to her daughter Benedetta, who has written about it in *La Foce: A Garden and Landscape in Tuscany*. She studied piano and married Yehudi

Menuhin's protégé Alberto Lysy. And it was their son, the cellist Antonio Lysy, who began the Incontri in 1989 – more, he says, as a musicians' retreat than anything else. 'Friends from the Menuhin School, where I studied, or from Prussia Cove would come out and stay, giving the odd concert. And taking that further seemed like a chance to rebuild the community here, in an essentially agricultural region where people were leaving to go and find work in cities'.

With Antonio as artistic director and Benedetta as president, the concerts happened partly in the fattoria, partly in the neighbouring castello, which is also an Origo property, but spreading out into historic sites across the Tuscan hills – like a cluster of restored farm buildings (now a hotel) near Sinalunga, and an ancient church outside Pienza.



Perfect setting:
La Foce, outside and in



There has been a conscious decision to keep the scale of the Incontri manageable – which means ten days of concerts, mostly chamber scale. But there are satellite excursions into visual arts, and a supportive social network in the rich, sophisticated international community which occupies this part of Italy and hides the fact that it's a country in dire economic straits.

But Benedetta Origo knows the reality. She talks of the struggle it takes to keep an estate like La Foce in business. And business it has become, with one of her daughters running an onsite restaurant, another daughter running a sculpture studio, and the conversion of outlying farmhouses into holiday lets.

There is still a strong, surviving sense of the Origo lineage (Iris, after all, was a Marchese) and noblesse oblige. 'My family existed in a halo of privilege and beauty', says Origo, 'as aristocrats did. And now it's right to open the estate, to make it more accessible and useful'.

Twenty-five years on, she says she is used to all the visitors who take no notice of 'privato'



Writer's retreat:
Iris Origo in the early forties

signs and peek into her cupboards: 'It's what happens when you open to the public, and I quite like having people here'. So there are no plans for a Garsington-like exit from the fray, despite the fact that Origo is an elegant and graceful 73. The show goes on – this year

from 19 to 28 July, with artists who include Ralph Kirshbaum, Red Priest, and Francesco Cilluffo conducting the Orchestra della Toscana.

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