



Teacher Stephen Clapp speaks at Credo's daily Morning Sing

At Ohio's Credo Chamber Music Festival, students make new friends playing together – and then pick up rubbish from the streets. **HEATHER KURZBAUER** reports on a project that combines community work with musical development

Just down the highway from Cleveland, Ohio, a faded American industrial hub of great musical repute, gently rolling hills give way to broad horizon-defining vistas. Perhaps nature provided a source of inspiration for one man's singular dream of a music festival that puts performance on a par with spiritual aspiration and community service.

The word 'credo', Latin for 'I believe', carries a message of a higher calling, a devotion to service, the stuff of old-time religion in America's heartland. Taking its cues from a powerful tripartite mantra – develop the gift, acknowledge the source, respond with service – Cleveland's Credo programme offers young musicians an unusual opportunity to combine performance practice with social activism. This year the Credo Chamber Music Festival was in celebratory mode, marking a decade of noteworthy accomplishments with a gala orchestral concert at the city's Severance Hall. Although all the coaches and counsellors at Credo are Christians and its message is drawn from New Testament sources, its meaning is universal.

Students are not subjected to proselytising religious activity, but invited into a community in which religion is more a source of inspiration than a tangible part of daily life. The values that bind Credo's pillars of faith appeal to students of all beliefs.

**OBERLIN COLLEGE CONSERVATORY**, home to the festival, is no run-of-the-mill institution. Architectural gems set around a pristine central green provide an appealing façade for one of America's most liberal educational bastions. A discreet sign at a central crossroads sets the stage for the message that has defined the school's social agenda for the past 175 years: Oberlin College was the first institution of higher learning to admit male and female students of all races, a trendsetter in the early 19th century. In the new millennium, a college famed for its combination of academic study and high-level music offers outstanding facilities and moral support for Credo's mission.

The project's founder and artistic director Peter Slowik is a man of limitless enthusiasm and purpose. His professional



Credo students giving a concert for workers at Murray Ridge Production Center

the root of most great music and a wonderful way to begin the day. Religion moved Bach and Brahms to write magnificent pieces. I love singing the music. Others get into the combination of music and words and still others experience the underlying message.' Morning Sing provides a means to an end: fellowship through song.

**AS IN ALL SERIOUS** summer music venues, coaching and practice sessions take up a good part of the student's waking hours. Teacher Mark Butin, principal violist of the Honolulu Symphony, explains: 'I encourage my group to get the musical idea out to the public and leave technical concerns behind for just a moment.' Oberlin piano faculty member James Howsmon imparts pearls of wisdom on how to listen to a pianist and factor in particular keyboard issues as a string player. Oberlin alumna Karen Burgman leads students in eurhythmics. Coaching takes on a different meaning at a place where the faculty practises what it preaches. Violin coach Michael Davis, concertmaster of the Louisville Orchestra, says: 'Perhaps by sharing non-musical experiences with students,

PHOTOS: ERIC WEILANDER

credentials attest to a lifelong commitment to musical excellence and he has garnered a plethora of teaching awards. As professor of viola and string division director at Oberlin College Conservatory he mentors high achievers, students who make their mark in top musical positions the world over. Yet to Slowik, real success is measured by loftier standards: 'The truly great musicians exemplified by Pablo Casals and Fritz Kreisler were humble humanitarians. If we only teach young musicians to focus on technical goals and to compete with one another, then the real message these great artists wanted to pass on to us falls on deaf ears.'

Credo evolved after Slowik spent decades observing and participating in music festivals far and wide. He correctly noted that while many programmes offered splendid teaching and intense study in beautiful settings, precious few focused on issues of deeper personal meaning. At Credo, musical instruction and performance are on an equal footing with community service. There are dedicated 'service days' on which students go out into the community and contribute on a practical level – cleaning homeless shelters and collecting rubbish, for example. The musical emphasis is on chamber music, not solo performance. The students, who are aged between 13 and 21, are grouped into ensembles and receive daily coaching sessions and bi-weekly masterclasses with coaches and guest faculty, as well as a weekly private lesson.

A day in the life of the Credo participant begins with Morning Sing. One student I met there says of the tradition: 'Singing is

they develop other ways to work together musically. Develop, acknowledge and respond are not just buzz words – they provide a structure that influences everything we do here.'

Stephen Clapp, dean emeritus of the Juilliard School of Music, is another of the host of renowned pedagogues that Slowik has motivated to join the Credo team. He expresses his enthusiasm succinctly. 'I know of no other place quite like this. We teach our students that the love and discipline that leads them to become musicians in the first place is an extension of what makes them better, more giving people.' Patiently, Clapp starts a coaching session with a detailed explanation on how to tune. 'I've gotten my Juilliard studio class to tune in seven seconds and I will teach you how to beat that record! Ask yourselves first, before you even pick up the instrument, what are you listening for? Tune the string as you listen to the beats two octaves below. When the pulsations slow down, you are closer to your goal of being in tune. And of course, when those beats stop, you have reached that goal.'

Engaged coaching and regular performances reap tangible benefits. After four days of Credo coaching, one group gave committed and credible performances of major repertoire ranging from Taneyev's Piano Quintet op.30 to Spohr's thorny Sextet op.140. The high level of communication and professionalism shown by all the student groups, performing after just a few days of rehearsals, came from something other than technical level or coaching; it stemmed from a real commitment, a belief in working together towards a greater goal. ▶

While many an esteemed pedagogue spends the summer months jetting off to masterclasses around the globe, Slowik gets down to the nitty-gritty of teaching in his own backyard. A first-hand or rather first-ear encounter with Slowik's exuberant teaching methods speaks volumes. True to form, he gives his all to groups regardless of their level. Refuting the very notion that teaching can be tedious, Slowik infuses his lessons with the powerful dynamics of give and take. A group of diffident youngsters starts off with a tentative first attempt at Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no.3. As the coaching session continues, Slowik demonstrates prodigiously, singing, pounding out chords on the piano and dancing through the rehearsal space to convey a steady build-up of musical ideas. Students are encouraged to identify harmonic changes, binary form and recurring themes with jumps, grimaces and shouts. A spell is cast and within one session the confident group runs through the movement with conviction and authority.

EVERY THURSDAY, CREDO PARTICIPANTS and faculty members set forth to combine music and community service. Service projects offer students the chance to perform for audiences in places far removed from traditional concert venues. This year, groups travelled to food banks, prisons, day care centres, low-income housing projects, hospital wards and retirement homes. The music lessons given at the conservatoire take on new meaning during performances that put young people face to face with adversity. But for Slowik, performance is merely a point of departure for true service: 'Credo's conscious redefinition of success is living at the intersection of the world's greatest need and one's greatest joy.'

To walk that intersection, students also put down their instruments and pick up tools of other trades. Cleaning homeless shelters, registering blood bank donors and collecting highway rubbish are not activities at the heart of most music festivals, but Credo advocates real, often confrontational engagement with the community. As one of the older students puts it: 'Studying violin at a conservatoire involves hours of practice and solitary confinement. Sometimes we forget who we are during our years of practice. At Credo we come back to learn not only about ourselves as musicians but as people.'

Recent service days led to other unexpected benefits. A group of twelve students divided into two sextets were brought to Cleveland's imposing City Hall to work at a Red Cross blood bank. One group performed as the other six registered prospective donors. Music wafted up from the



Credo participants carry out kitchen tasks

BRIAN WIERBE

## On dedicated 'service days', students go out into the community, cleaning homeless shelters and collecting rubbish

busy atrium to mayor Frank Jackson's chambers, prompting the local celebrity to invite the musical dozen for individual introductions and photos. To commemorate the experience, one group dubbed itself the Jackson Six. One member said: 'Service days are not an escape from practising but a reality check to teach us what performance should be: giving to others what we have been lucky enough to receive.'

Beyond music and service, Credo participants share evenings of theatre, sport and the trials and tribulations of dorm life. The three-week session passed quickly as friendships were formed across age, race and belief barriers. A formerly sceptical violist noted, 'At first, I was fearful of a stiff religious place where participants would be reading Bibles out loud. What I gained was a supportive, musical family.' When asked to compare Credo to other summer venues, students responded enthusiastically to Credo's emphasis on positive reinforcement, constructive criticism and service. As one teenager revealed, 'Credo puts together all the parts of who I am and why I love music. I wish it could go on all year.' Another participant said, 'Music is international; it knows no religious boundaries. Credo has helped me grow to become a better musician and a much, much better person.' ■



Credo players in concert at Cleveland's Severance Hall

JONATHAN HARGREAVES