

# Quartets adopt united front

Orchestral musicians have unions to fight their corner, but can small chamber ensembles improve their lot by standing together? **Peter Somerford** reports on how some German quartets are hoping to do just that



**A FLEDGLING ASSOCIATION** of German string quartets is aiming to gain more residencies for ensembles and improve conditions for the country's young quartets. The initiative is being led by Monika Henschel, violist of the Munich-based Henschel Quartet, and has been backed by ten leading quartets, among them the Leipzig and Mandelring quartets. These groups already have international careers and are not pressing for residencies for themselves. Instead they want the next generation of quartets to have more opportunities to sustain long-term careers.

Germany has long-established choral associations, and the German Orchestral Union has operated since 1952. An association of German quartets is overdue, reckons Monika Henschel. 'Germany has played a prominent role in the history of the string quartet, so it's natural for leading German quartets to stand together and act.' But why now, when Germany, like the UK and the US, is producing many excellent young quartets? 'We're in a prime era, yes,' said Henschel, 'but unfortunately in Germany we've also had major quartets such as the Rosamunde and Petersen fold in recent years. That is an unbearable situation. Why shouldn't

there be space enough for all of us? The main problem is a lack of basic support structures and residencies. We're not targeting full-time positions, because we know that quartets need to tour, but every ensemble needs a base.'

The Artemis Quartet at Berlin's University of the Arts, and the Aurnyn Quartet at the Musikhochschule in Detmold are among the very few examples of established quartet residencies at German institutions.

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Henschel wants to interest all Germany's 24 Musikhochschulen, as well as universities, in setting up similar roles for quartets. However, she accepts that the small-scale music schools lack the financial resources to offer residencies on their own, and will need support from government and trusts. The new association will also have to tread carefully in order not to alienate existing professors of chamber music at the Hochschulen, who might see an incoming quartet as a challenge to their authority.

Leipzig Quartet cellist Matthias Moosdorf believes that the association could also act as a platform for negotiating concert fees and broadcasting rights. 'Conditions are so much harder for young quartets now,' he says. 'When we won the ARD Competition in Munich in 1991, we were able to find a record company, and secure an agent in every important region in the world. No quartet today can expect to achieve that so easily. Quartet players have to fight for their profession.'

They also need to reconnect with the public, according to Berlin-based artist manager Sonia Simmenauer, who represents such major names as the Artemis, Belcea and Hagen quartets. 'We are suffering from promoters cutting back on quartet concerts in their chamber music series,' she said. 'Quartets have to find a way to redevelop their audience. Unfortunately, the interest among young people in forming quartets does not seem to be matched by young people's interest in hearing them.' But this is not just a German problem. Young quartets in the UK and the US are increasingly venturing into cafés, pubs and clubs in order to reach new, younger audiences.

The challenging environment in Germany calls for a focus on sustaining quartets, argues Simmenauer, rather than producing many more new ones. Henschel, however, does not believe that established quartets would have to fold just because of growing competition from the young quartets that she hopes will be established in the wake of new residencies. Sustaining careers is high on Moosdorf's priorities, too. 'Of course we recognise that quartet playing is a long-term profession. You need as long as ten years to build a special language and sound, all the qualities that are necessary in a professional quartet. We have a responsibility to fight for conditions for the future, so that in five, ten or fifteen years' time, young quartets can survive, and enjoy long careers.' ■