

Gotland School for Music Composition Music Festival

Report by Australian singer and teacher Jeannie Marsh

on her visit to the Festival in May 2012

First impressions

An early-morning flight on a small plane from Stockholm to the island of Gotland...a taxi trip through narrow cobble-stoned streets, surrounded by Medieval buildings...suddenly the view opens up into a picturesque harbour ...arriving at an elegant old waterfront building that was once the port Customs Office, but now bears the sign “Composers’ Hall” (what a wonderful sign for a musician to see!)...Studio Manager Jesper Elén showing me around the School for Music Composition (strangely empty of composers this week, as they are all busy at Festival venues for rehearsals of their compositions), and the Composers’ Centre (with its wall of photos of dozens of composers who have worked at the Centre over the years)...settling into my room in the Composers’ Residence, wondering how I will be able to drag myself away from the view of sparkling blue sea, ships coming and going...spending a few glorious hours exploring the ancient walled town of Visby, with its lush green parklands alive with Spring birdsong and huge tulips...finding my way to the first concert of the Festival at the delightful old Roxy cinema...being warmly greeted by composer Henrik Strindberg, and introduced to smiling staff and students...soaking up the mood of happy anticipation in a hall packed with families and friends proudly supporting their young composers... enjoying the first concert of the Festival, with five new student compositions performed by Sweden’s leading contemporary music ensemble (Norrbotten NEO)...after the concert, at the Festival Club (a delightful old bar next to the Roxy), talking to excited students about their music...having the first of many fascinating conversations with the composition teachers, exchanging our experiences in working with student composers at two opposite ends of the world (Melbourne, Visby)... chatting with other guests from the Composers’ Residence as we walk back home down quiet little streets...going to sleep smiling, knowing I have another 5 days ahead of me to immerse myself in the composers’ haven of Visby...

Why Visby?

In 2010 I attended the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) World New Music Days in Sydney (the first time in its long history that this major musical event had taken place in the Southern Hemisphere). During this stimulating week of new music I spoke to many composers from around the world, but it was the conversation I had with Swedish composer Henrik Strindberg that stuck in my mind. As a singer and teacher specialising in new music, I have been working with student composers at secondary and tertiary level for 20 years. So it was fascinating to hear from Henrik about a school dedicated to the needs of young composers, with practical training and the performance of new works at the centre of the course. Ramon Anthin is a central figure in the history of the composition school and the composers’ centre, and he was also at ISCM. I learnt from him and from John Davies (General Manager of the Australian Music Centre in Sydney) about the composers’ centre, which is also in Visby. Then I also learnt that Visby is a beautiful and historic town, and that once a year the students run a festival of their own compositions, and my fate was sealed - I simply had to find a way to get to Visby and see and hear all this for myself! The emails began to fly between Melbourne and Visby, and I began to plan my adventure.

A few facts and figures about my trip to Visby

Visby is a World-Heritage-listed walled Medieval town on the large island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, around 150 kilometres south west of Stockholm. Visby was a thriving port and trade centre in the 12th – 14th Centuries, and is now a popular destination for visitors from Sweden and around the world.

From 8th – 12th of May 2012 I stayed in Visby as a guest at the Gotland School of Music Composition annual festival of student compositions. As a guest I was privileged to be able to attend rehearsals, and all 9 concerts, and to have the opportunity to talk to students and staff about their work.

During my visit I was also privileged to stay as a guest at the Composers' Residence of the Visby International Centre for Composers. I shared the house with three composers: Ann Rosén and Ulrika Emanuelsson from Sweden, and Krisna Setiawan from Indonesia. The Centre has a constant flow of composers from around the world, each staying for a number of weeks, working intensively on new compositional projects.

Pursuing my interest in Swedish music and music education, I stayed on in Sweden for a further two weeks after my Visby trip. I had a fascinating time visiting music colleges in Malmö (in the far South), Piteå in the far North), and Stockholm.

What is the Gotland School of Music Composition?

- The School began in 1995
- It is located in the same building as Visby International Centre for Composers
- The School offers a two-year full-time course in music composition
- It is a vocational training course; the educational model is similar to that of a flying school where people learn to be pilots
- The focus is on compositional skills needed for composing notated music in the classical tradition (for orchestral, choral, and chamber forces) rather than contemporary popular styles. The school also offers courses in electronic music.
- In the two-year course there are 20 students (10 in First Year, 10 in Second Year)
- Students wishing to pursue a personal research project, or a cross-art-form project, can apply to undertake a special one-year course tailored to their specific needs; at any given time there might be one, two or three students undertaking this course.
- Students pay for their course, which is different from the standard model in Sweden, where most higher education is paid for by the government. The fee is covered by government subsidized student loans.
- It is a stand-alone institution, not a department of a university
- There are six members of the teaching staff, who have extensive experience as professional composers and teachers; some staff also bring expertise in ear-training, theory, and electronic music
- Partnerships with music ensembles are an important part of the School, with on-going connections with advanced music students at the renowned Musikkonservatoriet Falun (in central Sweden) and the chamber choir at the equally-renowned Södra Latins Gymnasium in Stockholm; ensembles such as GotlandsMusiken (an excellent local wind and brass ensemble), and Norrbotten NEO (Sweden's leading professional contemporary music ensemble). Students have regular

opportunities to workshop their compositions with these ensembles, attend rehearsals, and hear their works performed in the annual Festival. During the 16 years of the Festival, 100 student works have been performed by the Falun students, and around 250 works by GotlandsMusiken.

- Students come at different stages in life: many do the course immediately after completing secondary school, and go on to continue their studies at university; others do the course after completing university studies, or after working in the music industry or other fields
- Students are selected via submission of a folio of works, and an interview. Lack of traditional music literacy skills is not an impediment to entry, provided that a commitment is made to learning how to compose for musicians working within the classical music tradition.

Course structure

First Year focuses on building skills and knowledge, and bringing music literacy up to speed if students are not experienced with traditional music notation and theory. Students have opportunities to work with musicians in the local Gotland community (GotlandsMusiken ensemble), and they travel to central Sweden to work with students at Musikkonservatoriet Falun. They then hear their works for these musicians performed in the annual Festival. They work with Second Year students to run the annual Festival.

Second Year provides students with opportunities to work with outstanding professional ensembles (in addition to community ensembles), and more opportunities to have their works performed. They build on the skills gained in their first year, applying this knowledge in their compositional projects. They take on leadership and other roles in programming, planning, and running the annual Festival.

Students have group classes, plus regular individual sessions with one of the composition staff. They work with a different composition teacher for their individual sessions in each year of the course. In the group classes the focus is on practical learning, with lessons and seminars in the morning where they are given practical tasks to be completed in the afternoon.

Subjects studied include harmony, polyphonic writing, ear training and analytical listening, compositional techniques and styles, orchestration, aesthetics and notation, repertoire, electroacoustic music, and intensive music theory classes for those who need to catch up in this area.

Pathways for graduates from the school

Graduates of the School have gone on to do such things as:

- initiate and run their own music festivals
- have their compositions chosen for performances in national and international music festivals
- create their own performing ensembles to perform their works
- work in the film music industry
- study composition or other areas of music at university, either in Sweden or elsewhere

Jeannie's observations about the course

This course seems to be a rare treasure in the world of classical music – a place where young composers can go for an intensive two years of practical training, studying with excellent teachers, and with access to wonderful performers and performance opportunities. Away from the restrictions that can come with being a small department of a large institution, the School has developed a unique pedagogical model. Theoretical studies are strongly linked to practical applications throughout the course, with students “learning by doing”. This is a powerful approach in composition studies, as music can only truly exist when it is heard, not when it is locked in silence on a page. Judging by what I saw and heard in the Festival, and the conversations I had with staff and students, this “applied learning” model is proving to be extremely successful.

Working with senior secondary student composers here in Melbourne, I have learnt the importance of providing performance opportunities for young composers. In the annual *Making Waves* concerts I initiated at Distance Education Centre Victoria, we found that students learnt a great deal through the process of preparing their works for live performance, attending rehearsals of their pieces, and talking with the players. On the day of the concerts, the sense of occasion and respect was crucial, with composers appreciating being the “stars” of the event (rather than the performers being the key people, as is usually the case), and relishing the opportunity to have their family and friends hear their music performed live, by fine musicians. I have also experienced this in my work with student composers in the *Opera Project* at University of Melbourne, and in *Top Sounds* concerts, showcasing the best young composers from around the State. So it was great to see this principle in action in Visby, with such success. The concerts were very well attended, with families and friends of composers much in evidence. There was a real “buzz” in the audience before each concert, attentive listening, and enthusiastic applause and appreciation for composers. Composing is a challenging career path to choose, often full of frustrations, and lack of appreciation for the composer’s work. In light of this, the School is providing a service to the next generation of composers by providing them with opportunities where their work is presented in the best possible circumstances, by musicians who respect the work of the young composers and are keen to play it, in front of a supportive audience. It seemed to me that students can head out into the world after this course having had a positive experience, which is a valuable thing for a young creative artist.

Through providing opportunities for high-quality public performances, the School is also building an informed and open-minded audience for new music in the future. I had interesting conversations with an audience member who had come along to support a friend, and was new to the world of contemporary classical music. He was intrigued by the whole idea of the festival, and found plenty to engage him in each concert. He enthused about his favourite pieces, and was keen to discuss (rather than dismiss) the works he had not enjoyed. From the lively discussions going on in the foyer, I would say this response was common.

By bringing young performers and young composers together, the School is helping to build a generation of performers who feel a connection with living composers and their music. Invaluable opportunities for networking between young composers and performers are provided, with composers establishing on-going links with performers who might commission a work, or form ensembles to perform new works in years to come. Composing a work to be performed by a peer (i.e. another music student) is a useful experience for a young composer, and it can be exhilarating for young performers to premiere a work written for their particular skills. The “mystique” of the composer can be broken down when the composer is the same age

as you, and you can sit down together to have a coffee and a chat.

The quality of the musicians (both professionals and students) working in partnership with the School is impressive. They have a level of technique and musicianship that generally enables composers to hear their music as they intended, and to learn what is practical to present to a musician in the rehearsal time available. If your piece is not working, and it is being played by top musicians, then maybe the piece needs a re-think. From my discussion with a member of GotlandMusiken, it was clear that these experienced musicians enjoy working with the fresh ideas of young composers, and are proud of performing so many premieres. What a great situation for the composers!

Another aspect of the School that impressed me was the respect shown by the students for each other. In the Festival, students are responsible for working behind the scenes to ensure that each composer's work is presented as professionally as possible. They clearly take this responsibility seriously, and they need to work together effectively as a team in order to succeed. This team spirit and mutual support was obvious at every concert. I have found that collegiate support is rare in the world of composers, so this was very refreshing to see, and bodes well for the health of the composition scene in Sweden.

Students I spoke to were articulate and confident in speaking about their work, whilst also being appreciative of the opportunities provided by the course, and aware of the challenges and hard work ahead. This seemed to me to be a healthy state for composition students.

I spoke to a number of students about the course and their responses were universally positive. They spoke enthusiastically about the dedicated and supportive approach of the teachers, the practical nature of the course, the opportunity to work with musicians and have their music performed, the creative freedom offered in the course, and the small size of the school. A number of them also spoke about the inspiring beauty of the environment in Visby and Gotland, the ease of getting around in a small town, and the lack of distractions (allowing students to focus on their studies). One sign of the positive feelings students have about their time in Visby, is the fact that graduates keep in touch with the School, and return to attend the Festival.

I appreciated the opportunity to talk at length with four members of the staff at the School and the Centre for Composers: Per Mårtensson, Henrik Strindberg, Mattias Svensson Sandell, and Jesper Elén. Despite this being the busiest week of the year for everybody in the School, staff were generous with their time. They spent time talking to me about the course, the music being rehearsed and performed, their approach as teachers, the broader picture of music education in Sweden, and many other issues. This welcoming approach was a big factor in me having such an enjoyable and informative week in Visby. I also saw their care for their students, especially in rehearsals. My over-riding impression was that these students are lucky to be working with teachers who are so focused on the needs of each individual student, and who devote so much time and energy to fostering the creative development of the students.

The Festival

- Since 1997 the course has culminated in the annual Composers' Festival *Ljudvåg*, at the end of the school year in May.
- The Festival features works by every student at the school, First Year students as well as Second Year students.

- This festival is unusual in that it is run entirely by the students.
- All classes are suspended during the Festival, with students fully engaged in running the event and working with musicians on their works.
- Under the direction of two Festival Producers (students), students plan and run every aspect of event, including artistic direction; organising musicians, instruments and rehearsals; creating and distributing schedules; designing and producing all programs and publicity materials; promoting the festival; looking after visiting musicians; sound and lighting; documenting every concert; front-of-house; ticketing; stage management; planning and catering for final night party
- Students can nominate which concert or activity they want to work on, and they take responsibility for this area.
- In 2012 the Festival involved: 9 concerts in 5 days, 3 venues, 45 new works, 4 visiting music ensembles (including the large student choir from Stockholm, and NEO ensemble from the other side of the country), a Festival Club, and an electro-acoustic concert featuring a brand new instrument created by a student.
- It can be difficult for students to deal with the stress involved in organising such a large project, but it is seen by students as an exciting opportunity. The School is working on improving the way the Festival is run each year to avoid stress as much as possible.
- The two Festival Producers learn a wide range of skills in arts management, such as effective delineation of roles and responsibilities.
- I spoke to the 2012 Festival Producers and heard about a range of systems they used, such as having one designated “go to” person (**not** one of the Producers) who was the central point for all queries, directing students and other participants to the appropriate person and process. Scheduling was streamlined by releasing each weekly schedule on Google Calendar one week in advance, once all the information had been finalised. The Producers learnt the value of keeping in constant contact with each other, updating each other about developments, keeping track of any tensions or problems that emerged, so that these could be acknowledged, worked with, or resolved as soon as possible. They needed to use and develop their skills in negotiation, diplomacy, facilitation, conflict resolution, and effective communication (in personal, administrative and artistic areas).

Summary of the 2012 Festival concerts, and Jeannie’s concert highlights

Two concerts presented by Norbotten NEO (at Roxy)

The virtuosic playing of the ensemble was a feature of these concerts, seen to full effect in their performance of exhilarating works by Kristin Warfvinge and Joel Forsell. These two works featured complex textures, an abundance of musical ideas, rhythmic momentum, skilled interplay of melodic lines, exciting build-up of tension, and dramatic use of dynamics. Another distinctive work was Daniel Rosenqvist’s lyrical and delightful homage to the music in Japanese Animé films.

Two concerts presented by GotlandsMusiken (one at Visby Cathedral, one at Roxy)

The first concert was in the magnificent 13th century Cathedral, with the students writing effectively for the powerful possibilities of brass and wind in this splendid space. The rich, meaty sounds of Jonas Thunberg’s piece worked well, and Gustaf E. Lundh combined funky riffs with contrasting ideas to great effect. There was a stand-out work by Kristin Warfvinge, in which she made full use of the big brass sound of this fine ensemble ringing around the cathedral, creating a majestic, exciting finale for the concert. The second concert was a Festival highlight, and was at the atmospheric Roxy. This venue worked particularly well for two outstanding works by Madeleine Jonsson Gille (interesting rhythmic

landscapes explored in a series of miniatures) and Niklas Ottander, which showed influences of jazz idioms, and showcased the talents of great soloists.

Choral concert presented by Södra Latins Chamber Choir (at Visby cathedral)

Writing for choir is a very different challenge to writing for instruments, and I was particularly impressed by intriguing and beautiful explorations of choral possibilities by Madeleine Jonsson Gille, Jacob Mühlrad and Rosanna Gunnarson. However, for me the stand-out here (and a Festival highlight) was a work of stark simplicity and enormous power by Niklas Ottander. Built around one haunting repeated phrase, the music gradually grew in dynamics and pitch from low and soft to high and loud, with the subtle introduction of a rising electronic sound adding to the effectiveness of the build-up. This piece used the ringing young voices and the resonance of the space to full advantage, creating a profoundly moving and powerful musical experience. I hope Niklas continues to work with choirs – those of us who work in choral music would be thrilled to perform more works like this!

Two concerts presented by Musikkonservatoriet Falun (at the Methodist Church)

Both these concerts showed the benefits of the long partnership between Visby and Falun students, with the assured writing for strings and woodwind underpinning commanding performances. Whether it was driving, scrubbing strings (Gustaf E. Lundh), skilfully-managed contrasting sections (Ella Sörlin), intense Berio-like vocal explorations (Simon Schultz), Felix Axemo taking Mariachi trumpets on a wild ride full of variety and fun (with Ennio Morricone calling encouragement from the back seat), or Rosanna Gunnarsson's dramatic response to tragic events in Gaza – the commitment of the young performers to the new music written for them was tangible and inspiring. Once again a highlight for me came from Niklas Ottander, with an exciting string quartet using concise musical material to maximum effect. Adding to the impact of both concerts was the sunlight streaming through the big windows into the beautiful old church with its pale blue walls.

Mekaniska AJNA concert (at Roxy)

How to describe one of the most unusual and enjoyable musical events of the Festival? Jens Peterson-Berger presented the result of a year-long special research project he has undertaken at the School: a performance of music he has created for a live ensemble combined with a unique new “mechanical” musical instrument designed and made by him. The instrument had been made from a large antique cabinet which Jens had transformed into a mechanical instrument (like the intricate clockwork musical toys popular in previous centuries). However, this was a 21st-Century hybrid, with the mechanical moving parts programmed and run from Jens' laptop. All sorts of quirky additions (such as a telephone handset) added to the fun when the instrument sprang into life, whirring, clanging, banging, tinkling, hitting, playing tunes, in a wide range of tone colours. The music, and the interaction between live musicians and the mechanical instrument, provided another fascinating element. It was as though circus music, Berlin cabaret music from the 1930s, and the funky grooves and fat bass sounds of 1960s Soul, had been somehow mashed up with the asymmetrical rhythms and changing time signatures of Stravinsky and Bulgarian folk music, creating something totally unique and utterly irresistible. It was impossible to listen and watch without smiling and laughing for the sheer joy of what we were all experiencing. As soon as the concert finished the audience moved forward en masse onto the stage to gaze at the machine and to congratulate the designer/creator/composer and performers. The performers (led heroically by the Director of the School Mattias Svensson Sandell) deserve huge praise for working together so tightly with their strange mechanical companion, whilst playing with the gusto and exuberance that the occasion demanded.

Electronic music concert (at Roxy)

The Festival ended in a contemplative mood, with Anton Linnerhaed's evocative sound picture of Visby cathedral. The composer grew up in Visby and works in the cathedral, and it was moving to think of him being inspired creatively by a building that has been so much part of his life. The peaceful collage of bells, echoing footsteps, voices and birdsong, evoked the timeless world of a building that for seven centuries has been the still centre of the town, no matter what tumultuous changes are happening in the outside world.

Other personal highlights of my stay in Visby

Visby: I loved being in one of the most picturesque and historic towns in northern Europe. I took every opportunity available to explore the old streets and walk along the ancient wall...

Staying in the Composers' Residence: talking to the three composers staying there about their work, and sharing our responses to the Festival music, was fascinating, and definitely enriched my stay in Visby; finding that Ann and Ulrika have strong connections to choral music (my field) led to me giving them a presentation about Australian choral music, and I also attended a rehearsal and performance of Ulrika's choir in Malmö the next week.

Welcoming spirit: staff and students were always happy to spend time talking to me and introducing me to others, even though they were all so busy. This was a highlight of my stay.

Special dinner: it was delightful to be taken out with local and visiting staff and musicians for a lovely seafood meal one night. As the rain pelted down outside the cosy waterside restaurant, I enjoyed the herring and schnapps, a lively chat with the tuba player from GotlandMusiken, and the drinking songs...

Jens' face during his concert: the ecstatic smile on the face of Jens Peterson-Berger as he sat on stage with his laptop, surrounded by the sounds and sights of his mechanical instrument, was priceless.

End of Festival Party: what amazing work the students did in cooking up a vegan feast, and transforming the School into a party venue. It was great to see them relaxing after all their hard work.

What can Australian music educators learn from the Gotland School of Music Composition?

We can learn a great deal. I will be talking to my colleagues about this over coming months, as I think about my inspiring experiences in Visby.

Jeannie Marsh

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