

**New York Times**

October 18, 2006

## **How to Get to New York to Play Mozart? Try Pulling Strings**

By [KATHRYN SHATTUCK](#)

It was not an auspicious beginning for the 38 musicians and their leader, the pianist [Andras Schiff](#), as they staggered, jet-lagged from the previous night's flight from Germany, into the Rose Studio at [Lincoln Center](#) yesterday morning. The room was chilly, and music stands were nowhere to be found. And despite having traveled in an aluminum crate the size of an industrial refrigerator, marked "Live Animals," the double bass brought by Christian Sutter had landed with a crack in it.

Mr. Schiff plopped himself on the floor, a look of exasperation darkening his usually placid face. His wife, the violinist Yuuko Shiokawa, scurried around the room murmuring, "Nicht gut, nicht gut."

Finally rising to address the group from his piano, Mr. Schiff said: "Let's try to get a little music made in the name of [Mozart](#). It seems to be very difficult this morning."

Then, as the first strains of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 filled the room, and chaos gave way to the sublime, Mr. Schiff smiled. All was right with the world again, it seemed.

Mr. Schiff, 52, could be forgiven his crankiness in this, the jampacked 250th-anniversary year of Mozart's birth. After all, his Cappella Andrea Barca, a crack ensemble handpicked from his most musically accomplished friends and acquaintances, was created eight years ago precisely for the occasion.

Beginning tonight, the ensemble, in its second visit to New York this year, will present three concerts at Alice Tully Hall as part of Lincoln Center's Great Performers series. And next Wednesday Mr. Schiff will perform a Mozart program in the Metropolitan Museum's Piano Forte series, his only New York recital this season.

Simply getting the ensemble, with players from 15 countries and with no official home, to New York required bureaucratic acrobatics worthy of a diplomatic summit. Mr. Schiff broached the problem in a four-page handwritten letter to Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#), addressing her not only as a politician but also as a fellow musician.

“It is a well-known fact that you’ve had musical training, and that you’re a good pianist, so I’m writing to a colleague,” he wrote, perhaps trying to soften the blow when he later called the difficulty of foreign performers in getting American visas “a disgrace to a very great country.”

Mr. Schiff named the Cappella Andrea Barca using a whimsical self-reference, Andrea Barca being his Hungarian name translated into Italian. (He went on to turn Barca into a fictional character whose credits include turning pages for Mozart and composing an opera about burnt Tuscan bread soup.) But his reason for creating the ensemble was not frivolous: he wanted more companionship on the road.

“Look, nothing is easy, and the older you get, the harder it is,” he said in a telephone interview from the Bavarian city of Neumarkt in der Oberpfalz three days before the group’s scheduled arrival in New York. “I like very much playing recitals because of the quality of the music, and it’s wonderful to be fully in charge. On the other hand, the life of a pianist is a very, very lonely life, lonelier than other musicians’, and therefore if I can choose, then my choice is to do something together with people.”

Mr. Schiff picked his players “based on not just the musical but the human sympathy,” he said.

And though the ensemble’s original mission was to serve as a sounding board for Mozart’s piano concertos, it has enlarged its repertory in typically painstaking Schiff style: composer by composer, piece by piece.

“We’ve done many Haydn symphonies, [Beethoven](#) and Schubert,” he said, “and we’re even going into the Schumanns, but not too fast.”

Rehearsal periods, during which Mr. Schiff typically houses his players together at a bucolic resort, are limited to three a year, running from a week to 10 days.

“This Mozart year, it was much more than that,” he said, “but usually I do not want this orchestra to be a traveling, touring orchestra. I want it to stay very fresh and enthusiastic as it is. And for that, I don’t want to play more.”

While that spontaneity might make for performances slightly less than perfect, it also keeps them from becoming overrehearsed or stale.

“The orchestra sound at any rate had a casualness to it, intentional or otherwise,” the New York Times critic Bernard Holland wrote in February. “Ensemble playing was not very tight, but these are such talented and warm-hearted musicians that Mr. Schiff could wave his arms energetically while players went their own slightly meandering way. In the conducting business, there is something to say for benign neglect.”

The joy is infectious, as much for the musicians as for listeners, said Louise Pellerin, an oboist from Winterthur, Switzerland. “You feel his spirit in these very warm, sensitive people,” she said. “It’s so cute because every time we come back for a project, we have to arrive early because we’re all kissing each other.”

“I very often have this feeling that I have a medium in front of me, and the music just comes from the whole universe and through the piano,” she said of Mr. Schiff’s playing. “If it’s spirituality, I don’t know, but you really believe in God when you hear this.”

While a yearlong diet of Mozart and more Mozart, however godlike, might dull the palate of most musicians, Mr. Schiff insists that he has not tired of the composer he calls “probably the greatest miracle in music.”

Still, the pseudo-psychology by those who try to analyze Mozart and the commercialism that have surrounded the anniversary irritate him. “In most parts of the world, Mozart was played in a more vulgar way, I am sorry to say,” Mr. Schiff said. “In Vienna and Salzburg, there were signposts on the streets and phone boxes where you could phone up Mozart.”

His defense, he said, was to play more Beethoven.

“I plan my life in a systematic way, and I waited until the age of 50 to start playing the 32 Beethoven sonatas,” he said. By year’s end, he will

have finished his first sonata cycle in each of 15 European cities, and he will begin the two-year cycle at [Carnegie Hall](#) in 2007. Live recordings of European performances are being released by ECM.

Why did he wait so long to play Beethoven? “Well, because Beethoven was for me a very, very hard nut to crack,” he said. “Beethoven is not for children. Maybe the notes are not a problem, but the content is, so I wanted to wait for that. I now understand a lot of things I had no idea about 20 years ago.”

Despite the self-questioning and the laborious peeling away of layers that Mr. Schiff has applied to much of his artistic life, he remains certain of one thing.

“As much as I love Beethoven and Mozart, the greatest is Bach,” he said of the composer with whom he communes each day. “And they would be the first to agree. For me, to play Bach is a matter of hygiene. It’s like taking a shower.”

**New York Times, Friday October 20, 2006**

**Arts / Classical Music / Opera Listings**

**[ANDRAS SCHIFF](#) AND CAPPELLA ANDREA BARCA** (Sunday and Wednesday) With this fine Hungarian pianist and his ensemble, the Mozart onslaught continues, but here at least with some very skilled musical warriors. On Sunday there will be two concertos and the Symphony in G minor (No. 40). Note also Mr. Schiff’s all-Mozart solo recital on Wednesday at the Metropolitan Museum. Sunday at 2 p.m., Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center, (212) 721-6500, [lincolncenter.org](#); Wednesday at 8 p.m., (212) 570-3949, [metmuseum.org](#); \$60. (Holland)