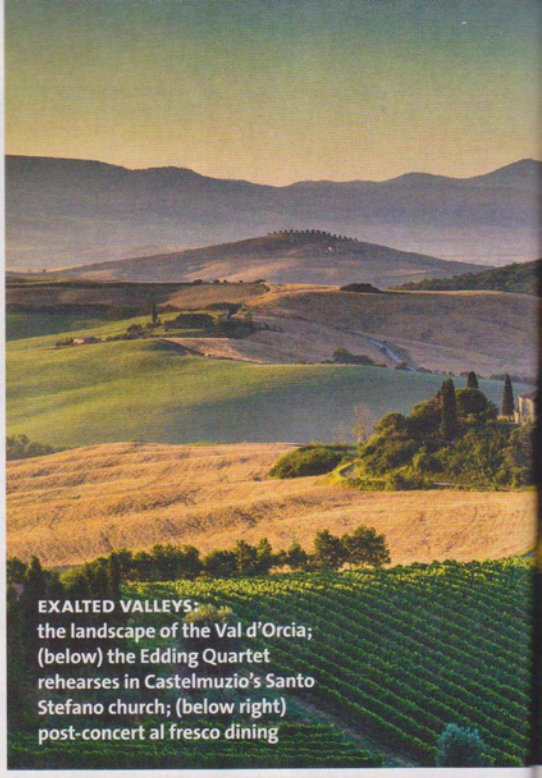
SOUNDS FROM AN ANCIENT SEA

Val d'Orcia: Italy

Kate Bolton-Porciatti visits a region of south Tuscany where, every summer, the distinctive and alluring landscape positively teems with musical life



EXALTED VALLEYS: the landscape of the Val d'Orcia; (below) the Edding Quartet rehearses in Castelmuzio's Santo Stefano church; (below right) post-concert al fresco dining

In summer months, the otherwise silent spaces of the Orcia valley in Tuscany are filled with music, thanks to a number of fine festivals. Among them, August's Accademia delle Crete Senesi is a cherishable series of events that responds to the history and spirit of this UNESCO-protected area. 'It's one of the most beautiful and authentic regions in Europe,' says the festival's founder and director, Philippe Herreweghe.

Over five million years ago, the Val d'Orcia was a tropical sea, the legacy of which remains in its sandy terrain and in the ebb and flow of its landscape. Strata of lava and sand, limestone and marl create the muted, autumnal colours of this dry ocean, and thousands of years of erosion have laid bare its clay soils, forming craggy badlands known as the 'Crete Senesi'. These corroded hills south of Siena have a strange, stark beauty, lunar in quality, while the arid and treeless area around the little town of Asciano, at the heart of the Crete, is known as the Accona Desert.

Drawn to this quasi-Biblical landscape for its haunting and timeless beauty, Belgian conductor Herreweghe, together with a group of like-minded musicians and private sponsors, founded a festival here in 2001. Their aim was to create 'the perfect marriage' between music, scenery and culture. Whatever the magic, audiences are charmed to come in their thousands.

'The perfect marriage' between music, scenery and culture

With a cast of predominantly Belgian performers, the festival testifies to the extraordinary musical talent that has emerged from that small country. In fact, nothing has changed – musicians from the Low Countries have profoundly coloured the soundscape of Italy since the 15th century. Known then as 'Oltremontani' (those from 'over the mountains'), Flemish singers and composers brought to the Italian Renaissance courts their sophisticated vocal polyphony and choral traditions. Herreweghe and his latter-day *Oltremontani* are continuing a long history of Italo-Flemish cultural relations.

Festival concerts are set in remote and ancient churches: 'dream locations, chosen for their suitable acoustics for the repertoire.' explains Herreweghe himself. In 2016, the opening and closing nights will take place in the romantic ex-monastery of Sant'Anna in Camprena, near Pienza. It's now an *agriturismo*, where you can dine in monastic style and lodge in former monks' cells (rather more comfortably furnished than when they were used as a setting for the epic film *The English Patient*). Here, Herreweghe conducts two ensembles: his own Collegium Vocale and the Belgian deFilharmonie orchestra in sumptuous programmes of Liszt and Mahler.

The church of San Francesco near Asciano is another concert space – wistful and theatrical, with its faded medieval frescoes and peeling Baroque plaster. Illuminated at night like a Caravaggio painting, it will be the perfect backdrop for the expressive

LOCAL HERO

Philippe Herreweghe

Annual Val d'Orcia visitor Philippe Herreweghe studied both music and medicine before embarking on his prestigious career as a conductor when he founded the Ghent Collegium Vocale in his Belgian hometown in 1970. He became one of the great pioneers of period performance, radically changing approaches to early music, influencing many of today's musicians. Since then, he has formed three other ensembles, La Chapelle Royale, the Ensemble Vocal Européen and the Orchestre des Champs-Elysées, with whom he explores an eclectic range of repertoire.

AIMING HIGH: Philippe Herreweghe conducts at the Accademia delle Crete Senesi

chiaroscuro of Giaches de Wert's madrigals. San Francesco will also host chamber music programmes and a masterclass with baritone Dietrich Henschel and pianist Piet Kuijken.

South-east of Asciano, the medieval hamlet of Castelmuzio rises like a sandcastle above a sea of green. The village's solitary 13th-century church of Santo Stefano provides a serene space for intimate chamber music and delicate period instruments, such as when the Edding Quartet plays Mozart and Brahms or, the following day, lutenist Thomas Dunford gives a lunchtime recital.

The festival's atmosphere is intoxicating, with all three churches packed to the rafters. Guests are offered pre-concert aperitifs – some of Italy's finest vineyards are at nearby Montalcino and Montepulciano – and can also join after-concert dinners at convivial banqueting tables, lit by candles, fireflies and myriad stars. It's all really rather special. ■

MICHIEL HENDRYCKX, JAN VAN CROMBRUGGE, ISTOCK

VAL D'ORCIA 4 MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Accademia delle Crete Senesi

Three historic churches provide atmospheric settings for intimate early music and lush Romantic works. Artists include the Ghent Collegium Vocale, deFilharmonie, famous soloists and upcoming young performers. (31 July – 5 August 2016)
accademiadellecrete.com

Incontri in Terra di Siena

With majestic views and one of Italy's loveliest gardens, Villa La Foce offers romantic outdoor settings for this first-class festival (29 July – 6 August 2016), with classical music, jazz, cross-over and more. Other dreamy venues include the castle Castelluccio, and churches in Città della Pieve, Montefollonico and Pienza.
itslafoce.org

Musical Landscapes in Tuscany

The Renaissance town of San Quirico is the main centre for this refined festival (19-28 August 2016). Here and in nearby villages you can hear music in noble palaces, ancient churches, and spectacular outdoor locations. There are sunset dinners and tastings of the heady Orcia valley wines.
paesaggimusicalitoscani.it

Musica negli Horti

This 'festival of the senses', held in early July, serves up music, food and wine in venues around San Quirico d'Orcia and Pienza, some of them not usually open to the public. As well as concerts are masterclasses, performance and composition workshops, cooking lessons and other gastronomic events.
musicaneglihorti.it/en