

MUSIC

The Orion String Quartet performing at Vagan church. The Lofoten festival features 17 concerts in 10 locations, including eight far-flung churches.



KJELL OVE STORVIK

Fiddling While the Midnight Sun Burns

By MATTHEW GUREWITSCH

THE Lofoten International Chamber Music Festival, on an Arctic archipelago in Norway bathed in the mild waters of the North Atlantic Current, bills itself as the world's most beautiful music festival, on the strength of its setting, which is stunning indeed.

The name Lofoten (pronounced LOO-foo-tin) is variously said to mean foot of the wolf or foot of the lynx, neither an animal you will find there today. For what it is worth, from an aerial perspective, the land masses bear a certain resemblance to feral footprints.

This is the land of the midnight sun, which does not dip below the horizon for weeks, though a kind of night does fall in places where the sun drops behind razorback ridges, some well over 1,000 feet high. People who live there can tell you at exactly which twist in the road you will lose sunlight until the earth wheels round to morning.

In the spooky hours in between, deep fjord waters seem to congeal into semiliquid rock crystal, darkly visible through the gaps between the floorboards of an antique rorbu, or fisherman's cabin (a fine choice of lodging, if you can find a vacancy). Sleep, which refuses to follow its accustomed cycles hereabout, comes a little easier in the gloaming. Even so, the sky, when clear, retains a glow that has driven more than one visitor to jump out of bed at 2 a.m. for a hike through alpine meadows carpeted with purple-flecked wild orchids.

Now in its seventh year, the Lofoten festival was founded by two natives of northern Norway. The artistic director is Arvid Engegard, first violinist of the Engegard Quartet; the general manager and lone year-round staff member is Knut Kirkesaether, front man, factotum and also the director of Lofoten Artists Management. Past festival seasons have featured top Nordic artists like the Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes and the Finnish violinist Pekka Kuusisto as well as international colleagues like the British violist James Boyd, the Dutch flutist Jacques Zoon and the Swiss cellist Iseut Chuat. This year's lineup includes the Nash Ensemble, of London; the Vertavo String Quartet, of Norway; the British clarinetist Emma Johnson; and the French pianist Pascal Rogé.

Budgeted at \$400,000, this summer's program runs from July 6 to July 11, with prelude performances on July 2 and 3. The music ranges from Haydn to Berg by way of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, with generous helpings of French repertory. A total of 20 musicians will play 17 concerts in 10 locations. One is the converted fish-processing plant (now a restaurant and conference center) in Nusfjord; another, a sleek concert hall of glass, wood and steel, which opened in May 2009 in Svolvær, the capital of Lofoten and a thriving port. Most enticing and most picturesque are eight churches scattered across the islands. The rooms hold just 250 on average, yet the festival has drawn visitors from as far afield as Australia and Hong Kong.

Visiting musicians have been bowled over as the public. By e-mail the Canadian pianist Anton Kuerti, a first-time visitor last year, recently offered this testimonial: "I found Lofoten to be one of the most remarkable spots on our planet, and I have seen a huge number of glorious places worldwide. Magnificent mountains sprout directly out of the sea, saturated with waterfalls and luscious vegetation. One aches to climb them. Often they have colossal sheer cliffs, with unworldly shapes and shadows."

Mr. Kuerti went on to call the musicians he had heard and worked with "just as splendid as the scenery."

The first American to perform at the festival was Mr. Engegard's fellow violinist



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Daniel Phillips, of the Orion String Quartet. The two have been friends since their early days at the venerable Sandor Vegh's International Musicians Seminar in Prussia Cove, Cornwall, in England, another artists' gathering place of awesome natural beauty. Mr. Engegard invited the entire Orion ensemble for the festival's inaugural season, in 2004. But as Steven Tenenbom, the quartet's violist, recently told the story from his home in Westchester County, mobilizing the rest of the group proved too tall an order.

"A couple of us — read, me — didn't want to bother," Mr. Tenenbom said. "The

Location, location, location: the Lofoten festival is about beautiful scenery as well as music.

trip was too much hassle. So Danny went alone. And when he came back, he said: "You'd better go. It's pretty indescribable." Since 2005 the quartet has made the trip every other summer.

For its brief duration the festival more or less monopolizes Nusfjord, which promotes itself as the oldest and best-preserved fishing village in Norway. But the native population has virtually disappeared, and the real estate is being adapted for tourism. Visitors are charged admis-

sion just to walk around, like gawkers in Pompeii.

The seigniorial mansion on a bluff once occupied by the prosperous owner of the town — a modest shingle or clapboard affair that would not look out of place in coastal Maine — is turned over to a devoted cadre of volunteers, who cook and serve breakfast there, answer phones, play chauffeur and so on. The artists, meanwhile, spread out in the fishermen's rorbuer (that would be the plural) by the narrow fjord on the outskirts of town. Some of the cabins have been smartened up; others are snug but spare, with more space to hang cod to dry than for living quarters.

The Lofoten archipelago is more accessible than it used to be. A system of bridges and tunnels that opened in 2007 links the larger islands and the mainland. But visitors from abroad still face a long journey. My three-leg flight plan last year called for longish layovers in Oslo and in the coastal town of Bode, adding up to 31 hours. (Schedules that look better on paper may not be. Miss a tight connection, and you could be stranded for a long time.)

The 2009 festival made Norwegian national news with its first visit to the far-away islands of Vaeroy and Rost, accessible only by ferry, beyond the treacherous churning waters of the original Maelstrom. En route our ship chugged past sharp giant boulders overrun with puffins or their close relatives, as majestic sea eagles circled overhead. Some of the most thrilling

formations loomed at the far end of the voyage, like emerald pyramids floating on the waves.

I had been curious to see the Quirini Concert Hall on Rost, named, I was told, for Italian sailors who were blown off course several centuries ago and settled there, at least for a time. For some reason the name had conjured in my mind the image of a Frank Gehry lollapalooza in miniature. But the boxy facility is not glamorous at all, doubling as a high school gym, where waiting youngsters passed the time shooting hoops. When the music began, a capacity crowd (mostly local) gave an attentive hearing to the combined Orion and Engegard string quartets in a spicy account of Shostakovich's Two Pieces for Octet (Op. 11). Then the venerable Norwegian violinist Arve Tellefsen brought on Kreisler and Dvorak salon pieces, receiving a hero's welcome and requests for autographs from young and old.

Another highlight last summer was a late-night concert of string quartets at the Flakstad Church, a diminutive barn-red house of worship surrounded by green pastures, the nave hung with the model ships beloved of God-fearing seafarers. To the sounds of Mozart and Mendelssohn, shafts of fragile sunshine tracked the walls

like lazy follow spots, weaving the spell of the midnight sun at its most magical.

Of other pastimes in the Lofoten islands, the Lofotr Viking Museum merits special mention for its reconstructed Viking ship and chieftain's house. Possibly authentic Old Norse lamb soup is served there in the middle of the day, and there is honey-laced mead to wash it down. (A first sip of the brew may taste delicious. By the fourth, I found it vile.) There are also extensive fortifications from World War II to explore, and a nine-hole golf course open past midnight.

But to experience that other glory of Lofoten, the northern lights, you must come back when the sun is captive in the polar regions of the Southern Hemisphere. Mr. Kirkesaether, the manager, reports that a first winter edition of the chamber-music festival, in February, worked out fine, though crowds were smaller than in summer, and the aurora proved elusive.

"The weather at that time of year can be rather violent," Mr. Kirkesaether said, "and it was. We had it all: sunshine, rain, cold, subfreezing temperatures — actually very rare in these parts, thanks to the Gulf Stream — with extremely slippery roads. But nothing was destroyed or canceled because of the weather, so we will continue next year."

So which is better, summer or winter? Among Norwegian musicians returning to Lofoten in 2011, Mr. Tellefsen has opted for February, Mr. Andsnes for July.