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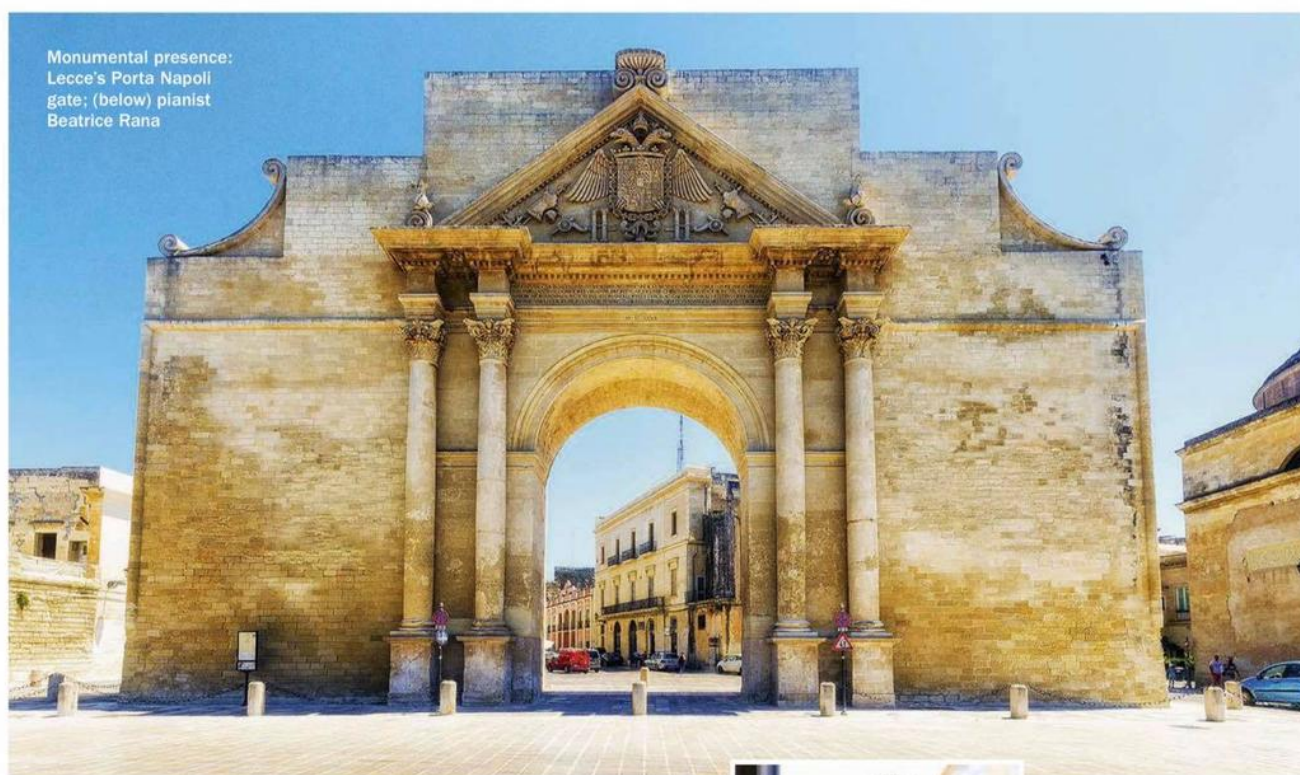
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to read an introduction to this month's cover CD

MUSICAL DESTINATIONS

Lecce Italy

Founded by the pianist Beatrice Rana, a three-day chamber music festival shows this historic city at its very finest, says *Jeremy Pound*



Monumental presence:
Lecce's Porta Napoli
gate; (below) pianist
Beatrice Rana

As Clara and Marie Becker begin their piano duet recital at Lecce's Palazzo Tamborino Cezzi, a big, furry cat ambles onto the stage. He clearly likes Brahms, as within a few bars of the *Variations on a Theme of Schumann* he has leapt up onto the piano stool and settled down behind the players, who admirably carry on as if this were an everyday concert-hall occurrence. It's only when, a little later, *il gatto* ventures onto the keys themselves and adds a little improv to Schumann's own *Pictures from the East* that he is finally hoiked away. Ciao, Puss.

I can't really blame our feline friend for wanting to join in, as this recital is really rather charming. With its neo-classical columns, the Palazzo is a gorgeous place for a concert, and though we have open sky above our heads, the high walls of the courtyard in which we are sitting provide a superb acoustic. And the unflappable Becker



sisters – two of a number of talented students who have been invited to perform at Classiche FORME – play with aplomb.

This is the third edition of Classiche FORME, the festival founded and run by local piano superstar Beatrice Rana, but the first to be taking place in Lecce. The previous two were staged at a villa in Spongano, a village set



Played with feline: the Becker sisters plus recital companion



Power couple: Schipa with Amelita Galli-Curci c1925

in olive-growing country at the tip of the region of Salento, itself the very heel of the boot of Italy. It was an idyllic venue, but one whose limited space meant that tickets sold out rapidly, and so the decision was taken to shift the three-day event to this Baroque gem of a city lying a few kilometres north.

The setting may have changed, but Rana's vision for her festival remains the same. 'My aim is to unify two passions of mine,' she says. 'On the one hand, there's music, which has been part of my life since the beginning; on the other, there's Salento. I'm not talking about mainstream Salento, however, but the hidden treasures. Take this space, for instance. It has never been open to the public until this year, and has definitely not staged a concert. This festival gives people the chance to discover new things about our beautiful region.'

By 'this space', Rana is referring to the Chiostro dell'Antico Seminario. Situated on Lecce's Cathedral Square, this turn-of-the-18th-century theology school is, again, blessed with an open-air courtyard boasting sublime acoustics. After the young artists have strutted their stuff at the Palazzo, it is here that Rana gathers seasoned pros for *Classiche FORME*'s late-evening concerts of repertoire ranging from classical to contemporary – for me, Simone Rubino's spellbinding performance of solo percussion works by Tan Dun and Xenakis is a real highlight. Rana herself is a mainstay of her festival and, I notice, also makes use of contacts close to home – her cellist sister Ludovica appears in one concert, as does Benedetto Lupo, her erstwhile piano teacher. In the balmy July air, there's a wonderfully cordial feel to it all, coupled with exceptional artistry.

GETTY, DANIELE CORICCIATI, ILENIA TESORO

Outside concert times, Lecce's historic centre is a wonderful place to explore – brave the heat of the midday sun, and you'll have the streets pretty much to yourself. The city dates back to the reign of Hadrian in the second century AD, and the legacy of those Roman days can be admired in the form the finely restored

The festival has a wonderfully cordial feel, coupled with exceptional artistry

amphitheatre on Piazza Sant'Oronzo. From the 16th century, meanwhile, come the hefty city walls, built by Charles V to keep out invading Turks, and the magnificent triumphal gate, the Porta Napoli.

It is, though, the Baroque architecture of the late-17th and early-18th centuries that really defines Lecce, most of it constructed from the local limestone that gives the



Bowling action: Simone Rubino works his magic

Local hero

Tito Schipa

Tito Schipa was born in Lecce in 1888. As a young man, his talent as a singer was recognised by Bishop Gennaro Trama, who funded his studies at the local seminary before he headed off to continue them in Milan. A career as one of the great tenors of his generation followed, both in Italy and across the Atlantic, not least when performing alongside soprano Amelita Galli-Curci. Among his many recordings can be found a performance of the song 'Lecce Mia', paying homage to his home city.

place its warm, bright appeal. Dating from this period are two further gates, the Porta San Biagio and the Porta Rudiae, and a veritable wealth of churches – almost every street corner seems to have one. The majority of the churches can be admired amply from the outside, though it is worth paying the modest fee to pop into the cathedral and the Basilica di Santa Croce.

Lecce may not be known as one of the country's great cultural hubs, but like most Italian cities it has its own opera house, the Teatro Politeama, and as I wander around, names such as the Via Giuseppe Verdi and the Conservatorio Tito Schipa (see above) reveal a certain pride in its musical heritage. Plus the sold-out concerts at *Classiche FORME* confirm that there is certainly an appetite here for good music. Besides, even the local cats like it. 🐾

Further info: For details of *Classiche FORME*, see classicheforme.com