



Focus – Atelier Hastir

Modest house, big back story

Saved from the wrecking ball at the 11th hour, an oasis of history and culture struggles to perpetuate the memory and spirit of its extraordinary former occupant

BY MARIE DUMONT

PHOTOS BY SANDER DE WILDE

Rue du Commerce, on the western edge of Brussels' European quarter, offers one of the most dispiriting sights in Brussels, with block after block of modern office buildings. For a brief stretch, however, the grim alignment is interrupted by three weather-beaten townhouses from the 19th century. One of them is home to small EU-related offices, another to a Thai restaurant. Number 51, between them, was the studio of Marcel Hastir.



Time capsule: Marcel Hastir's painting studio cum concert hall, as it still looks today

Hastir was a fascinating, endearing artist. He moved into the house in 1935 and went on living and working there for more than 70 years. A free-thinking, life-loving man with an unruly shock of hair and a twinkle in his eyes, he doggedly refused to move to a nursing home when his eyesight and his legs started to fail him, preferring to spend his old age on the ground floor of his rented home, receiving visits from his many friends. He died there last summer, aged 105. To a friend who'd asked him for tips on reaching such an advanced age, he answered: "That's easy: you just have to wait."

Hastir learnt to draw and paint as a boy, roaming the countryside around Linkebeek to practise landscape painting. His works were once shown at the Palais des Beaux-Arts alongside those of Magritte but then fell out of favour, probably due to his total indifference to abstraction and other modern trends. He also loved music, a passion he discovered as a child while accompanying his upholsterer stepfather on his rounds to the homes of well-to-do clients. One of them was the violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, whom the young Marcel never tired of hearing play. After his own brief, unsuccessful stint at the violin, he opened his house to musicians, rearranging his studio into a small concert hall when the fading daylight made it difficult to paint.

The first concert was staged to raise money for one of his models, who needed to be treated for pneumonia. Later, many classical musicians and singer-songwriters such as Jacques Brel made their debuts there, and the tradition continues to this day with an exciting if little publicised programme featuring mostly local talents. It's an intimate setting with a small audience, light years away from the bustle of Bozar.

Entering number 51 (regulars refer to it simply as 'l'Atelier') feels like being caught in a time warp. With everything left as it was, the house is like a still-life, haunted by Hastir's presence. There are books on the mantelpieces, an ancient record player on a bedside table, pale throws on sagging sofas, a worn black velvet jacket draped over a hanger. And paintings, hundreds of them: bright Mediterranean landscapes, portraits, many nudes. Capturing the glow of a woman's skin was one of Hastir's life-long artistic pursuits.

Gazing at these portraits gives you a sense of Hastir's place in 20th-century history. There's a ghostly sketch of Queen Elisabeth of Belgium, who took lessons with him and secretly paid for an eye operation. Elsewhere you catch glimpses of the Indian philosopher Krishnamurti, of Italian peace activist Lanza del Vasto and other visitors whose presence there made the place a bohemian, cosmopolitan beehive.

CONTACT

ATELIER MARCEL HASTIR

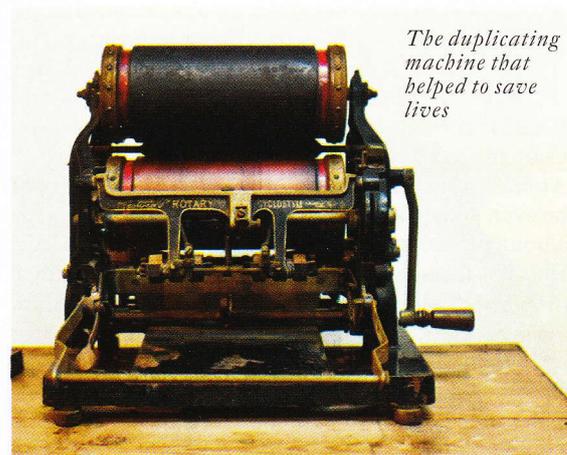
51 Rue du Commerce, Brussels (metro Trône)

EMAIL

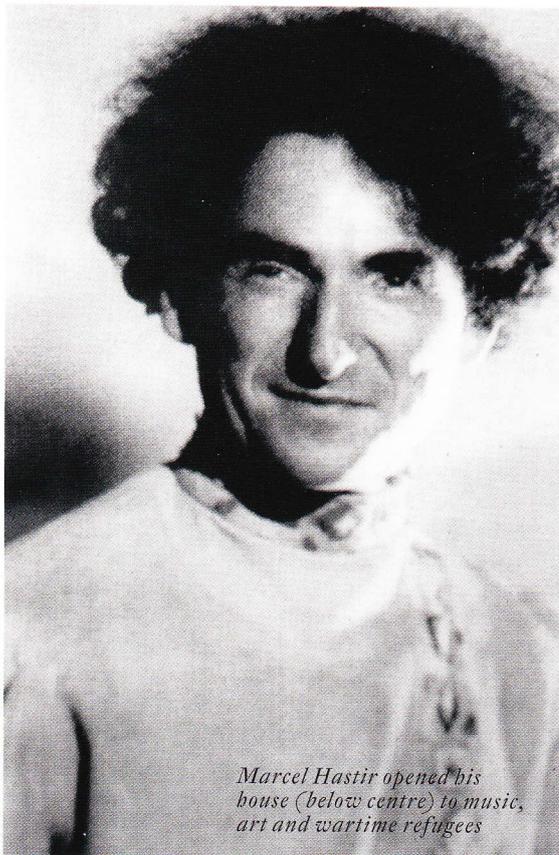
ateliermarcelhastir@gmail.com to find out about future concerts and other events

L'Atelier was no ivory tower. Throughout his life, Hastir engaged with the world in that impulsive, matter-of-fact way of his. During the German occupation, he used his drawing skills to forge identity papers for people hunted by the Nazis. He

also hid Jews and members of the Resistance, enrolling them as students and models in an art school that was essentially a front to shield them from the Gestapo, whose propaganda office was just a few doors down the street. The Germans came often on vague ▶



The duplicating machine that helped to save lives



Marcel Hastir opened his house (below centre) to music, art and wartime refugees

suspicions, but they never made it past Hastir. "I used to tell them: 'Go away! I've had enough!'" you hear him brag in a filmed documentary recently shown on Belgian television.

Next to the piano today is an old duplicating machine which was hidden away in the basement during the war years and used by Resistance fighters to print tracts. Among those it served, Youra Livchitz, Jean Franklemon and Robert Maistriau would become famous for one heroic act: stopping a train bound for Auschwitz one April night in 1943 and thus enabling more than 200 Jews to escape into the Flemish countryside. The event, the only one of its kind in Europe, is grippingly recorded in German journalist Marion Schreiber's book *Silent Rebels* (2000).

That the Atelier today owes its survival in no small part to a handful of German Eurocrats is one of the twists of fate with which the place's history abounds. One of them, Roland Schmid, has been a translator at the European Council since 1979. Schmid first became aware of the Atelier in the early 2000s; with a group of friends, he even staged a play there and sealed the deal with a bona fide contract, understanding, by the look on Hastir's face, that such formalities were normally dispensed with. After attending a concert one late spring Sunday in 2002, he saw a red demolition notice posted on the front door. The deadline for opposing the move was the next day.

"A friend and I took the day off and persuaded various people to write letters to the commune. We also

produced a petition with 300 signatures," Schmid recalls. Demolition was averted, a first victory followed by years of concerted efforts to prevent Hastir from being evicted and to have the house listed. Today, the building belongs to the Brussels commune and has been leased for 99 years to the Fondation Marcel Hastir, which is in charge of continuing its artistic mission. Its members, both Belgians and expats, are brimming with ideas: there are talks of turning it into a museum ("but a living one, where things happen," Schmid insists), of creating a recording studio or an art restoration workshop. But first, there are serious renovations to be done.

"We need to raise nearly 80,000 euros just to fix the facade and the roof and replace all the windows," Schmid tells me, pushing the grand piano out from under a leak in the ceiling. "Redoing the lot would cost us at least 250,000."

Modernising the Atelier without losing its magical atmosphere will be a tough call. Right now, the place seems on hold, poised between its eventful past and an uncertain future. I attended my first concert there a few weeks before Christmas. An Israeli pianist, Itzhak Solsky, played some Spanish music and two lovely pieces by Fauré, then was joined by a violinist and a horn player in a Brahms trio. There were a few informal speeches and some commotion as chairs were brought in to accommodate the larger-than-usual audience. Squeezed into a sofa inches away from the musicians, I could just about read the notes on the violinist's stand. All around us, the portraits seemed to listen. ■

CONCERT

Pianist Itzhak Solsky and violinist Noe Inui, a member of the Van Neste Trio, perform works by Brahms, De Falla, Gershwin and Franck on January 28, 20.30. For tickets, contact danielle.meert@skynet.be

