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Hills are alive again for a troubled Schloss

A BRITISH composer and music enthusiast is fighting a lone battle to save a romantic schloss in the Bavarian Alps built for an Englishwoman amateur violinist of the Edwardian era. Intended for concerts in a setting of Alpine pastures and snow-clad mountains, the ill-starred schloss was completed in 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War and never occupied by its owner, the Hon Mary Portman, tenth child of the immensely rich 2nd Viscount Portman, *Marcus Binney writes.*

Anthony Morris's passion for Schloss Kranzbach began in 1999, when he converted the chauffeur's house into a studio office, from which he has managed a series of international audio-visual events, including classical recordings at the schloss itself. A former professional French horn player who played with Kent Opera after a career in Austria and Germany, he now works as a consultant in the music industry, specialising in surround-sound systems for clients including the Dolby-competitor DTS. Last year he drew up proposals to finance and restore the schloss to its former splendour, but these fell through when the owners secretly sold to another buyer.

Mr Morris was doubly intrigued to find that the schloss had been designed by one of the leading British country house architects of the early 20th century, Detmar Blow, who was a fluent German speaker thanks to his German mother. At one time Blow had a country house practice even larger than Sir Edwin Lutyens, but in the 1920s he curiously sold it to "Bendor", the fabulously rich playboy Duke of Westminster, and devoted the rest of his life to running the duke's affairs.

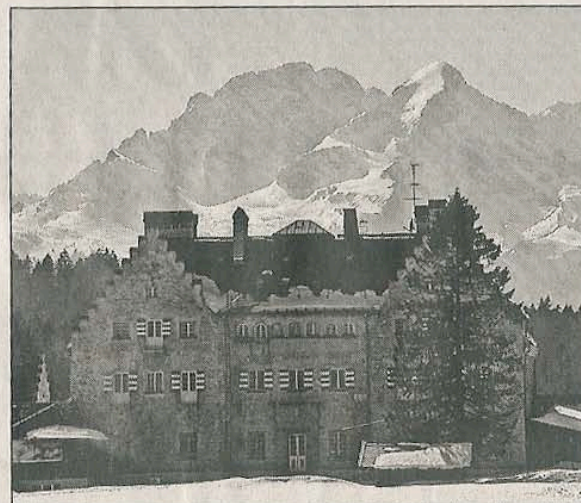
Though Schloss Kranzbach's English connections have long been forgotten, a romantic description of the house was provided by a *Times* reader in a tribute to Blow on the obituaries page on February 8, 1939. "A daughter of an ancient English family whose life was devoted to music asked him to create a habitation for all time to hold music in a setting of massed peaks. Below rich Alpine green pastures descend to rushing waters and banks of gentians."

Mr Morris has traced a Guarneri del Gesù violin which bears the name Mary Portman. It is now used by the Korean-born international soloist Yura Lee, on loan from the current owner, Clement Arrison, via the Stradivari Society.

Miss Portman had strong connections in the German musical world. One of her violin teachers was August Wilhelmmij, Wagner's concert master at Bayreuth. Although she was a tenth daughter, the immense wealth generated by family property on the Portman estate north of London's Oxford Street enabled her to buy a string of houses, including one in Holland Park, London, and another at Charlottenburg in Berlin, which she had to forsake in 1914. The violin-maker W. Henry Hills described her as "a very pretty young lady", which her portrait by Sir Arthur Stockdale-Cope certainly bears out. Miss Portman was very kind to the violinist Lady Hallé, who lived some years in Miss Portman's house in Berlin and died there in 1911.

The schloss has crows-stepped gables which give it a Highland look, and stands against a backdrop of snow-clad Alps 70 miles south of Munich. Gaily painted armorial shutters gave colour to the pale stone walls. Inside Blow provided a 65ft-high concert hall with stage and changing rooms suitable for a 50-piece orchestra.

After the First World War the Schloss remained empty until 1930, a year before Miss



The schloss, completed in 1914, with a backdrop of the Alps

Portman's death, when her agents sold it to the Evangelical Church. The house was torched in 1933 and the interior of some rooms was largely destroyed. During the Second World War it was taken over by the ordnance department of the German Army, the Heereswaffenamt, and used for top secret work. A US Army report of May 1945 states that 20 German technicians were working there on an early version of Saddam Hussein's notorious big gun, "a high-velocity gun to propel projectiles by electromagnetic force". Scientific equipment was later taken to America.

After the war the schloss was used as a rest and recreation centre by the Evangelical Church, where visitors from north Germany could take a

cure in the Bavarian air. In 1997 the house was transformed into a hotel fitted out in pseudo-Tyrolean style, but this failed to prosper. Mr Morris says: "I was so concerned about the future that I prepared business plans and started serious negotiations with the owners. The house is now a protected building and the mayor of the local jurisdiction, Krün, has zoned the site so new building will not be permitted nearby."

Unknown to him, the owners had already agreed on a sale. Now the hotel has closed, though the new Austrian owners plan to reopen it as a four-star "wellness hotel" in autumn 2005. Mr Morris says: "Now the history of the schloss is known, I am hoping they will carry out a model restoration."