

Viola Workshop in South Yorkshire with Robin Ireland 17 th October 2015

As a somewhat 'lapsed' viola player who has for several years now ceded priority to his violin ("For shame", I hear you cry!), it was with some trepidation that I accepted an invitation to attend my first Robin Ireland viola workshop. I need not have worried. I was able to choose less demanding parts for 2nd/3rd viola and the music arrived over a week ahead of the event, giving me plenty of time to attempt re-familiarisation with the clef.

The event itself took place in 'The Hayshed', a music room within the picturesque garden of a cottage in Ravenfield, and was meticulously (as ever!) organised by Natalie Wing, who hosted the day. It was a wonderful occasion, both socially and musically, for the thirteen violists taking part, whose ages ranged from young student to those of rather more mature vintage. One immediately felt welcome and at ease, and any potential for anxiety due to ability or rustiness were at once dispelled: those of you who know Robin Ireland will be aware of the empathy he displays towards his students and of his capacity, in his astute but gentle, coaxing way, to bring the best out of his charges.

The day was full of variety, interspersing some intense, focused playing sessions with restful listening periods. We began with a four-part viola orchestra ensemble, with several players to each part, tackling arrangements of Purcell's Chacony and Bach's Ciaccona (the famous Chaconne from Partita BWV1004 arranged by Ichiro Nodaira). Now, these are works of wonderful harmony and nuance, but to experience them via the richness of tone from massed violas was something else, and the final play-throughs, following Robin's perceptive instruction, raised the hairs on the back of one's neck at the emotion and power of the music. This session was followed by masterclasses conducted by Robin with two young (and brave!) students; they quickly relaxed and, growing in confidence with the audience support and Robin's encouragement, produced very accomplished performances of their chosen works. To end the morning session, we listened to three different recordings of passages from Mozart's Divertimento in E flat K563 for string trio and discussed the different approaches in playing style and interpretation – a most enlightening and thought-provoking exercise.

Following a tasty (and plentiful!) buffet lunch the afternoon began with a session on practice methods, relating to both bowing and fingering technique - very useful indeed and hopefully motivating many of us to actually do some practice in future! There followed another intense and enjoyable playing session as we came to grips with a duet by Bartok and gave the final performance of the Bach Chaconne, and then we relaxed completely! David Lipka gave an introduction to Tai Chi, with emphasis on good body use and posture relating to viola playing. The final event was a wonderful informal recital given by Robin, accompanied by well-known local pianist and accompanist Jack Littlewood.

In short, a truly memorable day, and one which has motivated me to ensure that dust is no longer allowed to accumulate on my viola!

Tony Hobbs

5th November 2015