

## **Viola Workshop with Robin Ireland** 1st April 2017

Toby Holden and Kate Quihan Kang

The April Viola Workshop began well, with Kate and I, due to a delay getting our instruments out of college, sprinting after our train as it sped into the distance without us! But we were rescued by the wonderful Sue Douglas and arrived at the beautiful village of Ravenfield in South Yorkshire, just in time for the first activity of the day – viola ensemble – confidently led by Roger Hoyle. Immediately I was struck by how high the standard was; with everyone committed and focused, whilst friendly and relaxed. All players made excellent work of realising the broad selection of music, which featured a number of wonderful arrangements by Natalie Wing. A highlight was performing her arrangement of Pablo Casals' 'Song of the Birds' with Robin Ireland playing the solo part.

Later in the day, Kate and I had the chance to perform in a masterclass with Robin, in front of our fellow violists. This provided a chance for those attending the viola day to observe conservatoire-level string teaching generally, and more specifically to get a feel for what goes on at Birmingham Conservatoire, where Robin, Kate and I are based. An unexpected contribution came from Fern the dog, whose in-time tail wagging provided a fitting metronomic accompaniment to the class!

After a delicious lunch Robin gave an introductory talk on Bach's great C major sonata, followed by a further massed viola session. Then the group split into two ensembles, which provided an enjoyable opportunity to perform chamber music in a more intimate setting than that of the morning's larger ensemble.

The group reformed to hear the last event of the day, a concert in which we were treated to a wonderful performance of Mozart's Violin and Viola Duo in G major from Hannah Thompson-Smith and Robin Ireland, with spirited playing from both, before the grand finale...

... which was something particularly special – perhaps unprecedented – in its entirety, a performance by Robin Ireland of Bach's Violin Sonata No. 3 in C Major... of course, on the viola! At the time I recall thinking that I wasn't aware of any other violist attempting such a feat (a later web-search also bore no results). Looking at the score, I can understand why! What an extraordinary challenge of musicianship and technique the piece demands, particularly in the pseudo-polyphonic fugue section. The unidiomatic nature of the piece is undoubtedly furthered by the challenge of realising it on the viola (perhaps explaining the apparent lack of prior attempts). As if to confirm this, Robin, before playing, jokingly said he wasn't sure whether this was more of a marathon for himself or the audience.

Those familiar with Robin will know of his acclaimed recordings of unaccompanied Bach works, so you could feel the excitement in the room at the chance to hear the first-run of a not-yet-recorded work. This performance was committed, meticulously thought-out, technically accomplished and wonderfully human. We were treated to well-executed sense of line, conscious and emotive stylistic playing, and beautiful and expressive tone.

Definitely not a marathon, though Robin took gold, and a fine way to end a very enjoyable day of viola-ing!

Toby