

VIOLARAMA, CARDIFF – NOVEMBER 2015

The music department of the University of Cardiff was the setting last Sunday for another gathering of violas (plus their owners) to enjoy a day of music making. It was organised by Philip Heyman, principal viola in the Welsh National Opera Orchestra and Ross Cohen, arranger *extraordinaire* of viola quartet music, ably assisted by other members of the Absolute Zero Quartet, Cecily Howick and Steve Broom. There were some 25 players of widely ranging ages but all able and keen to make music. The youngest ones, Amy, George and Violet (“call me Bob”) aged from 8 to 10 kept the grown-ups firmly in their places and showed no sign of nerves when asked to lead some of the activities during the day.

There was no master class this year and instead we began with all the players on the stage of the main concert hall playing music by John Wilbye (1574-1638 – best known as a composer of madrigals and also a wealthy landowner and sheep farmer). The master players took turns to conduct – occasionally confusing the ensemble with some quirky beats and expressions; but all criticisms were quickly forgotten when various participants were then invited to take the rostrum and conduct the orchestra in a series of extemporised movements of a “symphony”.

More serious work ensued, with players breaking into separate quartets to work on selected pieces of music, assisted by senior players who offered coaching advice. During the various breaks for tea, coffee, lunch etc. there was ample opportunity not only to discuss topics that only viola players understand, such as the merits of geared pegs (favoured by several players present), but also to try out some of the splendid violas made by David Milward, who made himself available for consultation.



David Milward with one of his violas

Throughout the day a musical quiz was run by Alison Thomas, the manager of the Absolute Zero quartet. Some of the questions were pretty fiendish (e.g. composition dates of various viola pieces; numbers of Stradivarius violas still in circulation; numbers of materials used in making a viola bow – can you name all 24 items?!).

Part of the afternoon was spent in larger groups of players devising their own improvisations based on Weather. The results were very impressive – one group managed to convey the variety of weather that might be encountered on a luxury cruise, starting with fog at Southampton, complete with foghorns, and ending on a

beach in Barbados in glorious sunshine. The languor of calypsos and rum punches was rudely shattered by “Daaah dum! (Pause) Daaah dum!” – the theme music from the film “Jaws”, played expertly by Philip Heyman to great acclaim and amusement. However, David Milward judged the best performance to be the group led by 10-year-old George Bailey, with its lingering rain drops at the end (performed by another weather expert, Ross Cohen).



Discussing the weather – how do you play fog?

To round off the day, the various quartets performed their selected pieces, followed later by rehearsals and performances of double quartets by Gabrieli and Praetorius. It was a great day and the University’s music department proved once again to be an ideal venue for this event, with excellent facilities.

Michael St. John – Cheltenham Symphony Orchestra