

Young Violas, RNCM, Manchester

Sunday 15th November

On Sunday 15th November, 17 young violists gathered at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester for a morning workshop led by Lucy Nolan, Viola Tutor at Junior RNCM. The range of experience varied from those who had never held a bow before to those who had passed their grade eight, with the age range being equally diverse, stretching from six to eighteen years of age. The fun began at 10 am, at which point the young violists embarked on introductions and ice-breaking games where Lucy was joined by Ali Vennart, violist of the Solem Quartet and Becky Stephenson, a third year undergraduate student at the RNCM.

This focus of this particular workshop was Viola Ensembles and before the participants were split into three groups Lucy asked us all to consider how fortunate we all are to be viola players and encouraged participants to share what it is exactly they love about the viola. The three groups then split off into separate rooms to begin rehearsals and coaching from Lucy, Ali and Becky.

For the next two hours each ensemble worked on not just the more simple matters of rhythm and intonation, but also the complexities of blending as chamber ensembles and being able to interpret the music and deliver this message to an audience. For example, the most senior group, which I was part of, spent time sharing and trying different ideas for the most suitable technique to play pianissimos and fortes, in order to create the colours needed to bring our piece to life. However, it turned out that the most challenging aspect for us as an ensemble was probably balance, as whilst the tune and the bass line needed to be heard, the middle two parts often found themselves struggling to be heard properly because of their middle registers.

As rehearsal time seemed to fly past it was soon time for an informal concert for parents and guardians - there was quite a crowd! The intermediate group began the concert with an arrangement of Handel's Arrival of the Queen of Sheba, this was followed by Andante Cantabile for four violas by Hendrik Waelpuut which was performed by the group that I was personally a part of and I enjoyed the rare experience of being able to play in a viola quartet immensely. The informal concert was then brought to a close by a performance from the youngest violists who played a piece composed especially for the occasion by Paddy Nolan.

Following the success of this day there are already plans for two further workshops to be held in 2016 on the 20th February and the 1st May. All violists of school age are welcome to apply via the RNCM website.

Simon Rowland