

## **Cecil Aronowitz Viola Competition & Festival – A teacher's perspective**

My head is still buzzing as I sit down to write a few words about an amazing week I spent at the Birmingham Conservatoire in November. I'm a private viola teacher living in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, teaching from a small studio in my back garden.

For months I have been looking forward to pressing the pause button on my life and attending the Cecil Aronowitz Viola Competition and Festival. A chance to totally immerse myself in two of the things I am really passionate about: teaching and the viola. What an opportunity.....Violists travelling from across the world to play and share their love and enthusiasm for all things viola.

### **Saturday**

I arrived on the first day to smiles and a warm welcome. My personal hope for the week was to watch as much viola teaching as I possibly could. Masterclasses would be running alongside the competition all week and this was a perfect opportunity for me to learn from some of the best violists, playing and teaching under one roof. The opening recital was from three young students on an exchange from the Cape Gate MIAGI Centre for Music in Soweto. They had flown in from South Africa the day before and yet still managed to stand up in turn, to bravely perform and talk about how it felt for them to have the opportunity to learn an instrument and visit the UK. We were treated to a wonderful film all about the inspirational work they do at the ARCO project and some short speeches from supporters and benefactors. The whole thing was extremely moving, another example of music bringing people together to achieve great things.

Later that evening I returned for the first of the judges' recitals.

Thomas Riebl was playing his 5 string tenor viola, an instrument I haven't heard played live before. I was transported by his beautiful and sensitive playing. The *Bach Cello Suite No. 6* and the *Schubert Arpeggione* are both really familiar to me but every now and again he would dip down onto the bottom F string; each time it would take me by surprise! It was strangely thrilling and I left feeling that maybe four strings would never quite be enough again.

### **Sunday**

I returned on Sunday morning to watch a little bit of the competition before embarking on the day's masterclasses. The competitors had all been required to prepare some unaccompanied Bach, the first movement of Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante and Kreisler's Liebesleid to finish. I remember thinking what a great choice of repertoire and how comforting it must have been to feel supported by both the piano and a violin in the Mozart in between the Bach and Kreisler which left them with nowhere to hide.

I had to tear myself away from competition to go and watch the Martin Outram masterclasses that ran from 11am - 6pm. What a fascinating day!! Some great ideas and tips on releasing tension in the bow hold, shifting, playing chords, as well as working on finding the mood and shape of a piece.

Sunday evening brought with it another wonderful recital with Timothy Ridout, the first winner of the Cecil Aronowitz viola prize. I had seen Tim play before at his Wigmore Hall debut and so knew I was in for a treat. As Tim is a former pupil of Martin Outram, I thought it would be fascinating to hear him perform, after watching Martin teaching all day, to see if I could recognise that influence on his playing. All that went out of the window very quickly as Tim's awesome sound and musical interpretation left you no choice but to just sit back and drink it all in. The last movement of the Mendelssohn was particularly thrilling.

### **Monday**

I attended Tim Ridout's Masterclasses first thing on Monday morning. There was no doubt Tim was a very gifted performer and I was interested to watch someone teaching at the beginning of their career, aged 21. It was fascinating and a real insight into how he approached learning a piece. It was immediately obvious that sound was his top priority. He demonstrated often to the students, partly to help them hear how it could sound and partly, I felt, because he just needed to be playing his viola. It was a total joy to watch, his enthusiasm was infectious and the students benefited greatly from what he had to give. He was a really natural teacher. A pupil of mine, who was also attending for the whole week, said that Tim was by far her favourite teacher! You can't beat youthful enthusiasm, totally energising! I would have loved to stay and watch his other two masterclasses but there was an overlap with Roger Chase, who was one of the primary reasons I was there. It was interesting to go from someone starting out in teaching to someone who is so very well established. I have watched Roger's teaching online and really like his approach. His masterclasses from 11am – 6pm did not disappoint! We were regaled with tales of his teachers, Bernard Shore and Lionel Tertis, a full range of technical tips from 'dead fish' bow holds to G's being pregnant with Bb's and pushing them out to help a shift! I realise that this, out of context, may seem a little strange but I can assure you it was an extremely entertaining day!

The evening brought another wonderful recital from one of the panel: Robin Ireland. A versatile programme of music ranging from Bach to Shostakovich. The highlight for me was a chance to hear him play one of his own compositions: *Pairings II* for Two violas, written for himself and Louise Williams.

### **Tuesday**

This was going to be an interesting day for me as two of my former pupils were coming in to do masterclasses with Gary Pomeroy. He had a very gentle, thoughtful approach and used some lovely analogies to help pupils visualise what he was describing. He gave great advice for getting the best out of slow detailed practice and how to differentiate this from practising performing. Abby had come up from the RAM where she is in her final year. She is emerging from music college like a beautiful butterfly and gave a really classy, controlled and thoughtful

performance of her Bach. It was heart-warming to think back to her at 6 years of age, my first viola pupil after I left college and here she was, about to embark on her own exciting viola journey. Teaching is a wonderful process. Izzy played next; I also remember her at 6. She left school and arrived at Birmingham Uni this September at the start of a physics degree, before realising after a week that music really was where her heart lay. Perfect timing for her to fall straight into viola heaven - it has given her a really clear idea of what is on offer while she auditions for music college. It was great to catch up with them both and see how well they were doing.



Tuesday evening's recital was fabulous. There really isn't anything more energising than watching young people perform. The wonderful violas of the Birmingham Conservatoire gave a recital of British viola music. Each and every one introduced their piece and gave a great performance. I loved hearing some old favourites and discovering some new pieces, which are now in my Amazon basket!

### **Wednesday**

This was the day that my pupils were coming up from Hitchin to play in masterclasses with Matthew Jones. There was an initial flurry of texts and phone calls to do with instruments left at school and horrendous tailbacks on the M1. All of which the lovely Toby took on-board calmly and by just after 11am everyone was there with smiles and

instruments in tow. They had a most fabulous morning with Matt. If I had handed him a list of all the things I would love him to help with, he couldn't have got it more spot on.



He was kind, funny and instinctively knew what each one of them needed to develop and went about fixing it in the loveliest way possible. He had some interesting thoughts on teaching vibrato and ways to think about bow division.



We all had lunch together and then they all went off to enjoy a really fun workshop with Lucy Nolan and Gary Pomeroy. I returned to watch more of Matthew Jones' masterclasses and we all reconvened for dinner before attending the evening Recital.

Ettore Causa's beautiful playing was captivating, especially the Schnittke - Suite in the Old Style Op 80, arranged for viola. What a wonderful day - a huge thankyou to everyone for a day packed full of viola from beginning to end!

### Thursday

I had noted at the start of the week that Thursday was going to require some decisions to be made. It was the judges turn to do some teaching as there was a break from the competition and there were four lists of masterclasses running concurrently! I had assumed that by this point in the week I would have a clear favourite and would know who I'd want to watch. I was wrong, I had thoroughly enjoyed all the recitals and so decided to choose by repertoire, rather than by teacher. I chose Hindemith, Bach and Hoffmeister spending the morning flitting from room to room. I found Thomas Riebl to be very clear in what he required of the students, giving them concise, detailed instructions. As soon as he was sure they had understood what he was explaining he would say you need to go away and practise that, then he would move on to his next point. He was extremely efficient and covered an incredible amount of ground in a short space of time.

After lunch there was a fascinating talk from Nicola Aronowitz about her late husband Cecil. It was wonderful hearing all about the man to whom the week had been dedicated. We listened to recordings of him playing, saw pictures and heard stories about his life. I believe he would have absolutely adored this week of celebrating the viola.

This was followed by a talk about mentally preparing for performance. This is an area I have been personally exploring recently and so found this particularly interesting.

Thursday evening's recital was a showcase of young violists from each of the specialist music institutions. This is predominantly the age-group I teach. It was a great overview of what to aim for, an indication of how hard young

people are working and the high level of talent we have in this country. Each and every one of them should be super proud of their achievements and bubbling with excitement for what is yet to come.

### Friday

The last day of my viola confinement!

Another four rooms of masterclasses to choose from. I started by moving around but settled fairly early on in the masterclasses of Ettore Cause. His fiery passion and Italian accent were hard to resist as he enthused about the colours of Bloch and Hindemith. It was certainly a fitting end to my masterclass marathon! I emerged from the teaching rooms into a canteen so full of life and energy you just can't imagine!! His Imperial Majesty, King Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, the Ooni of Ile-Ife, was visiting Birmingham Conservatoire with his entourage and there was African Drumming filling every corner.

That afternoon there was one final recital given by the winner of the RNCM Cecil Aronowitz prize. Juliette Kowalski gave a wonderful performance of both the Brahms *Sonata in F minor* and Frank Bridge's *Two Pieces for viola and piano*.

The culmination of the week came in the form of the competition final: five viola concertos to be played with the Conservatoire Symphony Orchestra, in the brand spanking new concert hall.... One Bartok, two Hindemith and two Walton. There was nothing for it but to sit back and enjoy the show, thankful that I didn't need to decide between them.

Prizes were awarded, people were thanked for their amazing contributions. It would be true to say I felt quite emotional as I walked out of the door, having met some very special people and come to the end of a momentous week. In less than 9 hours I'd be back in my own studio ready to share what I had learned. I may have cancelled a whole week's teaching to attend, but I genuinely believe my pupils will benefit tenfold from all the things that I have learnt! In total I enjoyed 41 masterclasses, 8 recitals, 2 talks and as much of the competition as I could fit in amongst all of that.



I feel so lucky to be part of a profession in which you can always learn something new. As I see it, my job is to scoop up keen, bright eyed mini musicians at about age 6 or 7.....champion them, believe in them, give them fire in their belly and enthuse them with as much passion for music and the viola as I can muster, before waving them off to study with the big guns in the hope I have done enough to get them through the hours of practice and intensity of music college! Of course not all will choose music, but they still head off with music forever in their pockets.

My week in Birmingham was such a positive experience, it built my confidence helping me to feel I was on the right track, while at the same time giving me so many new ideas on other things to try, and stories to pass along to my pupils. Thank you for having me and welcoming my pupils!

I really don't feel I can do justice with only words to explain what a wonderful week it was; I am full of admiration for Louise Lansdown and her devoted team. None of this would have happened without their tireless devotion and commitment. All I can say is that you all have three years to clear your diaries before the next one. I can assure you if it is anything like this one, it will be well worth it!

**Vanessa Gaidoni** – December 2017