

I don't know which is sorer my feet or my fingers. Throughout August I have walked the Kinder Loop – 55 miles in 3 days, followed a pilgrimage route through the remote mountains of mid Wales down into the Tanat Valley to Pennant Melangell and am just about to embark on the Barnsley boundary walk. In between these long distance walks I have had two intensive viola experiences. The first was at Benslow where Martin Outram was our tutor and Julian Royton was our accompanist. The second was an Orchestral weekend run by the Port Sunlight Orchestra who are based in the Wirral.

I went to Benslows in great fear and trepidation suspecting that the standard would be very high and not wanting to waste Martin's time. I was correct about the standard as principally Conservatoire students and one 17 year old who I reckon will be among the top rank of viola players in a few years time. Absolutely amazing and so musical (and a really nice lad as well). One day I can say that I played viola ensembles with him. I was so glad to see 2 names I knew on the list – Martha Evans and Toby Holden, and that I've been attending Pro Corda for the last few years and knew roughly what was expected of me otherwise I would have sunk without trace. And what a privilege to be taught by Martin who was very kind to me and gave me some excellent hints. Now all I need to do is to practice them. Will have to tie my itchy feet to the ground.

Every evening we had viola ensembles. The first two nights was music that Martin had brought with him and on the next two nights we were privileged to perform first performances of viola ensembles written by two of the composers who were attending the composer's course which ran alongside our viola summer school. It made it so special working with other musicians. I'm sorry that we didn't make more of it with the other two groups – cellists and pianists, but by the time we'd got to know each other better the course was nearly over. Also at Benslow they have the most amazing sheet music library with combinations for all varieties of instruments. Food was good as well. I shall be back. I think it will be another must do like Pro Corda and the Orchestral weekend which was the second of my two August viola experiences.

I have been attending this course for several years now having been hooked into it through a flyer I discovered in our North Staffs rehearsal hall. This year we were playing Shostakovich 12th symphony, Elgar's Falstaff and Bernstein's Candide for which I had 2 days to prepare after my excursion into mid Wales. On listening to both the Shostakovich and the Elgar on YouTube it just sounded like a lot of noise finding it impossible to follow my part. But after a few run throughs and attempts at playing it, it eventually started to make more sense. At one point I wondered why I was putting myself through all this as I did in my darker moments at Benslow. But I suppose there's nothing like a challenge. The work that I did just in that short time paid off so that at least I knew where I was at the rehearsals. Fortunately there are some very good players in that orchestra who dragged the rest of us along. One of the joys of playing with a group like that is that you see the same faces (plus some new ones) year after year and can catch up. Music, after all, isn't something solitary, but a very social happening- good for the soul. Our conductor, Gerry, had an excellent clear beat which is always helpful. We made quite a creditable performance on the Sunday afternoon before we all rushed off exhausted to our various homes after more or less non-stop playing with breaks for meals and the pub.

The period of 'rest' is now coming to an end and I can see by my diary that it is getting rapidly filled up with chamber music and Orchestral rehearsals and performances, plus the odd walk. Still, at least I'm not bored and it's important to keep the roaming viola dog exercised and amused

Have a good September and October. Until next month with more news and views from the amateur world

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