

News from Sally Beamish, BVS Honorary President

I feel greatly honoured to have been invited to become Honorary President of the BVS.

I studied viola at the RNCM with Patrick Ireland and Atar Arad, and went on to study with Bruno Giuranna in Detmold, Germany.

For 10 years I freelanced in London, and was a founder member of the Raphael Ensemble as well as playing with Lontano, London Sinfonietta and the Academy of St Martins, and in principal viola positions with the London Mozart Players and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

In 1989 the viola on loan to me, a Gabrielli, was stolen in a house burglary, and this contributed to my decision to move to Scotland and focus on composing – something I had always intended to do at some point, but had somehow never got round to. This also coincided with the birth of my first child, and it turned out to be an ideal career to combine with a family.

Twenty seven years later I am still here, now living in Glasgow, and still drawing inspiration from my surroundings and from the rich musical culture.

I've had a busy summer – in fact, a busy year – I counted a total of 16 premieres, which might have been something to do with my 60th birthday in August. It's all been inspiring and exciting.

Among the new pieces is a ballet of The Tempest, with choreographer David Bintley, for Birmingham Royal Ballet. I approached this score by giving each character a theme and an instrument, and Ferdinand is represented by the viola – which means lots of solos, and a big waltz for the viola section! The viola section of the Royal Ballet Sinfonia, led by Carmen Flores, was absolutely fantastic.

Before embarking on the score I wrote a solo viola piece for Nils Moenkemeyer called Ariel, and this material became the basis for Ariel's music in the ballet (usually on flute).

Another new piece is Merula Perpetua for viola and piano, which was given a wonderful premiere in the Proms by Lise Berthaud and David Saudubray. It was great to work with them and I was delighted they joined me for a birthday lunch afterwards.

I've been loving playing the viola again after many years with no instrument. This is thanks to the beautiful Gaspar model viola made by my daughter, a student at Newark School of violin making.

A highlight for me was playing at Musikdorf Ernen in August – a chamber music festival in the Swiss Alps.

In September I performed a new solo viola piece, Glanz, at a memorial concert for Sir Peter Maxwell Davies in St Magnus Cathedral, Orkney. (I kept it short and

simple!) Lawrence Power will give the London premiere on 4th November at King's Place in another Max celebration, alongside an arrangement I'm making for violin, viola and strings, of Max's Farewell to Stromness.

At the moment I'm involved in work with Dalcroze UK. Dalcroze is a wonderful way of assimilating musical ideas through movement. It was once widely used in the UK, fell away during the last 50 years and is now enjoying a revival. I believe that all musicians should experience it! Fascinating to see my music translated into physical expression. I'm learning a great deal.

Another thing I'm learning about is the ordeal of travelling with a viola in the 21st century. My first encounter was with Norwegian airlines. A couple of days before flying I suddenly wondered whether violas were OK to take in the cabin. When I checked the allowed measurements, it seemed not, so I phoned to check. No, they said, it has to go in the hold. 'Can I buy a seat for it' I asked. 'No', they said, 'you can only buy a seat for a guitar or a cello.' I asked if I could put my viola in a guitar case, and they agreed to that, and sold me a seat. I turned up at the airport the next day, viola in viola case, and just out of interest, asked at the Norwegian desk whether it would be allowed as hand luggage. 'Yes, that's fine', they said. 'Well, I've just bought a seat for it,' I said. 'We'll refund you,' they said, and duly refunded me. Then, as an afterthought, they measured the case. 'Ah - no, sorry, it's too big for hand luggage. We can't guarantee it'll be allowed on the flight'. As it turned out, I walked onto the plane with viola, no questions asked. But how do musicians cope with the stress of uncertainty and illogical rules?

I feel once more a member of the viola playing family, and much look forward to my involvement with the Society.

Sally Beamish
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