

Preparations for my performance of the Vaughan Williams Suite for Viola and Small Orchestra (1934)

On the 24th of April I am going to perform Vaughan Williams' Suite for Viola and Small Orchestra in Germany with the lovely Lufthansa Orchestra under British conductor Colin Touchin. The Orchestra, which I met whilst working for Lufthansa Regional, is entirely made up of air hostesses, pilots, technicians etc. who work for the Lufthansa Group. We have people flying in from Malta, Vienna, Budapest and other cities across Europe to come to the Lufthansa Aviation Centre at Frankfurt Airport to rehearse over two weekends with a concert at the end. Usually there is a spring and an autumn concert.

I could have not wished for a nicer, more supportive orchestra for playing this English repertoire in Germany. When I originally had to make a decision about whether to play the solo part or not I was really frightened. Never have I stood up in front of an orchestra and conductor to pretend I am better player than they are (me a SOLOIST?!) or to think I deserve to be there! In this article I am going to write about some of the preparations I have done in the last few months and also look at the next two weeks leading up to the performance.

One of my first steps was to look at the manuscript in the British Library. The part which we can now order (published by OUP), is fully marked by Lionel Tertis, who gave the first performance of the work in 1934 at Queen's Hall in London and worked closely with Vaughan Williams. When I first learned the notes Tertis' fingerings (and I promise you there are A LOT of them!) mostly weren't an option for me. Now I actually take on more and more of them - but will write about that at a later point. Sitting in the library with music which Vaughan Williams himself held was absolutely fascinating for me and I loved every minute of it! There are some markings (e.g. *attacca* from the Carol into the Christmas Dance) which I have taken into my own performance.

I also recently saw Harry Danks' copy of the music which is in the library at Trinity Laban Conservatoire in Greenwich. When looking at his music it was very clear that he had played it with an orchestra as he had marked up quite a few dynamics and split bowings to achieve a bigger sound. I liked two or three of his ideas regarding bowings, so that was an interesting discovery too.

One of my next steps was to make sure I had several opportunities to play all or parts of the Suite in public performances. Venues so far have included the New Oscott Retirement Village in Solihull, St. George's Church in Edgbaston, St. Martin's in the Bullring, a Monday showcase at the Conservatoire in Birmingham. Playing in masterclasses and performing to various experts was very important to me too - there was something to be learnt from every person I played to.

The masterclasses included: Matthew Jones, Simon Rowland-Jones, Nobuko Imai, Thomas Riebl, Robin Ireland, Martin Outram and Roger Chase. Roger, who not only is playing on Tertis' own Montagnana viola but also recorded the Suite with the BBC Concert Orchestra in 2012, has a special connection to the music. It is he who made me aware of the reasons for Lionel Tertis' choice of fingerings. Often it was for very sound musical reasons e.g. to show phrasings and

colours - which I cannot achieve with my fingerings at the moment. So I am currently incorporating more of them into my playing. However I am choosing them very carefully as the concert is only two weeks away and being realistic about what I can manage is essential.

Another point I would like to consider is the mental preparation necessary for me to play this work with an orchestra behind me and a concert hall of 400 seats in front of me. Coming from the belief I described at the beginning of the article (i.e. me not deserving this opportunity etc.) to imagining actually standing up and performing has been a big challenge. I use the tool of mental visualisation every day. I am lucky that I have been in the hall before, so know how it looks and what to expect in terms of dressing-rooms, walking onto the stage, the set-up of the auditorium etc. Positive thoughts to help my confidence are part of the lead-up to my performance over the next two weeks.

One final point to make is the importance of knowing yourself and what is best for you. I did not want a run-through on the day of the concert. Though for a lot of people that means safety, for me it means exhaustion and stress. Instead we have planned a run-through the day before and are only going to touch a few corners on the day itself. Also, getting rid of the idea of a so-called perfect performance, and accepting that there will be mistakes, is my way of making sure I am doing the best I can and so enjoy the performance.