

Viola Workshop in South Yorkshire. 21st October 2017

Saturday's weather was typically autumnally English: blustery wind blew the intermittent rain against the windows of the little 'Hayshed' music room which was in the middle of a lush, English garden. This made for a soothing accompaniment to a day of close-quarters music-making. On the menu for the twelve participants was an assortment of pieces arranged for viola ensemble. Viola ensembles are strange creatures: they can be rich and sonorous but, at times, the players can get a little carried away with their own lugubrious sound. Robin Ireland, the distinguished chamber musician, senior viola tutor at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and champion of the viola, was tasked with keeping us from overindulging. He led with a good balance of encouragement and expertise, and his knowledgeable insights were welcomed by all.

After the first music-making session, we were treated to a listening session, ably presented by Roger Hoyle. Being a viola workshop, these were important, interesting or special recordings of violists and viola repertoire. Among the highlights were Robert Chase playing the virtuosic Kodaly transcription of the J. S. Bach Fantasia Chromatica, Yuri Bashmet playing Marin Marais, and an exciting transcription of the Shostakovich Cello Sonata played by Annette Bartholdy. It was midway through this listening session when I was struck by the realization that all the people gathered that day were as madly in love with this instrument and its repertoire as I was. Everyone was eagerly listening to fantastic recordings of music that others (people without the viola in their lives), would find obscure or niche. Indeed, one could sense that this particular component of the day could have carried on for several hours without protest.

The first afternoon session was taken by Robin Ireland, with the focus on rhythm and playing in time. It was invaluable to hear Robin talking about the physiological and philosophical requirements one should engage with when tackling complex rhythms. We were then tasked with employing Robin's tips and tricks in a Steve Reich piece called "Clapping" which involved many complicated rhythms and necessitated good ensemble work. After some more group ensemble playing we were split up into informal viola quartets/trios, where we were able to have some fun in a more casual and relaxed environment.

The day was topped by a concert featuring Robin Ireland and pianist Lynn Arnold. As the weather turned fouler still, the audience, tightly squeezed into the Hayshed, were warmed to the core by sensitive renditions of Benjamin Britten's "Lachrymae" and Schubert's "Arpeggione" Sonata. All present left the Hayshed having had their love for music, and more particularly the viola, reaffirmed and replenished.

Nick Fidler