

Viola Workshop with Robin Ireland - Saturday 5th November 2016

I can't think of a better way to spend a cold winter's Saturday than being in the wonderful countryside of South Yorkshire, in a beautiful smallholding, surrounded by other enthusiastic viola players! After a very early start for those of us coming from Birmingham (ok it was only 7 am but to university students who don't function before midday, it may as well have been 3 am) we arrived in Sheffield at 9 am, and were welcomed with cups of tea and biscuits.

We warmed up with a Bach Chorale transcribed for four violas, then started the day with Robin's arrangement of the Prelude from Bach's Partita in E major. This definitely threw us straight in the deep end as we tried to play such a challenging piece. After about 30 minutes, we achieved a reasonable standard with this fantastic work, and moved onto something a little bit calmer. Over the next hour, under Robin's excellent guidance, we worked through Purcell's Fantasia No 13 (upon one note) transcribed for five violas, and Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words Op. 102 Nos 2 and 6 in four parts. It was a great opportunity to play works by composers that we otherwise might not experience, and arrangements of pieces in which the viola might not get the most exciting of parts if played in an orchestra!

We had a short break (where more tea and biscuits were provided, much to our delight) followed by a masterclass with Robin. First Maddi Mcardle played and worked on Robin Ireland's Étude No 9, metre change study (East European Folk). I then played the 1st movement of Hoffmeister's Viola Concerto in D. The feedback and advice that Robin gave each of us was invaluable, and it was delivered in such a way that everyone watching could get a lot out of the masterclass.

We went straight on with a listening session, comparing different recordings of Walton's viola concerto. This was fascinating as I became so much more aware of how much the recording balance made a difference to the overall performance, as well as the performer's interpretation. This was apparent in the recording of William Primrose performing, which had a sort of vintage feel about it, with the solo viola line being very prominent, compared to Yuri Bashmet's recording with its speed being pulled about every other bar, and Lars Anders Tomter's recording, where the solo line was much more integrated into the orchestra.

We then made our way back to the main house (past two goats in a pen) and were treated to a delicious buffet lunch, kindly provided by Natalie, and had time to relax and properly get to know each other.

After lunch, Robin gave us a lesson on the left hand, reminding some of us, and introducing the rest of us, to his hand gym idea, giving us different exercises we can use on the go without our instrument to strengthen our left hand and gain space between our fingers, particularly the 1st and 2nd finger, to avoid tension. This was incredibly useful, especially to the three students there (myself included) who practise for hours a day, meaning that tension in the left hand can become destroying.

This was followed by a further massed viola ensemble session when we tackled movements from Jenny Jackson's 'Leading Lines' for viola ensemble, Monteverdi's Madrigal for five violas, and Rossini's Overture to the Barber of Seville for eight violas - and I must say the 1st violas did a very good job of playing so high it was nearly stratospheric!

We all moved to various rooms for viola quartets or trios, and my group had a go playing through several arrangements, ranging from classical to Spanish, which was great fun.

To finish off what was an amazing day, we were treated to an outstanding recital from Robin who was joined by pianist Arthur Bocaneanu. This started with Robin telling us a little about his amazing Amati viola which he took over from his father, which was very interesting. Then he played the Bach Suite No 2 in D minor transcribed for solo viola (using a baroque bow). Six short and colourful Preludes by Shostakovich arranged for viola and piano came next.

The highlight of the recital for me was the Brahms' Sonata in Eb Op. 120 No 2 for viola and piano, which was played with such imagination and profound maturity. The rapport between Robin and Arthur was first rate, and the entire performance was incredibly inspirational.

After the recital, we started to say our goodbyes, and make our way home, and as we left the smallholding, we could see Sheffield on the horizon, lit up with many different firework displays which seemed like a beautiful ending to what had been a fun and inspirational day! Many thanks to Robin for imparting some of his great knowledge to us all.

Emily Dore
9th November 2016