

Robin Ireland's most recent workshop was held on 18th June in Natalie Wing's glorious 'Hayshed' in her walled garden. The weather was not quite as good as it has been for some summer workshops, we weren't able to have lunch in the garden, but that was probably helpful as we were not distracted from the music making.

It was attended by a lot of the 'usual suspects'; regulars who look forward to the opportunity to meet together with viola friends three times a year and enjoy music making together. There was a new face to be welcomed, and it was particularly good to have a second visit from two Birmingham Conservatoire students: Woei-sim Chow from Malaysia and Lan Ge from China.

The focus ensemble pieces for the day were the Saint-Saëns 'Danse Macabre' and Mozart 'Magic Flute Fantasy', both arranged for viola ensemble by Ross Cohen of Absolute Zero fame. The Saint-Saëns was particularly devilish played by 14 violas with some tricky parts which challenged all of us due to Ross Cohen's extremely democratic arrangements which ensure interesting parts for each of the different voices.

Unfortunately, we ran out of time for the last movement of the Mozart, but I'm sure we will come back to it at a later date.

We also had a go at two pieces for twelve violas: Klengel arr. Michael Vidulich 'Hymnus' and Martinson 'Fantasy for 12 Violas'. What a wonderful sound!

The main theme for the day was the viola as part of a duo, this time either with another viola or with cello.

We started the duo theme with Woei-sim and Lan having a masterclass on a Handel Caprice in A minor arranged (by Ross Cohen) for two violas. It was particularly interesting for us to listen to Robin coaching on bow strokes for each different rhythmic component of the music and watching Woei-sim and Lan trying to match each other, from a starting point of quite different approaches to the Baroque bowing style.

The listening session was about the viola in duet. Several of the pieces were played by Katrin Melcher (viola) and Martin Ostertag (cello) covering a wide (almost the whole?) range of duets for these instruments. The samples we listened to included a Duetto by Alessandro Rolla who wrote 215 duos (but only one for viola and cello), and by David Kirchner who is a friend of the performers, and who has not published the piece because it was written specifically for them to play.

Other pieces played by them were the Rebecca Clarke duos, which include her 'Grotesque', a particularly fun approach to the two instruments, and Hindemith Scherzo, which fortunately they did not take at the pace Hindemith himself performs it (available on U Tube) with Emmanuel Feuerman! Both of these are accessible even for amateur players, and I have been working on them recently with my sister, so it was of particular interest for me to hear different performances of them.

We then moved on to viola and viola duos, including the Frank Bridge 'Lament' written for himself to play with Lionel Tertis and Robin Ireland's own 'Pairings II', written for himself to play with Louise Williams. There seems to be a theme of viola players having to write their own music for small ensembles because nobody else has written things for them. These personalised compositions also highlight how much composers have a particular artist's strengths and sound quality in mind while writing for them.

The day finished with Robin's recital in duo with Thomas McMahon, a colleague from the Birmingham Conservatoire, which had Robin swapping between violin and viola with Thomas on cello. Robin's own transcriptions of Bach Two Part Inventions and his own composition for violin and cello were followed by the Beethoven duo 'mit zwei obligaten Augengläsern', (written for himself to play with an amateur cellist friend Nikolaus Zmeskal). The wonderfully vivacious performance was only slightly marred by the fact that our performers did omit the obligato eyeglasses!

It was a very full and fun day and we are always grateful to Robin and Natalie arranging all of this for us. We look forward to the next one in the autumn.

The post-script for me personally, was rushing off to an Ensemble 360 concert in Doncaster. Unfortunately, their second violinist had hurt her back and was unable to play, so they had to alter the programme. One of the substitute pieces kept to the theme of the day. The Mozart G Major duo was played beautifully by Ruth Gibson (viola), ably assisted by Ben Nabarro on the violin in a very conversational performance which really respected the dialogue of the piece. It was a good end to an extremely satisfying musical day.

Linda Gast
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