

## Viola Workshop with Robin Ireland. 20th February 2016

After an inspiring, jam-packed few days of viola fun at the Pro Corda viola course, I was very much looking forward to another of Robin's viola workshops in Ravenfield, South Yorkshire, despite his concerns that I 'might be fed up' of him by the end of the week!

We began with a viola ensemble session, which gave us a chance to experience the Bach Violin Sonata in C major as never before. The Adagio and Fugue from BWV1005 had been expertly transcribed for viola quartet by Robin himself, who had been eagerly awaiting this moment after treating us to a sample on Pro Corda. Hearing the work in this form made us all appreciate the skill with which a solo violinist must coordinate and bring out all the individual lines and implied harmonies as well as the sheer complexity of Bach's writing.

Unfortunately, at this point I had to disappear to teach over Skype for half an hour as part of the Arco project (which is going very well by the way!) and so I missed the majority of the listening session. From previous workshops I know that this session consists of listening to a few different renditions of the same piece, in this instance the Brahms Viola Sonata in F minor Op. 120 No 1 as played by Paul Doktor, Lawrence Power, Yuri Bashmet and Pinchas Zukerman. This session is always a good chance for the group to hear the different playing styles and give our own perspectives, and is an opportunity to see the piece from a different point of view. I returned as the group were voting on their favourites: this time Paul Doktor's interpretation, despite its age, was the preferred recording, his simplistic take on the vibrato in the second movement beautifully breathing life into the piece.

Next came a masterclass in which Woei-Sim Chow (a fellow student from Birmingham) and I performed. Woei-Sim impressed us with an extract from the first movement of Schumann's Violin Sonata in A minor, transcribed for viola. I played the first and last pages of the third movement of the Walton Concerto. Robin helped me with the right hand preparation for the finer articulation points in the main motif, and to keep a long sustained sound in the haunting return of the melody at the end of the movement, focusing on smooth bow changes and using the full length of the bow.

After lunch came a session on harmony. I've always had a slightly irrational fear of harmonic analysis, especially as someone who struggles to see harmonies in their written form. We took a section of the Bach C major Sonata as an example. I was pleasantly surprised that Robin focused on the meanings and feelings of the harmony rather than the names and formations of the chords. We were able to experience the musical 'journey' as Bach takes his first steps away from the key chord in the Adagio, hear the strength of root position chords as great 'pillars' within the piece, and feel the anxiety and turmoil in the dissonances. I was reassured to be reminded that it is our emotional reaction to harmony through our playing, rather than the extent of our harmonic understanding that truly captures Bach. I know I am definitely guilty of limiting myself because I believe my academic skill is insufficient, and next time I go to play Bach, I shall approach the harmonic journey with a refreshed mindset.

We returned to the viola ensemble for the rhythmically tricky Bartok Duo 31 and Saint-Saens' Danse Macabre, the latter arranged by Ross Cohen. We then split into quartets whilst Robin warmed up for his recital at the end of the day. As a viola player it is always fun to play in a different position in a quartet, and this time as first violist meant spending rather a lot of time in the upper realms of my instrument, a daunting and rather revealing experience! Our group worked on the Brahms Hungarian Dances, Mendelssohn Song Without Words Op. 120 No 2 and a new arrangement of 'Blue

Skies' by Paul Sudlow, as well as his two original pieces, Pastorale and Cha-cha-cha, both extremely pleasing to play.

To end our day, Robin treated us all to a short recital, beginning with the Telemann Fantasia No 7 and the Bach Partita in B minor transcribed for solo viola. Jack Littlewood accompanied Robin for the second half of the concert, in which they played Schubert's Sonatina No. 2, a fairly substantial work despite its name, the first movement of Brahms' Sonata in G, arranged for viola by Thomas Riebl and finally, Kreisler's Liebesleid. The workshop was such a lovely way to end my viola-filled week! I can't wait until the next one.

Rebecca Stubbs