

Viola workshop with Martin Outram Sunday 9 October 2016

On a beautiful sunny autumnal day twenty one viola players aged from 8 to 80 turned up at the village hall in Dorchester-on-Thames for a day of all things viola.

Playing in a large viola choir is always a good start to proceedings and the first piece of the day was a Telemann Concerto arranged for four violas, followed by an arrangement for 12 violas of Johann Strauss' 'Emperor' waltz. Both very successful after some pulling apart and putting back together!

Then (after a necessary break for coffee and biscuits) came a series of short master-classes. Two of the youngest participants played in this session, both with great confidence. One of them performed the first movement of a concerto supposedly by J C Bach (but actually written in the 1920s) with great aplomb and some speed! This prompted comments by Martin on the merits of practising with a metronome, and singing the melodies to yourself to shape and shade phrasing.

Comments on bowing technique in general included keeping the wrist loose for bow crossing, flattening bow hair for loud passages, varying bow speed for colouring and shaping of phrases, flexibility of fingers etc.

One of the adults taking part in this session was also a violinist and Martin made the point that playing the viola required more use of the lower half of the bow. A key concept was to have weight - but not to use it. Kreutzer Study No 13 was demonstrated and recommended for little finger counterweight practice right at the heel of bow.

A performance by one of the adults of the first movement of Hindemith's Sonata Op. 11 No 4 gave rise to how to deal with nerves in performance. Martin advocated practising accessing a calm mental space using whatever technique was best for the individual - perhaps imagining being in the sun on a beach. Breathing is crucial, not only at key points but also breathing out at the start of a piece lowers the shoulders and so removes tension.

So, with much think about, the morning finished with the viola choir playing Sally Beamish's very clever 'Bratschwerk' for four violas, followed by a lunch break, with a chance to have a quick stroll to Dorchester's beautiful Abbey nearby.

The afternoon session started with Martin playing the first Bach suite in G Major, followed by Hindemith Op. 31 No 4 which gave everyone a chance to enjoy beautifully phrased and shaped performances of two very different works.

This was followed by a master class on Hindemith Op. 22 No 5 where technique in playing chords was discussed. (It was rather a Hindemith-fest day!) Martin recommended looking for resonance in the dissonances and drawing the sound out: practising the 'inner melody' of notes in a progression, understanding how the note expands or contracts and how a chord is spread all need consideration.

A performance of the first movement of the Schubert Arpeggione sonata gave rise to Martin talking about using an expressive palate and broadening it to real extremes. He referred to so-called 'window' notes which gave transparency through which the piano part could be heard. He also recommended focusing on the note before an important 'rhetorical' note to emphasise it even further.

Finally everyone played two contrasting works: firstly an arrangement of the famous Barber Adagio and then the Gordon Jacob piece written in memoriam of Lionel Tertis. A great way to end an

excellent day of inspiring tutoring and happy music-making by violists of all ages. Many thanks to Martin and here's to the next workshop!

The workshop was organized by www.oxfordrehearsalday.org more string days are planned for next year.

Jennifer Hays

11 October 2016

Susan Bowles writes:

Well, what a constructive and happy day!

It was the perfect mixture of playing ourselves - and how good it is to hear massed violas - and being able to listen to others play their works in progress.

I love Martin's teaching; it's always so centred on the pupil and the tone and the music itself, never pointing at himself at all. His own playing however is really inspiring so I'm glad he does a short recital where we can hear how his technique tips are put into practice.

A wonderful day and thank you Simon for organizing it and letting me join in.

I had a great day at the viola workshop with Martin Outram. He is an amazing player and teacher and I will use his tips to improve the pieces I am working on. The standard of the other viola players was high and the pieces quite challenging but I managed to keep up. Dorchester-on-Thames was a beautiful village and I had time to walk around Dorchester Abbey on my lunch break.

Jamie Jones aged 10