

45th International Viola Congress.

What an amazing opportunity it was to attend the IVC in Rotterdam. So easy to get there direct from South Yorkshire using Intercity trains and Eurostar, which delivered me and my faithful viola into the heart of the city and then it was just a short walk, dodging trams and mad cyclists, to the welcoming Hofpleintheater, the main venue for the five days of the Congress.

I was far from alone in my pilgrimage: there were 300 full time participants from all over the world. For five days I was fully immersed in the viola and met such wonderful friendly and talented violists - academics, professionals and also some amateurs like myself.

The programme was packed to over-flowing with a feast of wonderful viola events. Should I go to a workshop to help with sound production, or a lecture, or enjoy a recital?

A workshop introduced me to the teachings of Karen Tuttle and another explained how I could work to get my whole body resonating along with my viola - this certainly needs some practice!

A lecture by a viola professor and academic from the USA explained results from recent brain research showed mental practice to be as important in the learning process as physical playing. Certainly very good to hear that. Another USA academic had the answer for students experiencing specific technical problems - she had developed an on line 'Etude Finder' to hone in to the best exercise for resolving the problem.

The Congress programme also explored viola repertoire from baroque to contemporary, from Turkey, Poland, Russia, Italy, Switzerland and Norway, to the South African Baobab Dance for viola and piano by Mokale Koapeng. It was wonderful to see how involved local orchestras and young people were attending the Congress and there was space to showcase young Dutch talent in pre-concert programmes.

Needless to say, I had to watch the amazing viola-themed theatrical performances by the students from Birmingham Royal Conservatoire. What a great contribution they made. Well done!!

I particularly enjoyed sitting in to watch selected students taking masterclasses with famous violists like Atar Arad, Kim Kashkashian, Timothy Ridout and Nobuko Imai. The students were all very good and it was so interesting to hear how the professional players worked in different ways to help their performance develop to the next level of musicality. Kim Kashkashian's workshop had a specific theme: György Kurtág's 'Signs, Games and Messages'. The complexity of performing this music led to an interesting technical session on how to produce the required sounds.

Then in the evening it was such a privilege to hear these amazing players perform in public. The concerts mainly took place in the De Doelen, Rotterdam's modern concert hall. The first evening set the standard for the rest of the week with a concert given by professional Dutch

chamber musicians performing Vaughan Williams Phantasy Quintet and Brett Dean's Epitaphs for String Quintet followed by the beautiful String Quartet in F major by Bruckner.

Lawrence Power performed the next night with his first public concert for the Congress at the city's Church of St Lawrence with the church choir, organ and chamber orchestra, for a varied programme. Power was the soloist in William Alwyn's Pastoral Fantasia for viola and strings and Puccini's Requiem for choir, viola and organ and he gave the world premier of a new version of Hayo Boerema's Messe Solennelle with a solo viola voice in the ensemble.

Atar Arad, Timothy Ridout and Nobuko Imai gave a very special concert to celebrate the 105th birthday of Benjamin Britten and on another evening we heard Kim Kashkashian playing folk-inspired Armenian viola music accompanied by a wonderful percussionist called Robyn Schulkowsky. She created a very magical sound world conjuring up a time of lament and sorrow.

Lawrence Power concluded the Congress with a performance of the Walton Viola Concert to a packed audience in Rotterdam's main concert hall. As his encore he chose a new piece called the 'Brexit Polka' for solo viola, a musical joke including all the European Union's national anthems.

After such long days I was heading for my bed in the Holiday Inn, but for those who didn't need to sleep the Matrix club in the city centre opened its doors to the Congress at 11pm for viola jazz, pop and world music. Sadly, I missed some wonderful music - including a night of Fado songs from Portugal violists

The large foyer in the Hofpleintheater was an ideal area for chatting and socialising, and also hosted a 'Viola Market' with space for exhibits by several viola makers, viola gifts, CDs and sheet music. A corner was set aside for four luthiers who busied themselves making a viola over the four days of the Congress. Each evening at 6 pm they reported progress and on the final day it was finished, but un-varnished, and presented for its first playing, duly undertaken by Atar Arad and Kim Kashkashian.

Alongside the Congress was a competition to write a new four-violin work. More than 100 composers registered from 27 different countries resulting in an overwhelming 86 scores to be judged by the jury. In the Student/Professional category, the Rotterdam-based composer Aart Strootman won with the piece "Anachronism #4". In the Amateur category, John Whittaker (from the UK) won with the piece "A Modal March for 4 Violins".

It was a treat to hear both of the winning pieces premiered live by the Amsterdam based Zemtsov Viola Quartet during a brief ceremony in the Hofpleintheater.

Did my viola enjoy the holiday? It went to a couple of workshops and took part in the two rehearsals of the viola orchestra. This was between 8 am and 9 am, which was rather too early for my viola, but was such fun and culminated in a brief performance as part of the closing ceremony.

My admiration and gratitude go to the Dutch Viola Society for all the hard work and organisation behind such a full and exciting Congress, and especially to the President Karin

Dolman and Events Organiser, Kristofer Ganer Skaug, plus their great team of volunteers without whom the event might not have been such a success.

Will I go again? I very much hope so - the date is in my diary: Poznan, Poland, 25-28th September 2019. Hope to see you there too.

Sue Douglas
December 2018