

Viola Day with Martin Outram

Benslow Music

17 February 2019

Once again, a bright Sunday morning in February found me making the journey from the wilds of East Anglia to the comparative civility of Benslow Music in Hertfordshire. The reason: a day of viola fun and frolics with BVS vice-president Martin Outram.

Over the years Martin and my paths have crossed on many times, and I take up every opportunity I can to make the most of his immense knowledge and skill on the viola. The annual viola day at Benslow is no exception. Martin, along with his long-time collaborator, pianist Julian Rolton stick to their tried and tested popular format for the day, and as usual they were both an inspiration.

The day always starts with a gathering in the bar at Benslow – no beer so early on a Sunday morning, but coffee, tea, fruit tea and biscuits are always a welcome treat after a fairly long journey. Slowly violists begin to assemble. Viola friends old and new from all walks of life and distances ranging from just down the road to far flung corners of the UK and beyond congregating in a corner, swapping tales of their viola related activities and finding many mutual links. I still am unsure of the collective term for a group of violists, possibly it would make a good competition for the BVS to run to find a true definition, but one thing is certain - they are all lovely people.

Violists who attend are of a wide range of standards too. Some have studied at Music College, others have just played all their lives, and there are always representatives from a group of people who discover the viola later in life and tackle learning it with a vigour and enthusiasm that is enviable. The range is enormous, but Martin has the ability to make everyone feel at ease and leave the viola day having gained so much from the experience.

The course itself is a mixture of viola ensemble playing, usually including a play through of the Gordon Jacob Suite for eight violas (always a pleasure) and mini-masterclass sessions for the assembled players. Martin has a great range of music for multiple violas, the experience of discovering new gems in his collection always being an exciting part of the day for me, Anna Semple's 'Tango' being the latest addition.

This year, in the individual sessions we were treated to the Romance by Bruch, an arrangement of Vivaldi's Viola d'amore Concerto 392, the Sonatina in D major by Schubert, Bach's G minor da Gamba Sonata, Bowen's Sonata No 1 in C minor, the Passacaglia by Rebecca Clarke, the Ballade from Vaughan Williams Suite for viola and orchestra, the Bax Viola Sonata, Hindemith's Trauermusik and Coates' First Meeting: Souvenir. Such a range of music, but Martin, ably assisted by Julian, managed to bring new depths to each piece and the individual performances. Martin really does have the ability to communicate new ideas to players across a wide range of abilities, putting each at their ease and giving them specific and well targeted advice to apply to their playing both in the session and beyond.

We were also treated to a performance by Martin and Julian of the First Group of the Suite by Vaughan Williams and the first movement of the Brahms Sonata in Eb. It is always lovely to hear these two at work, this occasion being no exception.

The day was punctuated by the lovely hospitality and food that Benlsow Music is well known for.

All in all, another wonderful February viola experience and I will definitely be returning next year if possible.

Mathew Lee