

2019 Viola Day in Ilkley

Our 5th annual Ilkley viola day took place on 23rd March and we were delighted to have Martin Outram leading us in ensemble and masterclass playing in the beautiful sanctuary in Christchurch. We were a group of 10 violas including a recent convert from the world of violin playing.

To warm up, we started with an energetic Scottish Reel, accompanied by Francesca Bridgewater on the cello followed by Bratschentanz by Ian Gammie. We then played two movements of a Handel Horn Suite in F and swapped parts, which we did on a few pieces, giving a different perspective of the same piece, sometimes travelling in the direction of an easier part, sometimes being brave and going for something more challenging!

Masterclasses started with a viola duet with cello and harpsicord accompaniment of Brandenburg 6, a short extract from the first movement. Martin talked about the use of the bow in baroque music not being of a sustaining nature and also the importance of using the lower half of the bow. Having a relaxed thumb at the side of the neck of the viola is also important, using a natural relaxed hand position.

Clare played the beautiful Glazunov Elegy accompanied by David Bridgewater on the piano. Martin discussed the idea by Carl Flesch, throwing and catching a ball for downbows and upbows respectively to enable flexibility in the fingers of the bow hold. In the Rebecca Clarke Sonata we heard the first movement, from which ideas about thinking of our response to the music before beginning to play, using the ideas from the piece such as the extremes of the passion within the music and the dream world in which it inhabits. The idea of shadow bowing, bowing the movement above the string to allow less inhibited movement was discussed.

David played a little-known, but interesting piece called Fantasy for Viola and Organ by York Bowen accompanied by David and Francesca Bridgewater. Martin discussed the concept of how rather than applying more weight to viola playing, it is more about how weight is released. This produces a clearer sound, like diction within a voice, pulling out the sound and releasing it. In order to do this, the importance of active fingers was discussed and even a long legato bow being an infinite number of pulsations.

Some ensemble playing included 'When I'm 64' for nine violas which was a lot of fun with the swapping parts to realise how cleverly it was composed, the Happy Birthday theme woven into the music in many different ways. The Lullaby from Viola Land by Ian Gammie was also interesting and fun to play.

Andrew played the Barcarolle from the first sonata by Vieuxtemps where the concept of active fingers was developed, and Kreutzer study number 10 recommended for developing squeezing and releasing the bow, also the Kreutzer 4th study for staccato and active fingers.

After lunch Martin gave a short recital of the Bach sixth cello suite and effortlessly showed us all how it was really done! It was a joy to listen to him bringing the music alive.

We played some more of the Handel and perfected some technical hitches in ensemble, and then moved on to hear the Gigue from the third Bach cello suite. Martin talked about playing baroque music like that of Bach in 1st position to maximise the resonance as vibrato is hardly used, and to use the wrist rather than fingers for passages with multiple crossovers. Kreutzer study number 13 was recommended for practising this technique.

The first movement from the Brahms E flat sonata opus 120 number 2 was played, originally for clarinet and very demanding. Martin gave the idea of keeping the music flowing, thinking about what the music is conveying and allowing that to come through in the interpretation of the piece being as, if not more, important than technical mastery.

The day drew to a close with the rich and warm Barber Adagio, followed by the bright and sprightly Queen of Sheba before saying our farewells.

The day was one of seeing old friends and making some new ones. Martin was encouraging, sharing his infectious passion and joy of music, and making us all believe we can improve and enjoy our music-making even more.

Sophie Wallace