

***Limb* (2019): a new composition for Solo Viola & Orchestra**

a post-première reflection

by Jenny Jackson

Following my recent newsflash about having finished composing *Limb*, I can now tell you that it has received its first performance! I am pleased to say that it went really well and there has been some very positive feedback. There was a lot of interest and support from the viola community before and after the performance, not just from viola players but also parents of young viola students excited that their instrument has been put in the spotlight. I even had a message via Twitter from a professional viola player in America (who I don't know) thanking me for writing for the viola! So; that's been an unexpected - and very welcome - aspect to this commission, although it is also a sad reflection on the state of things: the viola is not a rare or unusual instrument (and there are already some fantastic pieces out there; they just need to be better promoted and more widely performed). Now my piece is complete I am enjoying getting to know it, and I have been reflecting on the writing process...

I found this particular collaboration both positive and testing. Having two components to consider simultaneously - solo viola, and orchestra - threw up challenges in composing effectively (in terms of balance, interplay and texture), and the typical way of rehearsing concerto-type pieces meant that I couldn't rely on hearing both parts together in rehearsals in order to tweak or alter things, so I had to trust my ability to imagine all possible outcomes from my chosen orchestration and notation (sometimes flexibly-notated). In fact, I didn't hear the two parts together until the final run-through in the cathedral, shortly before the concert performance. This probably caused me more stress than any other aspect of composing the piece!

I am happy to say that it did work - thankfully! A lot of this was down to the care and serious intent of the players from Hallam Sinfonia, and the energetic guidance of the charismatic conductor, Natalia Luis-Bassa. There was very limited rehearsal time due to the pressure of also producing a collaborative multi-choir performance of Beethoven's 9th Symphony in the same concert (the finale concert of Sheffield's very successful Classical Weekend festival, and also Natalia's last ever concert with Hallam Sinfonia, after ten years! So; an emotionally-charged concert, as well), but rehearsal time was used effectively and, in fact, the piece came together fairly easily.

However, the success of the performance was largely due to the wonderful, young viola soloist, Maria Do Vale Antunes (a Portuguese player currently studying for a Masters at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire with Louise Lansdown) who was unknown to me before this collaboration. This has definitely been one of the most positive outcomes for me; as soon as we met I knew we were on the same wave-length and I found her to be professional and hard-working, relaxed enough to cope with the pressure of performing the solo part and also technically

capable of delivering the part with confidence and drama. It was so rewarding to see how much effort she put into learning my music and how eager she was to understand the piece fully. It was a very flattering and humbling experience. I really hope we can work together again. Interestingly, she wrote to me to say how she felt a huge responsibility in playing a première. I hadn't really thought about how she would feel; I was too concerned with worrying that I had written a part that was equally challenging and interesting but not too difficult or impractical, and whether the orchestral writing was going to balance as I had planned (and also *not* balance when I had planned!). She was worried that she might not present an accurate realisation of my piece, which is so respectful.

During the rehearsal period, I had further ideas for an alternative opening which would illustrate the 'coming together' of the orchestra as a 'body', requiring the orchestral performers to enter the stage from unseen positions around the entire performance space whilst playing fragments of music taken from their opening bars. It would emphasise the aloof nature of the soloist as being 'out on a limb' at the start and, coupled with a number of changing performance positions for the soloist, would illustrate the narrative in a much clearer visual way (it would also offer a more immersive audio-visual experience from the audience's perspective). Unfortunately, Health and Safety ruled out this version for this particular performance, but Maria and I are hoping to arrange another performance where we can do it in the near future. She is very interested to explore non-conventional performances and so we both got very excited about the possibilities!

If you are interested in performing the piece please let me know: I would love to have more performances with or without the alternative opening. I can send a pdf copy of the score for you to look at... Physical parts are available to hire from Hallam Sinfonia (contact hallam.sinfonia@gmail.com), or you can buy digital parts to download from me (email: jennyjacksoncomposer@yahoo.com).

You can listen to the recording here: <https://soundcloud.com/jennyjacksoncomposer/limb>

Once again, I would like to thank the British Viola Society, Classical Sheffield and Hallam Sinfonia for their financial support.

I'm fancying composing some solo viola pieces now...

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