

Since writing my last blog in February I've been on a bit of a rollercoaster with my viola, at one stage being ready to throw it through the window.

I was asked by an oboe friend of mine, Charmian, to play in a lunchtime concert at one of our local churches. These lunchtime concerts are really a showcase for Keele students - Keele is our local university. Unfortunately, the Keele students had prior engagements so we had less than a week to cobble together a programme with three players - piano, viola and oboe - who had never played together before. A recipe for disaster one would think. Fortunately Charmian has great expertise in finding music for that combination which sounded good and we could actually play at such short notice.

The programme consisted of Theme and Variations by Emil Agnes (1810-1882). We only played the theme, the variations being too difficult for the short time we had to prepare. A trio sonata by Pepusch in D minor which I suspect was originally written for baroque flute, viola da gamba and harpsichord but was a delight for us to play. Also a modern piece by Daniel Leo Simpson, an American composer born in 1959 written specifically for our combination. As an aside, Simpson has written string quartets using a viola profunda in place of the viola and the viola taking the place of the second violin, and a soliloquy for viola profunda and piano which you can listen to on YouTube - rather gorgeous. Charmian played a couple of oboe pieces - a sonata by Bergoglio and a piece by Butterworth. I contributed my solo bit with the Eccles. To our amazement the programme went down well. So I was understandably on a bit of a high. But you know what they say, pride comes before a fall.

Shortly after this 'success', I went for my annual viola trip to Leiston Abbey where Pro Corda is held with Robin, Louise and Lucy as our tutors. I've been working on the first four movements of Vaughan Williams Suite for Viola and Orchestra, so I thought I would play the Prelude, which I thought I knew, at the beginning of the course and then concentrate on the other movements. But it didn't quite work out that way. I did play the Prelude but the sound coming out of my instrument was, to my ears, absolutely hideous. Instead of the full rich viola sound to which we all aspire, this horrible scratchy sound was irritating my left ear and the harder I tried the scratchier it got. Broke down once as couldn't stand the noise. Louise encouraged me to try again but the sound got no better. Suggested that somebody else could have a chance to play. I wouldn't have liked to have sat and listened to that torture – cruelty to violas!

If I hadn't got an advance ticket to get back home on the Monday, or had a car, I think I would have been off that evening. I must confess that I was all for giving up the viola, thinking maybe I'm punching above my weight. But then I thought of all the pleasure I gain from the viola, playing with other people and there has been some improvement with my more or less consistent practice. And what would I do without the viola? A viola-less world didn't bear thinking about. So I gritted my teeth and spent the next few days concentrating on the Prelude. But gritting your teeth means tension and that's exactly where I was going wrong. Robin very kindly said to me that you become more critical as you improve, but it needed a fairly low level of criticism to appreciate the fact that the noise I was making wasn't good.

I was given helpful hints by all three tutors to try and improve the sound. Lucy has been banging on for several months about the inflexibility of my knuckles in my right hand. The fact is they are too high, but I find it so difficult to get that springiness which is needed. Almost impossible to avoid that 'mountain of tension' which how the high knuckles and straight little finger has been described.

On my return home I trawled through YouTube under the heading of flexible bow hold. Some good advice (some not so good) mainly reiterating what Lucy had already told me. But there were two I thought particularly good - a Russian violinist called Julia Bushkova and an American violinist called Nathan Cole. Hopefully their comments are transferable to the viola. They certainly backed up what Lucy has been telling me with some helpful ideas for exercises.

Fortunately, as it turned out, I had agreed to play the Telemann Viola Concerto with a local chamber orchestra. This was not only an ideal vehicle in which to improve my sound but also quashed a few demons. Thankfully the advice given to me, taken and worked on, paid off. The sound I made being commented on favourably by both the audience and my fellow players.

So the moral I have taken from these experiences is never to take anything for granted. As Robin said I was a bit gung-ho to the Vaughan Williams thinking that I could play it without proper preparation, the mental bit being very important. Also never to give up. Persistence does pay off.

Rather a long drawn out blog this month, but helpful for me to clear my mind. Thanks for sharing it with me

Janet Pazio