

Nick Fidler reports from the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

The new year has been full of hustle and bustle in the Midlands for the viola. Violists from the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire have filled the last three months with masterclasses, recitals, concerto performances, solo competitions, and world premieres. The year started with a visit from the Cecil Aronowitz 2014 winner, Timothy Ridout. He gave an absolutely commanding performance of British works. He then gave masterclasses to several lucky students. His insights were novel and invaluable for the students receiving them.

In February, we received masterclasses and a lecture from Nadia Sirota, a Juilliard alumnus. Her experience as a non-traditional professional performer specializing in new music, was fascinating and shed some light on otherwise unknown paths that we can explore with our music. Some of the violas then took part in the annual pilgrimage to Leiston Abbey for the ProCorda course. 12 advanced students underwent three days of intensive lessons and private practice, under the guidance of Dr Louise Lansdown, Lucy Nolan, and Robin Ireland. All involved left the sanctuary of the Abbey with their love for the viola reinvigorated.

March saw the world premiere performance in Sheffield of "Limb" by Jenny Jackson, for viola and orchestra. Maria Antunes from RBC, played the solo part alongside the Hallam Sinfonia. Yue Yu took part in the Stockport International Music Competition and won with her performance of the Bartok Viola Concerto, an accomplishment of which we are all proud. Continuing with Bartok, the RBC Symphony Orchestra performed Bartok's "Miraculous Mandarin" at Symphony Hall. This work has several exciting and boisterous solos for the viola section. The night before the performance, the principal violist, Mabon Rhyd, had an accident on his bicycle and suffered a suspected hairline fracture on his right elbow. Needless to say, "stress" was the mood amongst the section prior to the concert. The ship was more than ably steadied by Toby Holden who jumped into the hot seat at the last second.

Mabon, in an act of bravery/stupidity, undertook an entire performance of the Mendelssohn and Enescu octets for the completion of his undergraduate studies a week after the bicycle incident, to much acclaim. Yue Yu has just left to take part in the Tertis competition: a competition that only accepts the 40 best violists in the world under 30. We wish her the best of luck and are proud to watch her soar.

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