

I've had a very busy summer between walking and music plus other things I cram in. As soon as I've been released from my regular rehearsals with the various orchestras I'm involved in, I'm a bit like a dog being let off their leash running hither and thither.

First off was north and mid Wales, exploring more of the area around Machynlleth, starting the Wye Valley Walk from its source in the Plylimon mountains and venturing into the foothills of Snowdonia from the North Wales coastline. In between Machynlleth and the River Wye my friend, Edwin, a recent convert to the viola, took a big risk in asking me to play in Vivaldi's Four Seasons as the only viola player in a music event his church in Crosby was hosting. Lucky it was at the beginning of the summer rather than the end when my fingers were still moving to the right place more or less.

I then spent a week in the Outer Hebrides with my eldest daughter who works there as a psychiatric nurse. That was at the time of the heatwave, Stornaway reaching 27 degrees. Unheard of up there! I took my viola with me as I had one day turn-around before going off to Martin Outram's summer viola school at Benslow. I have a very long-suffering daughter.

It was with some trepidation that I journeyed on to Benslow having felt quite shattered by Pro Corda earlier this year and I didn't find the experience of Benslow an easy one two years ago. Plus the minor point of not having done as much practice as I would have liked. But it turned out to be a fantastic experience helped by a friendly group of participants, mainly students with two older amateur viola players. Again, as before, I was very impressed with the standard of viola playing among the students, especially a young man from Taiwan, currently studying at Lyon, who is an absolute magician on the viola. I asked him how much practice he did to achieve that level of playing. His reply was not a lot (though what means a lot does vary from person to person) but he tends to use visualisation.

Whilst on the course we had two especially interesting sessions. One on positive thinking led by Melanie, Martin's wife, and the importance of breathing. To breathe from the diaphragm rather than the upper chest which just leaves a stale residue of air continually in the lungs. That must be why I fall asleep at the drop of a hat.

The other session was led by a Dutch lady who specialises in Baroque playing and Feldenkraiz which looks at how our current habits may be affecting the ease and enjoyment in how we play. Apparently Feldenkraiz is popular with sports people, as is visualisation, to improve their times and techniques. According to the bump on the Benslow website (Benslow run classes on this technique) the Feldenkraiz method uses movement to change the brain and refresh our self-image in order to help us learn and improve and discover our true potential. Too good to be true? But like anything we have to give it time and energy. So difficult to change habits and ways of working especially as you age. But I must remember that the brain is plastic, as has recently been discovered, so even at my advanced age change is possible.

There was also the opportunity to sit in on Alexander Technique run by the cellists who were having a course at the same time. As were the composers who composed works for us which we performed on the last day.

Another thing that made me think on this course was the importance of narrative. You can have the most perfect but also lack-lustre performance. You can also have a more flawed performance, but one where the performer is present to the audience telling them their story through the music, so that the listener is gripped rather than bored.

So Benslow was a truly enriching experience. And talking of magicians, Martin is one of them. I was able to sit in on various lessons Martin was giving. In a very short space of time he was able to transform the playing of those who were asking his advice. It didn't matter what level they were at. How wonderful to have that knack to see instantly where the problem lies and to be able to rectify them. I feel privileged to be able to attend the course. I shall be back next year, God willing.

The summer continued with more walking, Grantham canal, to the source of the River Dee in the Dduallt mountains south of Lake Bala, and completed Shakespeare Avon Way at Tewkesbury where the River Avon goes into the River Severn.

In between these, an orchestral weekend organised by Port Sunlight when we played Copeland's Third Symphony, Till Eulenspiegel and Gone with the Wind to please the brass. And a quartet day which happens twice a year in a local friend's house where twelve of us gather with different combinations throughout the day with a delicious lunch cooked by the host. Also the odd get-together of my various musical friends who get withdrawal symptoms when not playing with their regular orchestras.

Off to Benslow in a couple of days with my piano quartet being coached by the Primrose quartet. We are attempting Faure's Piano Quartet in C minor Opus 15. A gorgeous work when played well.

Feel so lucky to be able to do all this. Retirement is great when you have your health. Not so sure about my mental abilities though.

Happy viola playing

Janet Pazio

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