

Can't believe it was only June when I wrote my last blog, so much has been happening since then. After a slow start to the year things actually seem to be happening. On my first venture, which was the trip to Benslow for Martin Outram's viola course, it was brought home to me how much my life was stunted, having been incarcerated in my Covid 19 prison. Not an easy place to break out of psychologically. It was scary breaking out but well worth it.

Public transport down to London and then to Hitchin not as bad as I feared, although social distancing not so easy on the cheap chugger from Stafford where I had to change from Stoke. Luxury travel from St Pancras to Hitchin virtually having the carriage to myself. Journey back a bit of a nightmare with cancelled trains due to lack of drivers. I looked at all the Avanti trains doing their fast and frequent journeys up to my neck of the woods and wondered whether saving £30 was worth it. Ended up going to Rugby where the train terminated instead of Crewe and then catching a train to Stafford where I was told there were no trains going to Stoke as some unfortunate had thrown themselves on the line at Stone. The coach laid on was absolutely rammed when it eventually arrived and the guy sitting by me insisted on talking to me all the way back to Stoke – a good three quarters of an hour – removing his mask every time he spoke which rather defeated the object of wearing a mask in the first place. Fortunately I haven't displayed any Covid 19 symptoms. Or maybe I'm now a subversive spreader. I hope not. One thing that cheers me is that up till now: I've retained my sense of taste and smell.

In the midst of this travelling was the wonderful opportunity to spend time at Benslow on Martin Outram's viola summer school. Quite a mixed bunch this time. Good to share it with Sue our secretary. But the star of the show was definitely Katherine who played her viola and sang at the same time. And what a player she is plus a lovely clear singing voice with excellent diction. In the evening we played ensembles together. I'd forgotten how much pleasure I derived from playing with other people and there's nothing like a viola ensemble with its rich variety of sound. One session I had the pleasure of playing alongside Katherine who was definitely my anchor.

They'd done a terrific job at Benslow to keep us safe from the dreaded virus. Sanitizer and masks lurking on every corner. The staff wore masks but we didn't have to – what joy! Hideous things, they make my glasses steam up.

At the final concert there was a bit of a disaster with flimsy photocopied music. Quite a draught in the Morrison hall as the doors were open not just because

of Covid, although if we were going to get it we would be well on the way by now, but because of the almost unbearable heat we were enduring towards the end of the week. Toby was first on playing York Bowen's Sonata for viola and very impressive he was too. What was even more impressive was the fact that he kept going even when his music fluttered all over the floor, hastily picked up by Martin who replaced it on Toby's stand. Those of us following had more substantial music until we came to Katherine who rather appropriately was playing a piece, I think by Garth Knox, about the wind. Anyway the wind did its trick. Pegs were found by the girl guides among us and everything was OK from then on.

I can't thank Martin and his accompanist, Julian, enough for the fun time we had and excellent tuition. Can't wait for next year. In fact when I got home I looked on Google to see if there were any other courses I could attend. Maybe have to wait for Pro Corda next February. Just hope the dreaded virus doesn't scupper plans.

I mentioned in my last blog that I may be hiking to the hills. I certainly have to the detriment of my viola playing. First off Ludlow to Kington along the Mortimer Trail. Not a very good path in places. I suppose with Covid 19 they just haven't been walked. Hard work battling through bracken and brambles up hills with nary a view in sight. But the sense of freedom and just going somewhere else was worth it. And I can say I've done that. Tick,tick.

Blackburn cancelled because of Covid. Not worth the risk.

Then a bit more of the Marches way from Hereford to Abergevenny. First day weather was OK. But the walk from Ewyas Harold to Abergevenny was in torrential rain. My £ 6.99 Lidl cape proved invaluable. Warm and dry. A bit like travelling in a tent. All lane walking as not risking the footpaths. As it was the lanes were like streams, having to wade through the dips in the lanes. Mount Skirrid wrapped in clouds, but was able to walk up it the next day when I had the views.

Then Offas Dyke from Knighton to Hay battling against the strong winds. Quite exhilarating. But I've rabbited on enough. Have too many tales to tell. Off to Rhayader tomorrow to walk some more of the Wye Valley Way to Hay on Wye.

All these walks I'd booked up at the end of last year. What was going through my mind? So manic! But then that was my lifestyle pre Covid.

We are presently in the middle of a superb series of concerts which Louise And Lucy have put on with their students in aid of Arco. I have managed to catch 5. of them so far. Peter Whitehead played some amazing pieces I'd never heard of. One was suite for viola by Adolfo Busch. Really liked it but not for someone of my limited technique and a charming dance by Pendereski originally for violin but it sat well on the viola. He also played a world premiere by Mantheti Zanzile Malebe, a very interesting South African composers who uses the most amazing effects which Alma, another of Louise's pupils, certainly illustrated when she broadcast her concert. Absolutely fantastic. Well worth watching. And then there was Bill Ko, the young student who attended Pro Corda giving an impressive rendition of the York Bowen sonata, accompanied by his mum. Now there's a star in the making.

Louise you astonish me with your enthusiasm, commitment and sheer doggedness. Where do you get your energy from? Your pupils are a credit to you. And I know that Lucy is doing her bit as well. So many thanks to you both for putting on this inspiring series of concerts. It gives me confidence that there is life after death.

As the government says Stay Alert, Keep safe and no hugging. So a virtual hug to you all.

Janet Pazio

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