

Update from Yue Yu

Today I am thrilled to write my recent update. Can you believe that I have just won the first prize of the internal viola competition at the Mozarteum! I feel absolutely grateful for all the patience and tuition from Thomas (Riebl)... I would love to share with you some stories about my studies here with him.

Since I started my studies with him in October 2019, we have always had a goal which is to get me to play more solidly. It was such a torture for me, especially at the beginning. As many of you may know, I was the kind of the player who moves up and down, left and right, back and forth, literally everywhere on the stage (maybe just a tiny bit exaggerated haha!). To get me holding myself in one place while playing is no easy work. But regardless of however much I was moving, I was failing to be conscious about it; Thomas never gave up his patience telling me to root myself to the ground and find the centre of gravity in the body. Finally, after a year of work, I could now manage to find a certain spot on the ground that I can hold on to and not move like a crazy dancer anymore.

But playing solidly is not just about standing still, more important is to have a good basics (intonation, sound quality, rhythms and pulse, etc.) so that whatever I add on top of that would not collapse easily. I am thankful that through the preparation for this competition, I made some good progress towards playing more solidly.

It was especially in the case of the prelude of Bach's 5th suite that I had a struggle over playing it straight. As I always have a strong instinct for how a piece of music should sound, I tend to add too many ideas to the music. I think to say that I'm like a kite is quite accurate. If there is enough wind, a good momentum to push me away (in this case, building musical interpretations, adding ideas, and eventually melting into the flow of enjoying the music), I could float away so easily without even realising it myself, and so far away that people would barely be able to see me. The lucky thing is, Thomas still has the string that can pull me back.

For a period of time in February, Thomas would "torture" me in every lesson by asking me to play straight without any musical intentions, just to find the original appearance of the music. I had to try so hard to think only in the technical sense of things - for example, in the fugue section, these semiquavers should group in fours, and those should group in twos; now I should be only using my forearm and lead from the elbow; here I should take care of the sound quality, etc. Sometimes I managed to play in the way he asked, he would then tell me to add a bit extra. But you can be assured that this didn't happen a lot. What happened most of the times was that I ended up doing things all a bit middle-way - playing half solid and putting in half musical intentions. Because I hate so much playing without real heart, I would always add a little music before he may or may not ask me to do so. But by doing things all half-ways, the music became somewhat not natural anymore. I was also not playing totally solidly. Everything just kind of became a spoiled pot of stew of dubious things. I don't know what I'm describing. Just something horrible. It was worse than either just being solid or being totally dreamy. That made me feel like a failure - I couldn't play solidly, and I couldn't even feel the music anymore!

At the same time as I was going through this struggle, there were quite a few other things that were stressing me out. Aside of those, it was also then that I had an amazing opportunity to record the wonderful Schumann Piano Quartet with three inspirational chamber musicians – pianist Pavel Gililov, Professor from the Mozarteum, violinist Lea Hausmann, and cellist Sam Shepherds from the Amatis Piano Trio. Not only did it give me great pleasure communicating with these amazing chamber musicians, but also it taught me a great deal about listening. In fact, it was quite painful the way I learned about the importance of listening. As you may know, this piano quartet is especially famous for its beautiful 3rd movement. Lucky me, the viola was blessed also to have a turn in playing the gorgeous melody. One time, when I was just enjoying how I could just be myself and play my heart out, suddenly the supportive round sound which came from behind me stopped. While I was still in a state of trance, I realised that the piano professor was looking at me ready to speak about something.

“Do you hear what the others are playing?”

Ouch. The question from professor Gililov was totally spot on for the situation – I wasn't paying nearly enough attention to the other parts in the music... You can imagine how much it felt like a sudden slap on my face – my mood went on a trip on a roller coaster. When at first it was lifted by me feeling able to play music again, the very next second I was feeling totally embarrassed by it. But I had to just take it easy because the rehearsal had to go on. We tried for a few more times, and I tried to open my ears – it was a totally different experience playing it. When all the parts work together in a unified way that helps each other towards the final goal of music, it brings out a magic vibe. Previously, no matter how much magic I was trying to seek as an individual, it was incompatible with this kind of group magic. There is no part that is less or more important than another. In fact, perhaps the least important part there would be my part, because the things that go around it are what gives the music all the colours and what makes it unique. In this way, we sounded much more like a chamber group and the music was much more enjoyable and understandable. Rather than before when it was probably more like a piano trio group with a viola flower in the middle.

In the end, the recording went pretty well. The lights that stood around us were super strong and playing under them made us feel exhausted not even long after we started. But we all enjoyed it as much as we could and felt quite positive about a good result. It was just less than a month's time until the competition when this was finalised. One thing that I think I figured out is that how well one can listen while bringing out good music is perhaps what picks out amazing musicians from good players.

This mind-blowing experience, for me, made me reflect very much on my approach to music again. This time I decided for real, no matter how strong I would feel for the music I was playing, I would make everything as solid as I could and try to listen more from an audience's perspective.

When the day of the first round came, it was then, when I went onto stage and played, that I felt so grateful for all the work I had done in terms of solid playing. I was so nervous. Even though I still had one or two intonation problems, I was so glad that I could rely on the hard work I had done so that my fingers wouldn't be totally affected, and that I could think in a

pure technical way when I couldn't manage to concentrate otherwise, not to mention about dreaming away.

When I came back to Mozarteum that afternoon, I was in a normal mood planning to practise more. I had no idea that talking to a friend would get me again so discouraged. I bumped into him on the way into the School. He couldn't help but talk about how much he admired another player in the competition who always plays so stably and doesn't make mistakes and how there would be nothing in the way for him to proceed into the next round. It shouldn't have affected me as much as it had. But the player he talked about is exactly the kind of player that I would hate to find myself getting anywhere close to the way he plays – technically perfect, but very little in music that would reach out enough to touch one's heart. Moreover, there's hardly anything interesting in this way of playing. But no matter how much I hate it, players like that are always loved in the competitions...

The next day, I went for another lesson with Thomas as I would be playing in the final the following day. The competition theory put me in such a strange mood – as long as you are technically proficient, lacking musicality would not be such a big matter. I felt so fed up with that that I decided to play everything with no heart, simply straight.

When I finished, I was expecting Thomas to agree that it was too straight now. But no, instead, he was so pleased about how I just played! He even said it was the best version of Walton I've played so far! It was brilliant, solid, and very interesting and enjoyable. He said no matter how much I would disagree with him, to him it was a great, presentable performance and with great artistry. He was right about me not wanting to agree and I was very unconvinced that there was enough music. In regard to this, he told me: in a performance, what matters the most is what the audience feels. After all, it doesn't matter so much how the performer him/herself feels.

I guess that makes sense.

But in this regard, it still troubled me about finding the perfect balance for giving enough feelings that would come across to the audience.

In the end, I decided not to care about it too much. "It's my performance and there's no other round for me to fight for, I may as well just give the best music I have and make people happy." I became very much looking forward to the performance, and also Walton's Viola Concerto and Bowen's Rhapsody are both pieces of music that I would love to share with people.

When I ended up on stage, even though there were still factors of nervousness, I felt so free – I realised that what helped me to achieve the level of freedom I have now was actually the good solid basis that I had laid over time. While I was feeling so free to express myself through music, I also managed to present the music in a very good and faithful way. Eventually, I was just so happy that I played a nice little recital that morning. The happy spirits I felt at the end of the performance from the applause was everything I needed in return.

