

# Impressions from the Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition

March 16–23, 2013

by Louise Lansdown



*The Isle of Man, home to the Tertis International Viola Competition (unless otherwise indicated, all photos courtesy of the author)*

## **Friday, March 15**

Arrival on the Isle of Man was yet again a fabulous feeling, greeted by a calm, yet chilly evening. The drive from the ferry terminal in Douglas served to remind me yet again of how unique an event this really is—an international viola competition on a tiny island; violists traveling from across the globe to this gloriously removed haven, away from the crazy race of life! Port Erin looked even more welcoming than I remembered, absolutely ready and delighted to be hosting this viola festival and competition. The first sight of the Erin Arts Centre brought a mega grin to my face—with the lighting illuminating the haunting sculpture outside and the colorful and welcoming banners announcing the Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition and Festival. After a wonderful greeting from festival director John Bethell and festival administrator Gloria Balakrishna, I was duly ushered toward the bar, and the festival spirit had begun.

## **Saturday, March 16**

After a relaxing morning walking my doggie and doing some scintillating shopping at the Tesco Superstore, it was time for John Bethell to deliver the official opening to the festival—an inspiring and wonderful testament to Lionel and Lillian Tertis, and of course to all of the jury and people

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involved. This was followed by Tully Potter talking about Lionel Tertis, playing carefully selected recordings by the master accompanied by unique and personal anecdotes. Tully's knowledge of early twentieth-century string players, styles, trends, and history is unsurpassed, and his particular brand of Tully-ness is a joy to behold. I particularly loved the recording of Tertis playing his own composition *Sunset*—a charming little piece packed with sentimentality and weaving melodic lines.

Hong-Mei Xiao's class on the third movement of Hindemith's *Der Schwanendreher* was high octane and packed with invaluable tips. Hong-Mei's obsession with articulation, clarity, and projection was inspirational, and her demonstrations were full of vigor and passion. Tucked into her obvious love for this piece and its unique character were some real technical gems—leaving plenty of room for thought and experimentation after leaving her class. *Der Schwanendreher* was admirably performed in the class by violist Laura Seay from the USA and pianist Anthony Hewitt (UK).

The evening brought even further wonder, with an elegant and beautifully selected program from violist Jean Sulem (France) and pianist Caroline Dowdle (UK). Sulem began the recital with his own transcription of Schubert's *Variations on "Trockne Blumen,"* D. 802, originally for flute and piano—revealing lyrical, sweet, and virtuosic qualities to his playing. He followed this with a deeply personal rendition of Stravinsky's haunting *Elegie*, for solo viola (1944) and finished the first half with Heinz Holliger's *Trema*, for solo viola (1981)—a veritable climax of viola fireworks! The atmosphere in Harry's Bar in the interval was warm with everyone chatting together excitedly—many familiar faces who have been supporting the festival for many years alongside new and younger faces—reveling in the intimate and inspirational environment created in the Erin Arts Centre.



*Participants started early on viola ensemble music*

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## Sunday, March 17

The morning began with me sorting out reams of Viola Ensemble music, putting music on stands, and generally thinking of ways to engage everyone at 10:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning. I decided to start off with the rousing *Hungarian Dance in G Minor* by Brahms, followed by one of Garth Knox's *Viola Spaces* (arranged for multiple violas by Garth himself), *Up, Down, Sideways, Round*; the latter caused quite a kerfuffle with bows everywhere and much laughter to add to the equation. Tomorrow I think we shall be continuing with the Knox and perhaps even adding another *Viola Space* to our repertoire, *Rapid Repeat*, an exercise in tremolo.

Jean Sulem gave a beautiful master class with two different performers, each playing the first movement of Brahms's Sonata in E-flat, op.120, no. 2. His eloquent and sophisticated teaching was warmly linked to harmony at every corner, taking his musical direction and line integrally from within the piano score throughout.

Samuel Rhodes gave a personal and movingly loyal session on the *Allemande* and *Courante* from Bach's second Partita followed by the *Allemande* and *Sarabande* from the fourth Suite in E-flat. His knowledge from memory of every bowing and articulation was in itself astounding, accompanied only by an even deeper knowledge of harmony, musical shaping, *inégale*, and a wonderfully imaginative approach to voicing.

Hong-Mei Xiao's (viola) and Sophia Rahman's (piano) recital was a vibrant and highly charged affair. Not only was Hong-Mei's entrance and appearance striking, but her playing was packed with energy, life, and brilliance. The Schumann A-minor Sonata was stormily interpreted, followed by an impassioned and glittering *Romeo and Juliet Suite*. The recital ended with Bliss's mammoth Sonata for Viola and Piano—a deluge of virtuosity with extremely beautiful lyrical moments in the second movement and Finale. The *Furiant* start to the Finale was exhausting to watch, never mind to play. One was left in no doubt about Hong-Mei's musical beliefs and priorities—a real energetic powerhouse.

## Monday, March 18

Due to work constraints I was forced to miss Tully Potter's second lecture, "Oskar Nedbal and His Czech Successors," although I did manage to hear the strains of Shostakovich's Sonata and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumble-Bee* buzzing through the door toward the end of Tully's talk. This was followed by yet another one of my Viola Ensemble sessions. I decided to start with the *Chorale* from Gordon Jacob's Octet—sound building, intonation, pulse, texture, leading, and general group responsibility. To finish the session we continued to toil away on Garth Knox's *Up, Down, Sideways, Round*, with bows and arms flailing!

Maxim Rysanov's master class in the afternoon included two renditions of the first movement of the Bartók Concerto, with a third student playing movements II and III. Maxim's ravishing demonstrations and unflinching sense of humor were revelatory, as were his compelling and emotive concepts about the character of the music. His superstar status was certainly no surprise after hearing his marvelous playing and also observing the enthralled students hanging onto his every word.



*Maxim Rysanov demonstrates at his master class*

Unbelievably there was yet another Viola Ensemble session after Maxim's class; this time we ventured into the Argentinian world of Piazzolla!

Martin Outram and Julian Rolton's recital in the evening introduced the audience to several lesser-known Tertis arrangements as well as some hidden gems in the English viola repertoire. Martin's fascination for this music was evident in his eloquent and informative introductions and in his deeply respectful and beautiful playing. All told—an unusual and illuminating recital.

**Tuesday, March 19**



*Martin Outram, at left, works with a student at his Tuesday afternoon master class*

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As ever, David Hume’s talk on instrument set-up and adjustments was fascinating, resulting in many questions. It seems like every instrument is an exception, as is every player—there is simply not one answer for anything. Mention of a microchip used to track instruments was certainly a talking point . . . one to follow up on.

Viola Ensemble was up next, and we were lucky to have Nejat Başığmezler to conduct his arrangement of Piazzolla for a part of the session. His session was packed with energy, hilarity, and punchy advice about rhythm. We finished our rehearsal off with Simon Rowland-Jones’s magnificent arrangement of *Svanen*, by the Finnish composer Selim Palmgren.

Maxim Rysanov and Xenia Bashmet were the headline for the evening recital; with a packed hall and the appearance of Yuri Bashmet, the stage was set. The Lord Lieutenant Adam Wood arrived at the Erin Arts Centre to be greeted by *God Save the Queen* played by thirteen violas!! Maxim started off the evening with Bach’s Cello Suite No. 6 in D Major—what a task with only four strings. I am not really sure of the success of this key on a four-string viola, but the quality of the player was never in doubt for a moment.

The rest of the concert was a mixture of touching arrangements of famous works by Ravel, Debussy, and Fauré, finishing with a dramatic and exquisite performance of Schumann’s *Märchenbilder*.



*Viola Ensemble participants cross “swords” before playing God Save the Queen*

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Brian Hawkins, chairman of the jury, closed the evening off by reading the names of the eight semi-finalists; plenty of jubilation but also disappointment!

### **Wednesday, March 20**

By all reports David Hume again delivered a superb presentation on how to look after your bow (I was busy teaching, hence my inability to share firsthand experience). This was followed by Nejat and Betil Başımeşler teaching Turkish folk music to the Viola Ensemble; plenty of fun was had by all. Everyone involved in the festival and competition met for the official photograph outside the Erin Arts Centre—almost freezing to death posing for the mug shots outside in seemingly subzero temperatures. The second-to-the-last Viola Ensemble rehearsal was next on the agenda; finally able to select the repertoire for the concert and really rehearse with the correct people on the correct parts (much hilarity and also mayhem!).

Brian Hawkins delivered a scintillating talk on the Schubert “Arpeggione” Sonata and a short master class on the first movement of the sonata afterward.

The hall was packed for Yuri and Xenia Bashmet’s recital in the evening; an incredible testament to this unique and unbelievable talent. This was a poignant and deeply sincere recital, and finishing with the Shostakovich Sonata was harrowing and nothing short of devastating. Yuri’s own brand of expression, bow control, and musical license is utterly individual. It is not the first time I have been privileged to hear Yuri live, but I think I was even more aware this time of his human frailty and the sense of occasion with him gracing the stage . . .

### **Thursday, March 21**

What a day: eight semi-finalists playing for forty minutes each; nervous tension abounded. The line-up of semi-finalists included representatives from Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, USA, and one candidate from the UK. I did not envy the jury narrowing the final list down to three people.

The announcement of the finalists was saved until after the end of the evening recital with Sarah-Jane Bradley and Anthony Hewitt—an eclectic collection of Martinů, Kodály, Mendelssohn, and Bowen—beautifully constructed and presented. The final offering was a gorgeous unpublished work by Bowen; what a gem!

The announcement of the finalists was surprising; four rather than three! They were:

Ziyu Shen (age 15) – China

Matthew Lipman (age 21) – USA

Shuangshuang Liu (age 26) – China

Kei Tojo (age 21) – Japan



*Yuri Bashmet looks on while a student performs at his Friday morning master class*

### **Friday, March 22**

This morning it was Yuri Bashmet's turn to give a master class—and what an occasion it was. His genius and his fantastically unique perspective on music and the viola came flooding forth; everyone patently aware that they were in the presence of greatness. His obsession with a true legato, his meticulous attention to detail with bow speed/weight and contact, and his interest in a musically complementary vibrato consumed his work on both the Shostakovich Sonata and Bartók Concerto. His connection with the Schnittke Concerto—and with the composer himself—was utterly fascinating, allowing a personal view of the relationship between composer and performer. The violist who played this for Yuri certainly came away with a much more intimate sense of the music and Schnittke's intentions.

It was the turn of the Viola Ensemble to have its concert in the afternoon. Much hilarity and chaos pervaded the event. My conducting debut was not too terrifying; seemingly entertaining for those watching! Yuri Bashmet came to watch and hopefully enjoyed our flamboyant offerings: the *Chorale* from Gordon Jacob's Octet conducted by John Bethell, Brahms's *Hungarian Dance*, Selim Palmgren's *Svanen* (arranged for six violas by Simon Rowland-Jones), and an arrangement of Piazzolla's music by Nejat Başeğmezler.

The time was nigh to chat with Maestro Bashmet; sharing a few sips of wine in Harry's Bar. Meanwhile a concert with five competitors who had not performed in the semi-final round was playing in the background on the television. Most convivial indeed . . .

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Samuel Rhodes, violist of the Juilliard Quartet for forty-four years, gave the evening recital—a wonderful selection of harrowingly difficult contemporary music by Elliott Carter, Milton Babbitt, and Hall Overton, alongside a W. F. Bach Sonata, Hindemith’s Sonata for Solo Viola, op. 25, no. 1, and the Stravinsky *Elegie*—what a privilege! Sam’s unfailing integrity, humility, and deep love for all of this music were evident. And his touching encore written by a friend on hearing of his departure from the Juilliard Quartet in 2013 left everyone feeling sad! Sam’s recital brought to an end the series of evening recitals, just leaving the following night for the final round of the competition. All of the events on Friday were very well attended despite a blizzard and utterly freezing temperatures outside.

### **Saturday, March 23**

It was still snowing and incredibly windy on Saturday morning as everyone gathered for the Forum in Harry’s Bar, chaired by Brian Hawkins with Tully Potter, Sarah-Jane Bradley, and me on the panel. Many pertinent issues were discussed from the future of the viola, copyright and photocopying, and issues related to the Tertis Competition, including rules, external visibility, attendance, advertising, and press coverage. It certainly was a useful opportunity to share thoughts and ideas for the future.

Time was then free until the start of the final round of the competition at 7:00 p.m.! It was sad seeing the trade stands pack up their tables to go home, a real sign that this inspirational festival was really coming to an end. The four finalists certainly provided a magical evening of music-making; displaying their incredible talents with their movement of Bach, the fiendish Peter Maxwell-Davies *Six Sorano Variants for Solo Viola*, and their chosen concertos. Nervous tension was high, but the standard was fantastically maintained throughout with musical integrity unquestioned.

After an agonizing wait, everyone was called into the hall for the prize-giving and speeches. Many awards were presented to violists from the first and second rounds, with tributes made by the President, Yuri Bashmet, John Bethell, and the Mayor of Tinwald. Finally the prizewinners were announced:

Shuangshuang Liu (China, age 26) and Matthew Lipman (USA, age 21) were awarded joint Third Prize

Kei Tojo (Japan, age 21) was awarded Second Prize

Ziyu Shen (China, age 15) was awarded First Prize

*Louise Lansdown has recently taken up the Head of Strings position at Birmingham Conservatoire after spending eleven years as Senior Lecturer in the School of Strings at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. She is also Director of Chamber Music at Pro Corda, the International Chamber Music Academy based at Leiston Abbey in Suffolk. Louise is Secretary of the International Viola Society and President and founder of the British Viola Society. She completed a PhD on Paul Hindemith at the University of Manchester in 2008 and continues research on his music, life, and influences.*



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## Some Reflections from Competitor Laura Seay



*Laura Seay performs Rebecca Clarke's Sonata at the Tertis Competition (photo courtesy of Laura Seay)*

“I personally have known about the Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition and Festival for years—it’s known as one of the most prestigious competitions and is respected throughout the musical community. I decided to enter the competition as a personal project and goal to work toward over this school year. My experience on the Isle of Man, surrounded by some of the most promising violists, exceeded all of my expectations and hopes. I met so many musicians, audience members, host families, and organizers at the Erin Arts Centre—so many people that I hope to call friends for the rest of my life. This environment of collaboration and camaraderie is certainly due to the efforts of John Bethell, Gloria Balakrishna, and all of the volunteers and helpers who organized the event. My hope is that they realize what a wonderful and nurturing environment they’ve helped to create.

I remember speaking with one of the other competitors the night before the first round, and we both agreed that one of the most beneficial parts of participating in the competition had already occurred before it even started—the hours and hours that we had all spent preparing made all of us better musicians, more adept violists, and more disciplined artists. However, a pleasant surprise was hearing the repertoire selected by jury members for evening recitals. I left Tertis armed with multiple years’ worth of repertoire that I’m chomping at the bit and eager to play. Particularly interesting to me were the selections by English composers that are infrequently played in the United States—were it not for the Tertis Competition, I would never have known of many of these

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composers, and now there are twenty-eight international violists returning home and taking the music of England with them. What a thrill it is to be a part of this!

Unfortunately there was not a class or formal discussion about Peter Maxwell Davies's *Six Sorano Variants*, which was commissioned to be played by all contestants. With a piece this difficult and containing so many passages that needed adjustments by the player, it was a shame that there was not more of a formal discussion—but that didn't stop us! There were many late night discussions among the participants, pulling out violas over beers, passing around the instrument, with each player demonstrating personal strategies for dealing with the obstacles in this piece. The level of musicianship among the competitors was incredibly high—I left feeling sad that I couldn't live in this little bubble forever, but on the other hand I left feeling inspired, motivated, and grateful to have been included in such a wonderful opportunity. The spirit of music making and pushing to make the world of the viola better was alive and well on the Isle of Man!"



*Ms. Seay holds Bachelor and Master of Viola Performance degrees from The Juilliard School where she studied viola performance with Heidi Castleman, Steven Tenenbom, and Hsin-Yun Huang and chamber music with Robert Mann and David Soyer. Currently, Ms. Seay is a Doctor of Musical Arts candidate at the University of Colorado-Boulder, studying with Erika Eckert and Geraldine Walther. Ms. Seay won the President of the Jury Prize—awarded by Yuri Bashmet—and the Stainer and Bell Prize recognizing her excellent performance of Peter Maxwell Davies's Six Sorano Variants at the 2013 Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition*

*Fellow Tertis competitors Elizabeth Beilman, Neasa Ní Bhriain, and Mihai Cocea enjoy camaraderie in a British telephone booth (photo courtesy of Laura Seay)*