

Queenstown Violin Summer School

Violinists' Holiday Paradise

by Sarah Drake

Sarah Drake, a sixteen year old violinist from Wellington and former student of Wilma Smith, attended the inaugural Queenstown Violin Summer School this past summer. She discusses her experience at this enterprising new venture.

On January 10th 2003, 26 advanced violin students from throughout New Zealand and South East Asia, aged between 8 and 20, gathered together at Lakeview Holiday Park in Queenstown for an intensive ten days of learning and making music at the inaugural Queenstown Violin Summer School. The idea for this venture came from two well-known New Zealand violin teachers Stephen Larsen from Christchurch, and Kevin Lefohn from Dunedin. The idea was to provide talented and enthusiastic young students with a high quality intensive teaching programme, and a musical environment where students passionate about the violin could indulge themselves with like-minded people.

Our timetable was very full. A typical day included an individual lesson from one of the tutors, an Alexander Technique lesson in a group of 5 or 6, a masterclass with Kevin or Stephen which we either observed or played in, rehearsal time with one of the accompanists, a concert given by some of the students, and on top of this three or four hours of individual practice. The day also included wonderful meals prepared by our talented and incredibly efficient school caterer Linda Huggins.

The choice of location for the school was ideal. One of the best parts of the day was waking up in the early morning and hearing the birds singing in the nearby trees and enjoying a magnificent view of the Remarkables in the background.

It was easy to get along with everyone regardless of age, because there was a common goal amongst us and we were all working together for the first time. We were there to make music, work hard, become better musicians, learn from each other and share our enthusiasm for the violin. Teachers, students and parents were mutually supportive. Any competitive spirit was restricted to mini-golf! One essential ingredient to the easy atmosphere of the school was Pat Cressey, the school Manager, who was

always there when needed. She had a stabilising influence, looking after all the necessary little details, which made for a stress-free environment.

We had the privilege of having individual tuition from two different teachers over the course of the school, the first four days with one, then a day off, then the last four days with the other. Having a lesson on four consecutive days meant that it was possible to develop a student-teacher relationship. I have been to some music camps where you have a masterclass with a teacher for only one or two sessions, but here I found four lessons much more useful. Students could get used to the teachers' way of working, and have a chance to follow up on points from the previous lessons.

It was interesting having two different teachers. I studied the same pieces with both Stephen and Kevin, and gained a lot from their different perspectives on some of the same passages. The same musical point could be approached by thinking of an analogy or picture, or by a technical description of how to get an effect. Their approach was different, but it was all useful and thought provoking.

The tutors were totally dedicated to the whole school. In addition to Stephen and Kevin, the teaching team included Emma Barron, Caron Chan, and Leah Johnston. Not only was their teaching very focussed, demanding (in an encouraging way), and full of high expectations, but they were also committed to camp life in general. They were excellent role models; they seemed as excited about the school as the students and their attitudes had a positive effect on students as people rather than just violinists.

One of the most valuable parts of the programme were the Alexander Technique classes with Suzanne Finger. The classes sometimes included relaxation time, lying on the floor releasing tensions. Sometimes we played our instruments and Suzanne would point out tension habits that we were not aware of. She taught us good ways to imagine our bodies in space, like having springs in our joints, especially the knees! She had a small teaching point every day so we were not overloaded with new ideas and it gave us the opportunity to absorb the teaching. When you are playing or practising for many hours of the day, as we were, it is vital to take care of your body. I was really grateful for the holistic approach taken by the organisers.

A brilliant feature of the Alexander Technique teaching room was that it had one wall entirely covered with a huge mirror. It was a little daunting at first, but enormously informative about how we stand, move and play. I am thinking of installing one in my practice space at home!

The purpose of the masterclasses was for students to observe others being taught, and sometimes to be the one in the hotspot, that is, the one having a lesson in front of a student audience. It was intriguing to see how fellow students responded to the teaching and how the teacher managed to get ideas across. I often came away from a masterclass with many new ideas (musical and technical) that I could apply to my own playing. It was not just other students' imperfections I could learn from though; I could pick up on the points of mastery in their playing and aspire to incorporate them into my own studies. Sometimes the same point would be made to a student that had been made to me which reinforced the idea, and renewed my motivation for practising it.

Everyone has unwanted playing and postural habits that they are not always aware of. In a masterclass situation, as an observer, it is easy to see other people's bad habits because you are just watching and listening, and not caught up with the doing. It gives you a chance to take a step back from your own playing and think about it from an additional perspective.

The ten days of the Violin School were divided into two halves with a day off in the middle. The day off gave us a chance to relax and enjoy the distractions of a tourist town! A friend and I got up at 5.30am and walked up the Gondola hill. It was quite a climb (for us!), especially before breakfast, but wonderful to absorb the views at the top while the air was still and fresh. Later we went kayaking, which was very tame compared to the tutors' activities, which we heard involved jumping off the side of a mountain - with parachutes of course! We also got to continue our study of tandem juggling with Suzanne. And in the evening there was the QVSS mini-golf tournament. There were a few holes-in-one but certain members of the tutors' team experienced some frustration! One ball was hit over the fence - Perhaps Kevin should take up regular golf and maybe Emma Sayers should stick to the piano!

There were many performance opportunities for all students. On average, students played in two masterclasses and three concerts. We were very fortunate to have two professional and experienced accompanists, Emma Sayers and Tim Emerson. It is so inspiring to play with people who sound better than your recordings! Their experience really helped when putting together complex music and they were absolutely committed to every performance. They even became a two-person orchestra for the big tutti in the Bruch G minor concerto.

Tiredness was not an issue during the school. I think we all functioned on a certain amount of adrenalin just to get the most out of the time we had there. However, we did work (and play) long hours each day, and I think I

slept four hours longer than normal each night for a week after I came home. The whole experience was truly exhilarating. I learned a huge amount as a violinist, and I also discovered people my own age who feel as I do about the violin and I have made some lasting friendships. I hope that the organisers know how grateful all of the students are for being given the opportunity to attend QVSS and that they have enough energy left to run the school again next year!

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