

2004 Queenstown Violin Summer School

by Dickson Fung

Dickson Fung, a 19-year-old violinist from Auckland, attended the 2004 Queenstown Violin Summer School this past summer. He discusses his experience at this enterprising summer music school.

Each year approximately 30 young advanced violinists are selected by audition to attend a unique musical retreat in Queenstown. I was lucky enough to be one of those students this year. Queenstown Violin Summer School (QVSS) is truly a unique experience for a young violinist. It is an intensive two-week violin workshop focussing not only on violin playing, but also on building all round musicians. The atmosphere of the summer school is focused, yet friendly and fun. A real sense of camaraderie is formed between the students themselves as well as with the staff and tutors.

The summer school is the brainchild of Stephen Larsen, a well-known violin teacher from Christchurch, and Kevin A. Lefohn, Lecturer in Violin at the University of Otago, and Director of the Marama Strings Project. This year's summer school, run in association with the Marama Strings Charitable Trust, followed a similar organization and schedule to the inaugural summer school in 2003, with a few changes and improvements in scheduling. In addition to Stephen and Kevin, the tutors at the 2004 summer school included Caron Chan and Emma Baron, returning teachers from 2003 and members of the NZSO. A new teacher to the summer school in 2004 was Vesa Matti-Leppanen, the new Concertmaster of the NZSO. Two excellent pianists, Sarah Watkins and Tom McGrath were employed as accompanists for this year's school, and Alexander Technique lessons were given by Suzanne Finger.

The focus of the school was on building both technical and musical competence in the violin playing of every student. Each student received daily a violin lesson, group Alexander Technique lessons, a Masterclass in the afternoon as well as evening performance opportunities in concerts. Students were given ample opportunities to rehearse with accompanists, and additional workshops on technique and practice proved invaluable. Each student was encouraged to practise about four hours a day. The days were extremely full, with lessons, classes, rehearsals and practice time in the morning, a couple of hours of rest followed by masterclasses and workshops in the afternoon, and concerts in the evening. The school ran like clockwork under the management of School Manager Pat Cressey. All of our nutritional needs were fulfilled with the delicious meals prepared by the School Caterer Linda Huggins.

The beautiful atmosphere (and weather!) of Queenstown proved truly inspiring for the students and teachers alike, and the resort also enabled many of us to partake in many busking ventures during our rest times! It was truly wonderful to wake up and see the sunrise against the beautiful Remarkables and QVSS students were even treated to an early morning snowfall on the hills one day, which made the scenery even more spectacular!

The two week long school is divided into two halves, with a day and a half dedicated to rest in the middle. Each student studied with a different teacher for each half of the

school. This meant that students were able to experience different teaching styles, influences and approaches to tackling musical or technical problems. As well as learning pieces, each student was given exercises, scales and studies for the development of technique. Teaching points were constantly checked on and assessed by the teacher during the week, meaning that progress was particularly rapid. Our pieces were not neglected either, and each piece was taken from the early stages of preparation in our lessons, to the higher pressure situation of performing for a masterclass, and finally to performing as part of a concert. This progression meant that each student really got to know the pieces they were working on, and the constant re-assessments in our daily lessons meant that any problems arising in our performances were quickly and efficiently worked on. The end result of this process was presented in the Showcase and Final concerts, where students performed pieces at a truly impressive level.

The music school also fostered students' efficient practice habits. Often the home practice of young students can be haphazard, and many hours of practice can be done without achieving much progress. Numerous workshops were held during the school in order to help each student develop efficient practice habits, allowing the students to make the most of their practice time.

Masterclasses are an excellent opportunity for both the performer and the listeners to learn from a teacher. Daily masterclasses at the school not only gave us each an opportunity to give a performance of a piece with an accompanist and gain ideas from an expert teacher, but as listeners we were able to learn and incorporate the ideas discussed in these workshops into our own musical work. The style of masterclass teaching at the school was always very interactive, and everybody felt they were active participants in the classes.

A special feature of QVSS are the Alexander Technique classes. These are attended by every student at the school in small group classes. These classes helped students minimise tension in the body when playing, and increase total body awareness whilst playing the violin and in everyday life. Our excellent teacher Suzanne Finger was always at hand to help us work on any tension habits that we had developed, and her early morning warm-up sessions meant that all students were fully prepared each morning for the long hours of playing that we did each day.

This year the summer school featured ensemble classes for the first time which culminated in a performance of two massed group pieces led by Vesa-Matti Leppanen. These classes were valuable in developing ensemble playing skills. The performances of the massed group pieces at the Final concert also gave the teachers an opportunity to play alongside the students, an experience enjoyed by the audience and all 31 musicians on stage.

Despite the wide age range of the students attending the school (9-21), it was extremely easy to get along with everybody. A real sense of friendship was developed amongst the students, since we were all there to learn and share in our development and love of music. The consistently high level of student performances inspired us all to work harder during the school, whilst in rest times many laughs and enjoyable moments were had in our many ventures into Queenstown, or simply hanging out around our lodgings at Lakeview Holiday Park.

The middle weekend of the school was dedicated to rest and relaxation. This gave many of us the opportunity to enjoy the many activities available in Queenstown. Whilst many of us simply caught up on rest and had a relaxing weekend, others spent the time participating in more daring activities! For the braver few (including pianist Sarah Watkins), activities like para-ponting added an extra thrill for the adrenalin junkies during the weekend. Much to the dismay of the youngest student, she was not allowed to go skydiving by her parents. She is eagerly awaiting her 9th QVSS, when at age 18 she can finally take the plunge! The highlight of the weekend was the second annual QVSS staff-student mini-golf tournament. Whilst some of us proved experts in the art of putting, others were glad that they were in Queenstown to play the violin and not golf!

Queenstown Violin Summer School is truly a special experience for any young advanced violinist. The school is a great way for dedicated young violinists to build their technique and musicality over the summer break, and also a great chance for players to meet other young musicians who are like-minded in their attitudes towards music and learning. I learnt so many invaluable lessons during the school, which has formed a strong foundation in further developing my playing this year, and I made many lasting friendships amongst a wonderful group of young people. The ever supportive teachers of the school helped each student gain as much as they could during the intensive two weeks, and the friendly atmosphere of the school made the experience fun and inspiring. Memories of the fine performances given by many students given at the school are still vivid today in my mind, and the staff and students continue to be a lasting inspiration in my own musical development. I am already looking forward to next summer's QVSS and renewing the friendships I made during this year's course. Many thanks to all the staff of QVSS for a memorable two weeks of music making.