

Issigeac International Music Academy

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A longer post - an account of the course written by one of this year's players:

From 'The Four Quartets'

T.S. Eliot

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.

Issigeac International Music Academy 2019

For any of us, to adventure where we are unknown and unknowing requires a leap of courage. I think this is truer still when the adventure is to explore music, or art: anything that requires us to put emotions on the line alongside skill. The Issigeac International Music Academy 2019 with the Tippett Quartet was, and will continue to be, an adventure of the greatest kind.

There are countless music courses out there, many in beautiful locations, with fine coaches and long-established reputations. Taking a chance on a new venture is a brave move for both organisers and participants. Most amateur and part time musicians steal their playing time from prized holiday allowances, often taking time away from family, and there is a sense that every moment is precious. For me, I was about to choose one of two excellent, reliable cello courses, when I had my arm twisted, strongly, by an ex colleague and long-time friend who has since developed a stellar career as a musician, and is now a member of the Tippett Quartet.

Of course, I've yet to meet a musician who is utterly content with everything they play, but I am very clear about my skill and performance level, and like many amateurs, I prefer to hide in a section where I can get lost with impunity. I avoid chamber music instinctively because I perceive that it exposes all my technical weaknesses, and what's more, you can't pretend to yourself that the other musicians in the room can't hear you. I've always, slightly, felt it was beyond me. But I allowed myself to be persuaded – because the other thing I lack is an ability to say no. And the location is beautiful, and actually, the worst that could happen would be that I'd have to play the first note of every bar and then console myself in every bar.

We convened on the first afternoon for Tea, Cake and Chamber Music. I know this, because it says so on the crumpled schedule that sits beside me on my desk. Tippett (sic) Quartet - main room, Beethoven Quartet Liz House, Schubert Quartet 2nd Room. That first moment is, for me, always the most nerve wracking. Am I amongst players who will far outreach my ability? Can I keep up? Will I get on with these strangers with whom I must spend the next several days – any form of shared music is quite intimate, and chamber music particularly so. But – what an exceptional group of people they turned out to be.

This is a new course, and there are areas for improvement in terms of scheduling and cohesion, but it mattered not, because the dialogue was always there and the schedule tweaked daily. I wondered about the decision to start the week with a private rehearsal rather than a coached session, but it was the best possible way to begin. It was apparent within about 3 seconds that every single member of the course was apprehensive to a greater or lesser degree, and the Tippett Quartet members are musicians of great stature; to play in front of them would have added an additional and unnecessary dimension of daunt. We pulled out the Beethoven (Opus 18, no 3 in D Major) and began. That first rehearsal we

played through all four movements. Well – mostly. We had been sent the music in advance and that was really great, because it's hard, and it meant that we all had a sense of the piece and how it fitted together. We did the same the following morning, but with a focus on the first movement.

The Tippett Quartet. You never know what to expect. A great musician is not necessarily a great teacher, and the chutzpah needed to perform at any level requires a degree of certainty in self and ability that sometimes manifests as arrogance. We were, collectively, a surprisingly gentle bunch of students and we had yet to get to know our coaches. We rocked up to the opening evening's concert in anticipation, and we left, united, in awe. The performance – Mozart Quintet in C Major K.157, Beethoven String Quartet Op.59 No. 1 in F Major, and Debussy String Quartet in G Minor; Op.10 – was very, very good.

John Mills, first violin. His instrument sort of snuggles against his shoulder – it just looks so comfortable there. His technique is masterful but there is nothing flamboyant or dramatic. It's just right. The violin and viola are not comfortable instruments to play – the arm coerced by years of practice into a position that is not natural, and the vibrato is hard to learn. And yet with him, the instrument is content. His quietness draws the eye. The drama, the flamboyance, the tenderness: these are concentrated into every note that he conjures from his fiddle. His pleasure in the music is apparent in his quick smile, his generous personality caught in the fleeting moments where he collects and focusses the attention of the quartet. Jeremy Isaac – Jez to his friends. To 'play second fiddle' has a negative resonance in our lexicon – to be subordinate. Jeremy is no subordinate. He is bringer of the harmony, the richness and the depth without which the melody would not shine. He is tall, and folds onto a chair that seems slightly too small, but as with John, his violin is not a separate being, but an extension of him. To hear the second violin spinning its harmonies like silk around a chrysalis is a rare treat. Lydia Lowndes-Northcott shatters and finishes, finally, the viola's reputation as a comedic instrument. The register of the instrument and its mellower tone, in the hands of a lesser player, can be overlooked, subsumed into the whole. Not so here. She weaves her magic round the other instruments – sometimes cutting through above the violin, sometimes duelling and singing with cello – but in truth we wait, breathless, for the moments when the lines are hers alone, the others seeming to cradle her sound in theirs. I find it hard to write about Bozidar Vukotic. I know the instrument too well – the complexities of technique and the challenges of those rapid shifts and string crossings. The way in which it must sometimes drive the music from the bass, and sometimes sing above and with it. The richness of sound pours through his hands from his beautiful Italian cello and moves me in a way I had not thought possible. He doesn't just play the cello – he dances with it.

It is then, with trepidation, that we present ourselves to these musicians the next day. Out of their concert gear and in informal mood they laugh and put us at our ease. 'Well,' says one of them. 'It might have been better if we'd had the lights on. Reading Beethoven in the dark is very challenging. And in this heat, your fingers stick to the strings.' We settle down to tackle some string repertoire. I find myself sitting first cello, which surprises me – the other sections are led by the quartet. Boz has no time for dithering. 'I'll sit there if you want, but I thought you might enjoy it.' John directs from his violin and we play, side by side with the quartet. 3 on each part, with an extra violin – Michele has decided that the quartet playing is too high powered but she joins us for the ensemble with great gusto. We play – I forget what, exactly, that first session. Some divertimenti, something relatively straightforward but lovely. We are short of parts for the second half of the session and the photocopier takes a while to locate, but it's ok; while we wait John talks about ensemble playing, repertoire and style, and we chat and relax. The sound is astonishing. The viola section causes a stir. John, Jeremy & Boz are used to it, but for the rest of us, used to groups where this section can lack confidence, are momentarily stunned by their volume and tone. Lydia makes a joyful sound. Roger, we discover, used to be a professional trombone player with one of the London orchestras and has taken up the viola in retirement - so he's not afraid to make a noise. Harry seems unsure, but as the week progresses he reveals that he is also an accomplished pianist and he proves to be a generous accompanist in the rare free moments we can snatch the piano. The quartet talk about the style and technique for the piece and subsequent rehearsals follows the same format. The music is put in front of us: Holst St Paul's Suite, Warlock Capriol Suite, a Shostakovich String Quartet. After the first session it's all been chosen to

stretch us – sometimes the notes are hard, sometimes the emphasis is on style and performance, but we are never overwhelmed. It's a clever choice of repertoire. We read through once, then have a look at the challenging bits. The devil is in the detail, and each quartet member chips in with contributions – bowing techniques, fingerings, moments where we need to be aware of the ebb and flow of the phrases. They tell us the history of the music we play, and their passion is contagious. Passages are rehearsed, discussed, and then each piece is run again, and we can see how this concentrated work moves everything forwards.

The quartet coaching sessions start in the evening and, diffident, we shiver through our first few bars. The Beethoven Quartet rehearse in the bedroom of a private house, a glorious room with a high ceiling, sunny open windows and a fine acoustic. A 'salon', no less, an appropriate chamber for the music. Boz & John listen acutely, giving us full attention. We have Roger on the viola, the first violin is Cyrus, who spent a year at the Guildhall but hasn't played since, and Ann, competent, musical, technically adept... We all know enough to be really, really nervous. The coaching is fascinating, though, and within minutes we are listening, concentrating, trying different approaches, bowings, fingerings... The mechanics of the rehearsal process are engrossing. As a newcomer to this type of music I hadn't known what to expect. 'The quartet is greater than the sum of its parts,' Jeremy tells the Schubert Quartet. 'Each of you is only 25% and you must find out how you make the whole.' John tells me, kindly, that I am behind the beat on the closing chords. 'But if you lead them from the cello, then you won't be. It's better for the bass to be ahead by a nanosecond than behind.' Boz wants to hear more from the lower strings. 'Not louder, but more authoritative.' They talk about exaggerating movements and dynamics to a ridiculous level to really get the feel of the balance. 'The second violin and the viola need to remember that they sit 3 or 4 feet further from the audience than the first and the cello. They have the middle range of pitch and so don't cut through the sound as easily. Consequently, they need to work harder to be heard.' And so it goes on. The time we have with them over the week is intensive, and hard work, and deeply satisfying. They swap around, so that we always have a different combination. As a cellist, I find the sessions coached by Boz really valuable. He makes me feel I could, given time, play anything. There is a sense from all four of them that nothing is beyond our reach, have we the will and the courage to try.

The music is so intense, and so full on, that it is hard to imagine room for anything else. The timetable offers individual lessons, and, comparing notes I think it safe to say that the four players are all exceptional teachers. Over the evening meals we debate teaching styles and attitudes, and it's easy to see why the experience is so good – they all share a belief that to teach is to find a strength and bring it out, not to persecute a weakness.

Just as we start to feel comfortable with our colleagues, there comes an opportunity to mix it up. While Ann, Natalie, Roger and Helen have their lessons, the rest of us read through some Mozart quartets. Apprehensive all over again, this is in some ways the best moment of the week. We haven't seen the music before so there's no need to worry about getting it wrong, and sight-reading means you haven't the time to fret about your playing – you're too busy concentrating on the notes and listening to the tempo, on playing musically and making the most of the moment. Similarly, convening the following day to read through the Mendelssohn Octet, the concentration required is enough to overcome the angst. I gratefully abdicate the first cello to Helen, whose sight-reading is excellent. Aurell & Natalie play first violin, swapping between them so they both get to play the top line. It's challenging, and I'm not sure it sounded quite as Mendelssohn intended it, but we loved it.

There are other, myriad joys. A wine tasting in the heart of the wine growing area, where we learn about noble rot, and the intricacies of nursing the grapes through the harvest period. Delicious meals, either at local restaurants or provided at the main course venue. Exploring the tiny and delightful hamlet of Issigeac and revelling in the balmy weather; talking to the members of the Quartet, who are funny, self-deprecating and enchanting to a person. Late nights in the bar, on first name terms with the owner, revelling in the day's music in an Armagnac enhanced glow, and talking nonsense until the small hours, reluctant to go to bed because to do so marks the passing of another day. It reminds me

so strongly of my student days that I expect to see my younger self staring back at me from the mirror. There is great freedom in a group of strangers who share a common passion.

The week gallops apace. On Thursday, Ishani Bhooli, Course Director, plays the Bach Violin Sonata in E Major, BWV 1016, the Debussy Violin Sonata, and the Franck Violin Sonata to a packed hall, superbly accompanied by Jennifer Carter. At the interval, more than one person is in tears. The superlatives are all around, but this is no theatre of hyperbole – the playing is superb: of a calibre that humbles us. We are collectively high on the pure ecstasy of music, and the spontaneous standing ovation bursts uncontrolled from the audience. The Csárdás encore is perfectly judged and most beautifully played.

On Friday, as we gather together to play, we are offered the 3rd Brandenburg Concerto. For many, to play Bach is to hold the Grail. I have heard his music offered as a proof for the existence of God. I have also heard it offered as the ultimate proof of atheism – transcendence in humanity without divine intervention. There is a sense of perfection in every bar that overwhelms me and Brandenburg 3 is a piece I never thought I would play. We worked on corners, on technique, on phrasing and style. The sheer energy of it dominated the room. Lydia got us (cellos excepted) to our feet and we cascaded the music into the circle, hearing the glorious interplay of parts scatter and gather from player to player. Afterwards there was that brief silence which speaks volumes.

The end of the course could have been an anti-climax, and it was testament to the willingness of the organisers to be flexible with the arrangements that we had a perfect, merry, final day. The hall was open for an early start, we played and played. A Handel Trio Sonata was an impromptu hit before rehearsals began in earnest. The quartets convened for a final coaching session, and in the afternoon we ran an informal concert, Schubert & Beethoven nodded to each other, and anyone who wished could perform. The Tippett Quartet rehearsed elsewhere in advance of their evening performance, but when the playing was done they, and Ishani, joined us and we played, once more, the glory of the Brandenburg Concerto. And though we knew by then our music had played out, we also knew that the concert ahead was to be the apotheosis of the week.

The evening began with the French Premier of Holst's 'Fantasia' for String Quartet. A beautiful work, and one which showcases the viola in all its glory. They followed with the Ravel String Quartet in F Major – dramatic, energetic – one in which all the players are virtuoso but where all shine equally. After the interval, Schubert's 'Death & the Maiden' Quartet in D Minor. Talking to the guys beforehand, they had been (only a little) concerned. 'It's a big programme, and the Schubert is long. It's quite late, and it's hot, and everyone is tired.' They need not have worried. The atmosphere was electric. For me, each time a page turned I wanted to tear it back, so that the music would last for ever. People wept, silently. And again, after it was over, the audience stood and cheered. Inevitably there was to be an encore, though it was sometime before John could quiet us enough to say so, and I feared it – I feared the lessening of the perfection that had gone before, that somehow it would diminish what we had heard. I should have trusted them. They played for us that great tango, Por Una Cabeza, and they played it as I have never heard it – with style, with skill and with an enormous sense of humour. And really, that summed up the week.

Next year – well, next year I hope the course will be bigger, but not too much bigger. They won't need to market much, because all of us are coming back. I think the plan is to limit the places to 16, to ensure the maximum possible coaching sessions for each group, and there are already plans in place to increase the administrative backup. There will be more pianos available, and an accompanist. Feedback has been gathered and will be taken on board. All of this is right and proper and how it should be. But I think that, one day, I will be enormously proud to have been part of the first Issigeac International Music Academy.

'you are the music
While the music lasts.'