

TUTOR TALK

What makes the NCO experience so unique is the exceptional tutoring and guidance given to the young musicians. Each year, music tutors and guest conductors from conservatoires, specialist music schools and leading orchestras from around the world join us on NCO residential courses and at Regional Orchestra rehearsals.

We asked Under 13 Orchestra violinist and Easterlies Orchestra member, Samantha Burley, to interview NCO Guest Conductor, Easterlies Director of Music and violinist, Alex Laing.

How and when did you discover you liked the violin?

I am the fifth generation of violin players in my family. That means my father, grandfather, great grandfather and great great grandfather were all violinists too. I had no choice, really! My father played me lots of recordings of violinists including Fritz Kreisler who is still one of my favourites today. I was always surrounded by the sound of the violin.

How has NCO changed since you were a member?

The NCO is much bigger these days. It is amazing that there are 12 NCO orchestras now. The standard of playing is so much better now too. I played Dvorak's 8th *Symphony* with the Main Orchestra in 1991 – this was one of the first times the NCO had tackled a full symphony. It is extraordinary to hear today's orchestras playing Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*, Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* and the Under 13 Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's 5th *Symphony* – and doing them all so well. Importantly, the NCO still retains the ethos set up by Vivienne Price: music being performed to a high level by wonderful young musicians at the start of their musical journeys. Everyone is learning so much and having a fantastic time doing it. I feel the same at every NCO course as I did when I was a boy: a little nervous, very excited and extremely happy.

How do you think orchestral playing is different to solo playing?

As a soloist, it is important that your individual sound always projects even in a soft dynamic. This is not the case for an orchestral player who must focus more on matching and blending their sounds within a section. There is something magical about the colour produced by a massive string section all playing pianissimo by barely touching the strings with the bow. Anyone sticking out individually like a soloist ruins this. There are times in orchestral playing when one is not playing the melody: one has to support another instrument in a sympathetic way. My favourite soloists are those who you can tell are playing with and listening to an orchestra rather than on top of one: making chamber music.

Having led Main Orchestra, what do you think makes a good leader?

It is certainly not the case that the best violinist in a section is necessarily the best leader for it. True, the leader must be able to perform beautiful solos when required, but the most important part of the role is to translate the



Photo: Bill Hiskett

conductor's wishes and help to gel the orchestra together. Being easy to follow is crucial, so freedom of movement and breathing is necessary. It is also important to be decisive and calm and to keep smiling even when things are tough. The more conducting I do, the more I value great leading. If the leader plays with the energy I am trying to create, it is amazing how that translates through the rest of the orchestra. Conversely, if the leader does not provide the energy, then it tends not to happen anywhere. My favourite leaders to work with are those that make everyone around them better. It is important to have many leaders in the orchestra. The leader may be the first violin, but they must be able to connect with the principal players of all the other sections, so everyone is listening and responding in expanded chamber music. This makes the conductor's job easy!

Do you prefer picking up the baton or picking up the violin?

This is very hard to answer. My favourite thing to do is to make music, whether that be playing in a string quartet or piano trio, or conducting the NCO. I adore picking up my violin and trying to play a phrase of a Beethoven's *Sonata* as beautifully as possible. Equally, there is huge joy from hearing an orchestra responding to my conducting suggestions.

What do you love most about conducting the Easterlies Regional Orchestra?

It is great to work with an orchestra which contains experienced 13 year olds alongside 7 year olds being exposed to NCO for the first time. This is such a strong element to the progress of the NCO family. Every year is different, every rehearsal is different. I learn so much too, including new repertoire and how different colours and effects can be made by instruments I know less about than the violin.

How did you select the repertoire for this year's Easterlies Regional Orchestra, catering for all the different levels of playing and merging them into one concert?

This is the biggest challenge. At the start of each year I get a list of players in the Easterlies. It is not easy to find pieces for a large orchestra which has 18 cellos but no bassoons, 2 young harpists and one trombone, and one percussionist required to play 5 instruments at the same time! There has to be a balance of music that everyone can play, with some trickier music to teach us all new things. I also try to have some sort of theme for the concert. This year the main theme is song and dance: there is some opera from Carmen and some ballet from Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*.

What would you say is the hardest technique to conquer on the violin?

Another tough question! It has to be something with the bow. The bow is what makes the sound. For the sound to be good, the bowing technique needs to be executed with accuracy, but also always with freedom and no tightness or the sound quality will suffer. My goal would be to feel that whatever technique was required, I would be so comfortable in my bow hand, wrist and arm that I could perform anything thrown at me with ease. I'd best get to work...

