Message from the Editor

Myrna Layton

Welcome to the first issue of the IVS E-News!

The purpose of this electronic newsletter is to keep members of the International Viola Society connected, and to provide a platform for the sharing of information among the fourteen sections of the society.

For this issue we have established the pattern of asking each section to submit an article or articles from their section’s journal or newsletter that they would like to share with the wider viola audience. This is the pattern that we propose to follow for each issue in the future.

Each issue will also include a message from the president of the International Viola Society. Ken Martinson, who currently holds that position, is to be thanked for launching this inaugural issue of the IVS E-Newsletter.

Another person deserving of thanks is my daughter, Nancy Heiss, whose InDesign skills were invaluable to the creation of this issue of the newsletter.

In this issue, we have included articles from the German Viola Society submitted by Die Viola editor Ilse Mohr; from the Canadian Viola Society submitted by Canadian Viola Society Newsletter editor Jennifer Thiessen; and from the American Viola Society submitted by JAVS editor David Bynog. We hope that more sections of the international organization will submit articles or photos with captions for the next and future issues. We would love to hear from everyone!

Message from the President

Ken Martinson

It is with great with honor and great pleasure that I write you as the new President of the International Viola Society, a post I assumed on January 1, 2011, after having spent the previous three years as the Secretary of the International Viola Society and four years as Secretary of the American Viola Society. While growing up as a young violist, I revered the American Viola Society and everything it did, and it was a dream of mine to be involved in such a fantastic organization.

One of the many missions of the International Viola Society is to serve as a conduit for providing International Aid to grief-stricken areas of the world in the form of musical and monetary offerings. In the past, the IVS has been helpful in providing material and monetary donations to South Africa and Iraq. Currently, we are wrapping up a relief project for Talca, Chile, which had been hit with a devastating earthquake on February 27, 2010. Anyone wishing to make a contribution to the Chile relief effort can do so at http://www.internationalviolasociety.org/chilirelief/. So far we have secured over ten instruments and $1000 to help replace damaged instruments from the earthquake.

The most important responsibility of the International Viola Society is the oversight of the annual international viola congress. As the worldwide economy has been tightening, especially for musicians and educational institutions, it has been increasingly difficult to secure venues, sponsorship, and registrants to make these events occur successfully. Having served on the AVS and IVS boards, I have also been acutely aware of the burdensome responsibility that has been placed on the shoulders of the congress host. Since I view it as my responsibility as leader of the IVS to ensure the long term success of the organization, and much of that success is due largely to the membership created by holding International Viola Congresses,

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I feel the need to review the system for funding these Congresses, which I can say with complete confidence the overwhelming majority of worldwide members of the IVS would love to see continue.

I am currently working with the IVS Board and the IVS Assembly of Delegates to adopt measures that I believe will greatly help the solvency and future of the International Viola Society. Firstly, I am working with legal professionals to obtain non-for-profit status for the IVS in the United States, which should allow us more eligibility for outside funding (for instance, donations of airline tickets for board officer and IVC artists’ travel). Additionally, I am looking at creative ways for the IVS to raise revenue to help administer certain aspects of the congress. Finally, I am working on bylaws legislation that would add a small mandatory “Congress Fee” (of about $1–2 per member) for all members worldwide, which will go directly for either funding the congress or serving as an emergency coffer if the congress runs into debt problems due to unforeseen circumstances. As members of the Arts Community, we are (hopefully) aware of how essential a mandatory (very small) contribution from all taxpayers can help to sustain arts programs that receive federal grants.

The International Viola Congress XXXIX in Wuerzburg, Germany, with hosts Emile Cantor and Karin Wolf has proven to be a great success. At the event, we were able to honor and announce that the 2011 Silver Alto Clef Award has been given to Nobuko Imai. I am sure you will all enjoy reading about it later in this issue. The 2012 Congress also looks very promising; please see the letter in this issue from hosts Carol Rodland, George Taylor, and Philip Ying for more details.

At this time, I would like to publicly thank some individuals for their public service to the viola and the International Viola Society. First of all, thanks again to Catharine Carroll and Masao Kawasaki for the fantastic viola congress they held in Cincinnati in 2010; it was a truly wonderful event. I would also like to thank members of the IVS family who have provided terrific service over the last few years: Carlos María Solare, for his two terms of service as an IVS Executive Secretariat; Ann Frederking, for her years of service as the IVS Webmaster; Dwight Pounds, for his service as advisory member to the IVS Board and his work as IVS Historian and Photographer; Steven Kruse, for his stepping in as IVS Treasurer and doing a terrific job in a pinch; and finally Past President Michael Vidulich, who helped oversee numerous successful viola congresses during his term and has also helped in dramatically increasing the number of Sections that have joined the IVS international community. I would also like to offer special thanks to Nokuthula Ngwenyama for her phenomenal job in running the most recent Primrose International Viola Competition, at which I was in attendance. I was most impressed at the organization, the innovative usage of the transparent score system, and the web streaming of the competition, an accomplishment that will surely set the bar higher for international violin and cello competitions to follow!

Additionally, I would like to thank and congratulate the winners of the IVS Board elections, all of whom I am very grateful for and honored to be serving with: Vice-President, Ronald Schmidt (Germany); Secretary, Louise Lansdown (England); Treasurer, Catharine Carroll (United States), and my appointees: Executive Secretariats, Max Savikangas (Finland) and Luis Magín Muñiz Bascon; and Advisory Member, Michael Palumbo.

The International Viola Society unveiled its new website this year at www.internationalviolasociety.org or www.viola.com/ivs. The site will be
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continually improved and will hopefully include other useful components in the future; some possibilities include a photo gallery, a “stolen instruments” section, and an “in memoriam” section.

I am also looking to form an International Viola Composition competition, much like the recently created Gardner Competition from the AVS, but on an international scale. Another goal of mine is to have an established “E-news” from the IVS, which Myrna Layton from Brigham Young University has agreed to run.

The IVS has recently been given control of the yahoo group viola e-mail list, formerly run by Alan Lee, owner of www.viola.com. This list will primarily be managed from the President position of the IVS. You can join this group (which today has 2517 members) at http://launch.groups.yahoo.com/group/viola/?yguid=349966010. I have been a member of the group since 1997, and I continually enjoy strengthening my professional relationships and sharing ideas with violists across the world. We have also taken over the Young Violists group, which has recently been converted to a Facebook Group. To join us on Facebook, please visit http://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/youngviolists/.

Lastly, I foresee some exciting development and growth for the International Viola Society. Our stability as an organization not only depends on healthy membership numbers and revenue generated from our current Sections (of which we now have fourteen, having added Poland and Switzerland—and Wales has recently been incorporated into the British Viola Society), but also on the worldwide development of new Sections. Potential Sections that we have been working on include Thailand, Hong Kong, Venezuela, Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands, just to name a few. Stay tuned for further developments!

Please feel free to contact me at kenamartinson@gmail.com to let me know of any concerns or suggestions for the International Viola Society.

Violistically yours,

Kenneth Martinson
President of the International Viola Society

Excerpts: JAVS

David Bynog

A World at Their Fingertips: PIVA’s Student Workers

Myrna Layton

Resting on a cabinet in the Primrose International Viola Archive is a guestbook. People from all over the world have visited the archive and signed the book. Some of the names would be familiar to violists, others unfamiliar. Some signers have left comments, such as the visitor from Brisbane, Australia who remarked, “Congratulations on creating a stunning and tasteful archive. Wonderful resource!” Another visitor, from Ebley Stroud, England, wrote, “What a wonderful place! It’s so beautiful and inspiring.” But missing from the book are the names of many of the people who frequent the archive the most: the people who work there. If visitors of one day or one week are inspired by the archive and its contents, what is the effect on those who enter it almost every day?

Many students at Brigham Young University (BYU) have worked at the Primrose International Viola Archive (PIVA) in many capacities. Some have been working on master’s or honor’s theses; theirs have been a labor of love, with hopefully an outstanding grade at the end of their work. Some have received grant money from the Office of Research and Creative Activities (known as an ORCA grant). Others have been paid employees. Whatever their status has been, all have made contributions which have enriched the archive, and the archive in turn has made a positive difference in their lives.

The physical space designated within the Harold B. Lee Library as the Primrose International Viola Archive opened on March 1, 2002, but the archive existed as an idea and a corpus of materials for at least twenty years previous. From the beginning, dedicated students worked alongside Dr. David Dalton and the music librarians to make the idea become a reality, and to organize the materials that violists all over the world can access when they visit the archive or borrow something through interlibrary loan. While I have not been able to contact all students who contributed their time to the archive over the years, I hope you will enjoy reading about seventeen of them.
Suzanne Shippen was a candidate for a master’s degree in viola performance at Brigham Young University in 1989. She was hired to work with the recordings of PIV A, entering data from the card files into the computer system. “It was back in the stone age as far as computers go, but a huge upgrade from the card catalog,” Suzanne says. Like many violists, Suzanne had started out as a violinist. Working with the archive helped her to appreciate the contribution of William Primrose who “gave the instrument a respectability that encouraged other fine musicians to play it. As a violinist, it certainly helped me to overcome any kind of stigma I may have held previously about playing the viola.” Suzanne was deeply appreciative of the honor it was for BYU and the School of Music to have the William Primrose collection bequeathed to BYU.

Suzanne went on to play the viola professionally in the Washington, D.C. area, as well as in Utah, where she currently lives. She currently composes music, some of which is being published and recorded. Looking back at her PIVA experience, Suzanne says, “How I perceive myself and my strengths in music would never be what they are today had I not switched instruments. Playing a supportive, inner part in the orchestra was a huge eye-opener to me and helped me understand how important those parts are to the overall success of a performance, just as an accompanist can make or break a soloist. So compelling was this idea to me that it has also made me much more mindful of how I view and value people or what my role is in life as a person … I choose to lift and support others and help them to shine through music. Yes, I can say that concept was completely transformative.”

LeeAnn Morgan was also a master’s candidate in viola performance at BYU near the time that Suzanne was finishing. She worked in the archive for three years as part of a paid graduate assistantship. Her assignments involved updating the de Beaumont discography database—continuing work begun by Suzanne—and preserving and archiving the Primrose correspondence. She also spent many unpaid hours with George Rochberg’s Sonata, and Maurice Vieux Etudes for her own research. A dozen years later, LeeAnn made use of the materials in the archive as she worked on her doctoral dissertation from 2004 to 2007. LeeAnn’s finished dissertation, The William Primrose Transcriptions: Primrose’s Rise to Eminence and the Expansion of the Viola Repertoire through His Transcriptions is now a useful tool for other researchers who visit the archive.

With her doctorate from the University of Washington complete, LeeAnn is on the faculty in the BYU School of Music, and works as a performer, with contemporary music and premieres being her specialty. She says, “Working in the PIVA archive was invaluable to my professional pursuits. I have a much deeper understanding of the unique qualities of the viola, its special pedagogical aspects and its distinctive performance tools. I have had three articles on the Vieux and Rochberg published in the Journal of the American Viola Society (JAVS) as a result of my research. One time I was taking an audition in Seattle and the person auditioning had just read one of my published articles. It immediately gave me credibility as a professional musician. I am an immensely better violist, musician, teacher, [and] professional. My artistic understanding has improved immeasurably through reading, listening, and watching archive materials.”

The preceeding is excerpted from the full article, which can be found in the Fall 2011 issue of JAVS (the Journal of the American Viola Society).
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McCarty sculpts Bach’s forms with the fine, blue-flamed torch of her mind... If I were to compare McCarty’s readings of the cello suites to one recording of the Bach sonatas and partitas for solo violin, I would point to the refinement and aplomb of Arthur Grumiaux.

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OTTAWA CITIZEN

...she plays [Telemann Fantasias] in a historically aware way, with sparing use of vibrato and ideal clarity of articulation...the recording is warm and welcoming.

STRAD

...delightful pieces [Telemann] resounding in the uniquely rich, warm, vibrant viola timbre and register, especially as realized in McCarty’s full-bodied expressive style... simply great music-making complemented by ideal sound. A terrific disc!

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Dear Friends,

We most cordially invite you to join us May 30–June 3, 2012, here at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, for the 40th International Viola Congress! IVC 2012 promises to be a joyous celebration of all things viola.

Eastman hosted the 5th International Viola Congress in 1977. We were therefore inspired to choose Shakespeare’s quote from The Tempest, “What’s past is prologue,” as our theme.

While our plans are far from complete, we are excited to share with you some highlights of our existing agenda. Our opening recital will be given by Baroque specialist from England, Annette Isserlis. Our first evening concerto concert will feature former Berlin Philharmonic principal violist Wolfram Christ, as conductor and soloist, as well as Atar Arad, Kim Kashkashian, Paul Neubauer, and Nokuthula Ngwenyama. Two of our subsequent evenings will be in collaboration with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra and will include performances by New York Philharmonic leading ladies Cynthia Phelps and Rebecca Young in a work composed for them by Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina and a world premiere of African-American composer Olly Wilson’s Viola Concerto as performed by Marcus Thompson. IVC 2012’s “roster,” which is still very much “under construction,” also includes Heidi Castleman, Paul Coletti, Victoria Chiang, Ensik Choi, James Dunham, John Graham, Wing Ho, Jeffrey Irvine, Michele LaCourse, Karen Ritscher, Hartmut Rohde, Yizhak Schotten, and Jonathan Vinocour, to name but a few.

In addition to myriad performances of great music old and new, including special “alternative styles” concerts in informal venues and the traditional “play-in,” IVC 2012 will also offer lecture-demonstrations by luthiers and string specialists as well as by composers Margaret Brouwer and Kenji Bunch. Panel discussions on a wide range of topics and daily “Wellness Sessions for Violists” will also be offered.

Student opportunities abound at IVC 2012. Inspired by IVC 2010, we will hold a Young Artists’ Competition for violists aged 16–22. Prizes will include a new bow, which has been generously donated by master bow-maker Benoit Rolland, as well as significant cash prizes. Themed master class offerings will range from improvising cadenzas in Baroque and Classical styles to orchestral audition preparation and standard repertoire. For younger violists and educators, we will be hosting the traditional AVS “BRATS Day.” (“BRATS” is an acronym for “Bratsche Resources and Teaching in Schools,” a program created through the American Viola Society.)

Eastman’s facilities are second-to-none, and we look forward to sharing with you our historic Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre and Kilbourn Hall, as well as our brand new wing, which includes the stunning Hatch Recital Hall. Vendors will have a wonderful exhibition space in this new wing, so if you are looking to purchase a new viola or are in need of any viola-related accoutrements or sheet music, IVC 2012 is the place to come!

Rochester is easily accessible by car, plane, train, or bus, and we have reserved rooms for you at the Hyatt Hotel or in the University of Rochester’s River Campus Dormitories. Please register early, and keep checking the website, as we will post updates continuously (www.ivc2012.com).

We look forward to seeing you next spring in Rochester!

Warmest regards,

Carol Rodland | George Taylor | Phillip Ying
“What’s past is prologue”  
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

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The Soshanguve Ensemble from South Africa enthusiastically takes the stage

by Ilse Mohr

Spontaneous, cheerful and full of beans were the young viola players from South Africa in their presentation with a touch of a Happening. In their final piece they enticed the audience away from their seats to join in dancing. The Europeans had difficulty with this, but the vitality from the other continent was impressive and showed clearly that the viola can do more than fill a concert hall with veneration.

The visiting Soshanguve Viola Ensemble was directed by Hester Wohlitz who is the founder and president of the Viola Society of South Africa. The formation developed from a music pedagogic project started in 1999 for the street kids of the Soshanguve township near Pretoria. Supported by the Music Foundation of the University of South Africa (UNISA) and its director John Roos children from underprivileged social strata were offered an alternative to life on the streets.

(translation: Martin Packham)

The 39th international viola congress had many highlights

by Carlos Maria Solare

It was hard to believe it was true when the invitations were at last sent out: there had been a series of setbacks with restarts and changes of venue, but finally the 39th international viola congress was ready to take place at the Music Academy in Würzburg from the 12th to the 15th of October 2011. Uncertainty had continued until shortly before this date because the vice-chairman of the German Viola Society, Dr. Ronald Schmidt, had to suddenly quit the preparations for health reasons. We are eternally grateful that Prof. Emile Cantor took his place and – as he put it – implemented the plans of Dr. Schmidt.

I have intentionally used the word ‘implemented’ which Prof. Cantor modestly used, however his commitment before and during the congress was indefatigable. He engaged the former Israeli ambassador to Germany, Avi Primor, as patron of the event and personally undertook the traditional test playing of all the exhibited instruments. And more: he turned this potentially dull meeting into an exciting event. In his opening speech Prof. Cantor called on all participants to improvise together with him, to make the event successful.
All participants complied willingly with Prof. Cantor’s request, although it was a great pity that they were so few. A mere 41 of the 300 or so members of the German Viola Society had made their way to Würzburg and of those only about a dozen attended the Annual General Meeting. There were also several overseas guests at the congress. Most congress participants were from the ‘hard core’, but there were happily some new, younger faces. The program was a colourful mixture with something for everyone. While I felt little enthusiasm for the improvisation workshops I was rewarded by lectures on musicology and music history, not to speak of several fabulous concerts.

It was new to me that the history of Würzburg encompasses many events which involve the viola. The Music Academy is the oldest in Germany and was the first to establish a viola class. Hermann Ritter worked in Würzburg and had his (ill-) famed “Ritter-viola” built by the Würzburg violin-maker Karl Adam Hörlein. Finally, the famous music pedagogue Egon Saßmannshaus came from Würzburg.

The grandiose teaching of Saßmannshaus was celebrated by one of the congress days and dealt primarily with pedagogic themes. The story of Ritter and his instrument was told to us by Carl Smith, an American who lives in Graz, and who so to speak fulfills the physical requirements for a discourse on the subject: for several years Smith has been playing exclusively on a 47cm Ritter viola with intense study of the repertoire specially created for that instrument.

Thoma Riebl brought another unusual instrument with him, a viola with five strings made by Bernd Hiller and tuned to F – C – G – D’ – A’. By tuning the lowest string to E the solo part of Schubert’s Arpeggione sonata can be played in the original position without any transposition. This was sufficient reason for Riebl to have such an instrument made.
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The social aspect of the congress was not neglected, which was very welcome since these events are often the one chance in the year to meet old friends and colleagues. Dr. Schmidt, happily recovering from his illness, came for two days. Walter Witte was there for the whole week since ‘his’ competition was running in parallel to the congress. According to one member of the judges the general level of the competition was pleasingly high. And indeed, in the final prize winners concert some lovely music was to be heard, seemingly confirming that assessment.

The results of the Walter Witte composition competition held in 2009 could also be heard: two works for viola and accordion by Roman Pfeiffer and Arne Sanders. The ominous word ‘interesting’ is insufficient to describe the inexhaustible stock of sounds which an accordion can produce. Fabio Marano and Anne-Maria Hölscher enthusiastically engaged themselves for the two works.

(translation: Martin Packham)

The Music Academy of Würzburg goes back to the Society of Music Academics, founded in 1797. The Academy is the oldest music education establishment in Germany. In 1966 it moved into a new building with a concert hall in the Hofstallstraße.

(Photograph: Ilse Mohr)

Excerpts: Canadian Viola Society Journal

Jennifer Thiessen

Ernest Kassian: CVS Lifetime Achievement Award 2011

by Daniel Scholz

I am honoured to write about my mentor and friend, Ernest Kassian. I first met Ernie when I was 10 years old and a member of the Junior Strings Orchestra in Regina. I also studied viola with Ernie through high school and during my undergraduate degree at the University of Regina. Ernie hired me to teach violin and viola at the Conservatory of Music, and also to conduct the Junior Strings while I was still in university. It is because of Ernie that I am now a professional violist, teacher and conductor.

Ernest Kassian has enjoyed a long and illustrious career as a violist, violinist, teacher, and conductor. During his tenure at the Conservatory of Music and at the University of Regina, Ernest established Suzuki programs in Regina and Saskatoon, the South Saskatchewan Youth Orchestra, Suzuki teacher training, and many of Regina’s thriving performing arts organizations as well as performing in the Regina and Saskatoon Symphony Orchestras. His energy and enthusiasm was inspiring to other teachers, as well as parents and students. As a teacher he played a valuable role in hundreds of students’ lives.

Ernest grew up in Edmonton, Alberta. From an early age, he was inspired by the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra and the Edmonton Chamber Music Society concerts, where world class artists such as Heifetz, Menuhin, Ricci and Rostropovich were performing. It was a great time to be a young aspiring musician. Ranald Sheen was one of Ernest’s teachers in his formative years and had a great influence on his technical and musical development as a violinist. He continued his studies at the University of Alberta with Tom Rolston. During his first year at university, Ernest heard a performance of Mozart’s Sinfonia Concertante. He fell in love with the sound of the viola. Tom Rolston was delighted that Ernest was newly captivated by the viola, and after practicing diligently over the summer, Ernest entered his second year of university as a violist. It was not long after this decision that he also switched from the
Ernest Kassian

Ernest's tenure in Regina was marked by boundless creativity and fierce determination. His Suzuki programs were at capacity and the waiting lists were long. Along with other musical community leaders he established organizations including the South Saskatchewan Youth Orchestra, the Regina Lyric Light Opera Society and the Regina Summer Stage. He was on the executive of the Registered Music Teachers’ Association and the local Musicians’ Association. He not only played principal viola in the RSO, but also played first violin, principal second violin, and even assistant principal bass for a season! He was also featured as a soloist with the orchestra and conducted a number of rehearsals at various times.

Ernest was highly sought after as an adjudicator at the local, provincial and national levels. He was also involved in the Western Board of Music as an examiner, and travelled to every major Canadian city in this role. As an educator, Ernest always sought new ways to expose classical music to young people. With the SSYO, he organized tours across Saskatchewan, and participated in the Canadian Youth Orchestra Festivals held at the Banff Centre for the Arts.

Sabbaticals provided an opportunity for Ernest to further his own education and creative talents. He pursued doctoral studies with Gerald Stanick at the University of British Columbia and Fyodor Druzhinin in Kiev. In London and the Czech Republic, he studied conducting with great teachers including Lawrence Leonard. To research his new World Music course at the University of Regina, Ernest spent time traveling to Greece, Spain, Morocco, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Bali.

Now living near Courtenay on Vancouver Island, Ernest still keeps an active schedule of professional and leisure activities. He has served on the Canadian Viola Society executive for the last decade and attended Viola Congresses in Toronto, Chicago, Glasgow and Seattle. He plays viola in the Vancouver Island Symphony, and for an opera company in Qualicum Beach. He has just recently adjusted his teaching schedule from three days a week to one. He is an active curler, a certified open water scuba diver, enjoys downhill skiing and is an avid motorcyclist.

With such an eclectic and expansive career there are many events that stand out. In chatting with Ernie, he describes the most rewarding moments for him as a teacher as watching the development of students from when they were youngsters, to working with those same people in a professional environment. I remember the first time I did a gig with Ernie when I was a teenager. What a thrill and an honour it was for me!
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Violas made by: Francois Pique, Gaetano Antoniazzi, Leandro Bisiach, & Gustave Bernardel.

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Ernest’s enormous success as a teacher might be best described in the accomplishments of some of his students. Erika Raum is violin professor at the University of Toronto. Bridget Hunt is a violinist with the Toronto Symphony. Michael Scholz is a violist in the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. Thomas Cosbey is the concertmaster of the Thunder Bay Symphony. Steven Larson is a member of the Adaskin String Trio and Viola and Chamber Music professor at the Hartt School of Music. David Rose is a Viola Professor at SUNY Fredonia. Brian Larson is a violinist with the Malaysian Philharmonic. Karen Bindle, Kim de laForest, Saache Heinrich and Micheal Hrycay all play with the Saskatoon Symphony. Countless others have gone on to great successes in law, medicine, technology, art, education, academics and politics. Teaching for Ernest was not solely to make musicians of tomorrow, but to build a community of thinkers and leaders who were well versed in the arts and highly disciplined, creative citizens.

Daniel Scholz is principal viola of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra and principal viola of the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra. He is a core member of the Winnipeg Chamber Music Society and the Rembrandt String Quartet. Daniel teaches viola at the University of Manitoba and the Canadian Mennonite University, and is the conductor of the Winnipeg Youth Symphony Orchestra.

**Viola Value: El Sistema**

**Winnipeg Looks Beyond Clichés**

*by Kristjanna Oleson*

There is a revolution in music education that is making waves all across the globe. If you have heard of conductor Gustavo Dudamel, or of the Simón Bolivar Orchestra then you are familiar with the passion that is attracting educators, symphony orchestras and social programs all over the world to consider starting Sistema programs in their communities.

José Abreu founded El Sistema in Venezuela in 1975. He gave eleven children instruments and said, “With these instruments you will change the world.” They have. José is a pianist, educator, economist, politician and activist. He deeply appreciated the support he received from family, teachers and his community enabling him to become a musician. José wanted all children in Venezuela to have the same support. Today, El Sistema has 102 youth and fifty-five children’s orchestras in Venezuela with close to 300,000 students participating. Ninety percent come from impoverished neighborhoods and each program adapts to the needs of its community. The teachers inform the program and develop a curriculum that fits for them. El Sistema is not a method of learning music; it is a philosophy that enables the learning of music where art is not a monopoly of the elite.

In 2009 José received a TED Award for his work with Venezuelan youth and he wished for 50 musicians from the USA to be sent to Venezuela to witness and understand the philosophy of El Sistema and begin programs within a year of completing their fellowship. Sistema programs have since begun to make their homes in communities across the USA.

In Winnipeg, Manitoba, on October 17, 2011 Sistema Winnipeg was born. Sistema Winnipeg is modeled after the programs in Venezuela but is a partnership between Seven Oaks School Division and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. We are the fourth Sistema program to start in Canada. Tanya Derksen, the Education Program Director of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra brought the idea to Seven Oaks School Division and Lydia Hedrich, Assistant-Superintendent felt that the program was consistent with their vision. Seven Oaks is known in Winnipeg for its support with the Learning Through the Arts movement and for encouraging constant transformation to better serve our children.
I am a violist/violinist/music specialist, teaching and directing the Sistema Winnipeg program that runs everyday after school from 3:30 to 6:30 pm at Elwick Community School located in the north end of Winnipeg and comprised of diverse socio-economic and cultural groups. We provide two snacks and some outdoor time if the weather permits and immerse the students in musical activities, explorations and lessons. We have 41 students from grades 1-3 (5-8 year olds) and hope they will all continue with Sistema until they are in grade 12.

We are entering week three and the students are eager to start playing the instruments. But choosing the right instrument is a process that cannot be rushed. In the beginning, the majority of students wanted to play the violin, predominantly because there is a successful fiddle program at Elwick School taught by Karen Warner. I felt that the instrument choice must come from the student but that it should be an informed decision. I held off on ordering instruments until the students had enough exposure and time to decide.

The students had no previous exposure to the viola or the cello. I realized that I had an opportunity to introduce students to the viola as a magical instrument and to reflect the great value I feel it deserves. As we began to explore the sounds of the different instruments, certain students lit up as they played the viola, showing an unwavering knowledge that the viola was the instrument for them. I recognized that spark of awareness. They found their sound.

I began playing the violin when I was 3 years old. It wasn’t until my second year of university that I fell madly in love with the viola despite playing in youth orchestras and quartets my whole life. My violin professor (David Stewart)’s wife, Paule Prefontaine lent me her father’s viola for the summer while I worked in Riding Mountain National Park. I had often said to people that I loved music and really liked the violin but was unaware that I hadn’t yet found my heart’s voice. When I began to play the viola, my soul resonated with its tone color. I remembered how, as a violinist, I was drawn to listen to the inner voices while asking myself who had the lovely passing tones that brought the melody more meaning. If the sound of a string ensemble were a stage, the cello would be the platform, the bass its posts, stable and strong, the violins would be the sets, the colors, the scene, and the viola would be the energy that lingers in the air, unseen but felt in every corner.

One day as I drove to a gig and got lost in thought, as I often do, I realized that the mockery violists have endured through the ages mirrors common attitudes towards people of low socio-economic status—both are considered a waste of space and unnecessary. There are clichés that our society believes to be true, though they are not. For example: those who can’t do, teach, violists are failed violinists, and those who live on social assistance are lazy. I remember having to defend my choice to switch to the viola and thought about how difficult it must be for the single mothers in the Sistema program to defend their position in society, hoping people will one day see the truth behind the clichés.

One of the reasons I love being a teacher is that we have the ability to create a microcosm of society and live by our collective beliefs and morals within our classrooms. The students and teachers of Sistema Winnipeg are in the process of creating a community that does not believe in blanket statements or in judging others. Rather, we believe in being a safe place for all. We embrace the variety of abilities and needs we each have and see each person as an important and necessary part of the whole. After all, what would an orchestra be without the viola section? I believe that it would lose its magic.

If you are interested in the Sistema Winnipeg Program please contact me at kristjanna.oleson@7oaks.org.

Violist Kristjanna Oleson (B. Mus Perf/B. Ed) is the Music Specialist and Facilitator of the Sistema Winnipeg Program and co-founder of Animata Strings.
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The Road to Fammi: An Interview with Jean René

by Jennifer Thiessen

Jean René strikes an elegant balance between musical worlds. He has carved out a place for his unique voice in Montreal’s classical and improvised music communities. The 2010 launch of his solo album, Fammi, is a significant contribution to the body of original recorded viola music. In a written interview this October, I posed questions to Jean René on the topic of his album, in English, and he returned his thoughtful responses in French.

JT: Before talking about your album specifically, I want to ask you about your particular path as a musician. You are a classically trained violist who has worked in traditional orchestra, chamber music and solo settings. You are also an improviser and a creative musician who is rooted in the lively world of improvised music in Montreal. Can you talk about your formation and how your career has taken its unique shape?

JR: My training is usual except for the “advanced” age at which I began. At the age of 18, college-age in Québec, one would have said it was too late to learn to play a stringed instrument; except at Nicolet, a religious private school for high school girls with a college-level music department of 70 students. For my audition, I played a piece by Peter, Paul and Mary on the guitar (left-handed!) and was told that one could perhaps make a good music teacher out of me. The nuns were excellent pedagogues and in continual education: some of them attended Tanglewood summer music academy, another studied composition, Indian music, jazz. They were very open to contemporary music there. More than at the Conservatoire where I had the good fortune to be accepted afterwards. It was there that I took classes in writing and orchestration. I never missed a chance to participate in all the contemporary music projects that were available to me. At that time, I was having a hard time appreciating the music of the 19th century. I loved Bach and everything that came after Debussy and Bartok.

Improvisation was already there since the beginning, in hiding: even though I hardly knew how to play and read, as soon as I mastered a technical aspect, I experimented with it. Working on repertoire and studies without improvising on them was a constant challenge.

When I finished school, I had the opportunity to work full time for five years in Italy in various permanent orchestras. I discovered a fascinating career but also one that I didn’t want to make the centre of my life. I read too much frustration and bitterness in the faces of my older colleagues, and not enough enthusiasm.

On my return home, on the occasion of the launch of a magazine I was involved with, I had the desire to improvise. I contacted a pianist with whom I had done some improvising at Nicolet (who had since become a harpsichordist, then a composer) and he told me about René Lussier and Jean Derome who were, according to him, doing something very interesting in this area. It so happened that I met René right afterwards; he started inviting me to his workshops which he called his « Boudines » and then to various other projects where I met other musicians, and so on...

Jean René can be heard on over twenty recordings on various labels including Ambiances Magnétiques & records. Visit http://www.actuellecd.com/fr/cat/et_08/ to hear excerpts of or to purchase these albums.

(photograph: Céline Arcand)
JT: You have gone on to perform and record frequently with René Lussier and Jean Derome and are an integral member of the groups of Michel F. Coté, Rainer Wiens and Pierre Labbé to name a few. What collaborations have been important to you as an improviser? What experiences have nourished the spirit you were searching for in music?

JR: Basically, all collaborations have had their importance, progressively tracing my path as an improviser. At the beginning, I often played in groups as an interpreter/performer; there was a lot of written material, and the improvisations were often collective and quite marked out/directed. After that, I was involved in projects that gave me more space: for example, the Polaroïde trio with André Duchesne on guitar and Pierre Tanguay on drums or, more recently, Rainer Wiens’s Dream Algebra. These are groups in which each musician has a territory to occupy; they are projects that offer opportunities to define and discover oneself at the same time.

All experiences nourish the voice of a musician. I can’t pretend to be a traditional musician, but at the same time, traditional music was the first music I played; I accompanied my uncles, aunts and cousins on the guitar during long evenings where each person sang their song. So I could say that folk music counts almost as much as contemporary, baroque or romantic music; it all feeds my vocabulary.

That said, I remember a pivotal moment, at least concerning the working method I adopted to make my cd. Michel F. Côté had hired me for a studio session; he was preparing music for Rêves, a creation by Wajdi Mouawad. He asked me to improvise a little sequence using the colours of Morton Feldman. On listening to what I had already done, I added two layers, to achieve something that suited him and that I also found convincing. I felt that the time had come to launch into a solo project.

JT: The solo project you began at that time became your album, Fammi, which was released on the &records label in 2010. Could you describe your process of conceptualising, creating and recording the album?

JR: It is never simple to explain the birth of a project so clearly, we get attached to certain fragments of our own history and we forget others. For me, the conception and the realisation melt together. That said, I can summarise my process in two points.

First, chosen simplicity. I was determined to produce the album in a totally autonomous way. Alone, also acting as recording engineer, I had complete freedom. Furthermore, I wanted to bring together all of my experiences as composer, performer and improviser; I believed that the best way to achieve this was to start from spontaneous gestures. Each piece on Fammi has one line or one motif as its starting point.

Secondly, taming the sound of the electric viola. I was quite frustrated every time the sound of my instrument (viola or pochette) was amplified. With a microphone, it picked up too much of the other instruments around me and the sound technician didn’t receive enough signal. However, with a pick-up, I heard myself well in my amplifier but hated the sound. I decided to take the bull by the horns to solve the problem. I rented a space for several months and recorded myself trying different settings, searching to find the music that the electric viola was hiding within itself. After a lot of trial and error, the first satisfying pieces arrived - five or six. After that, I pursued my work on the acoustic viola.

Finally, I would like to say that the pieces on my cd are abstract constructions, without narrative. This didn’t stop me from using almost all of the pieces for a radio-theatre project I did in collaboration with two actors. I invited these actors to improvise scenes, as solos or duos, on my music. My intention was to reverse the usual process; instead of putting music on a scene, we invented a scene starting with the music. At times, the music of the voice overpowers the meaning of the words.

On a technical level, the whole album was recorded at home with Pro Tools (Audiomedia III and M-Box), directly on a Mackie console or with a Rode mic (NT1-A). The effects I used are: a Boss GT-4 pedal, a Microverb III Alesis, or nothing at all. I used a simple Fishman pick-up with my pochette (pocket fiddle) made by Pierre Charette. This Montreal luthier also made my viola, in 1991.

Jennifer Thiessen lives in Montreal. She cultivates a particular interest in chamber music, new music, improvised music and baroque period performance. She volunteers as editor of the Journal of the Canadian Viola Society.
I broke my rule of super light travel and took this book on tour with me. As a string quartet violist myself, I can attest that this is the best representation out there of life as a string quartet violist. It is also a great read! I made this required reading for my viola studio. Get the book, read it and join us on the Alto side...

— Masumi Per Rostad,  
Violist of the Pacifica Quartet

Bernie – I never got round to saying how much I loved your book, it was my bedside reading for about a week. It’s witty, erudite and charts one of the most distinguished careers of recent times. Hats off!

— Paul Silverthorne,  
Principal Viola, London Symphony Orchestra

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— Myron Rosenblum  
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George Bornoff Viola Scholarship Opportunity

A grant from the Foundation for the Advancement of String Education has created the George Bornoff Viola Scholarships for the studio of Patricia McCarty at the Meadowmount School of Music in Westport, NY. The scholarships are to be awarded to violists ages 13-30 on the basis of an application DVD, including both solo repertoire and required chamber music excerpts. The seven week Meadowmount program, June 23 to August 11, 2012, includes weekly private lessons, intensive chamber music study, master classes, professional staff accompanists, Orchestra Audition Seminar, and performance opportunities. Violists participate in two chamber music groups, preparing complete works to performance level.

**Application deadline: January 31**

Application information and chamber music excerpts: [http://www.meadowmount.com](http://www.meadowmount.com)

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The International Viola Society has arranged group discount code rates for anyone wishing to travel to Rochester, NY to attend this year’s 40th Annual Viola Congress at Eastman from May 30 to June 30. Discount with the code usage will be on average about 5%. Not only will the saving benefit individual travelers, but the more people who use the discount codes will result in more free travel vouchers which will ultimately save the Viola Society more money, and allow the IVS to have more funding for special projects.

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For complete rules for obtaining this discount, please visit [www.internationalviolasociety.org](http://www.internationalviolasociety.org) and look for the Airline Discount Codes info on the main page.