

1. Workshop for voices and viols, 9 June, Hoole Community Centre, Chester, with Ibi Aziz and Roger Wilkes

NWEMF was pleased to welcome, for the first time under its auspices, the young master of the viol, Ibi Aziz, as tutor for a workshop on 9 June 2007 at Chester. The avowed aim of the day (at least in part) was to introduce the viol to those who had not previously tried it.

We began with a demonstration in the form of a duet (or small consort, if you like) by Gibbons, played by Anne Clements and Hugh Cherry; this was treated as something of a masterclass by Ibi, who commented on various aspects of the piece and how it should be played, including varying the emphasis in phrases and the contrapuntalism.

This was followed by Ibi introducing the instrument and the history of composition for it; he concentrated on mentioning later

pieces, particularly noting how pleasant Abel (one of the last major composers for the instrument, in the late eighteenth century) is for playing in small gatherings – a point he illustrated by playing some passages himself. I have previously been to a talk by Ibi on Marais, where he was mildly rebuking most players for being scared of things like semi-quavers, which after all are not at all difficult; in a similar vein, he was saying today that Marais wrote a great deal of music for ‘mere mortals’ and it should not be so feared: whereupon he extemporised a performance of a particularly virtuosic passage, leaving everyone aghast and himself having to admit – I think with a twinkle in his eye – that Marais can indeed be difficult! The ease with which Ibi can take such music in his stride is ample illustration of the great talent which has led him to become one of the leading virtuoso players of the instrument in this country. At the same time, his easy-going nature ensured that the amateurs gathered for the day did not feel intimidated.

At this point the group split. Ibi took a session for those who wished to try out the instrument; I was not present here, but it apparently went well, and I gather people went as far as to play Tallis’s Canon. Roger led the other group of more experienced viol players and singers, and together we played and sang some madrigals of Gibbons, including the famous swan song. The music itself was not difficult, and we were able to progress to a passable level with it before lunch.

After lunch we again had two groups, of singers and players, working on Byrd’s song ‘This sweet and merry month of May’, devoted to Queen Elizabeth; we reassembled at the end to sing and play it through together. This piece was trickier, and involved quite a bit of work. Personally, as a not particularly advanced viol player, I found the pace at which we took it somewhat daunting, but it was nonetheless a good experience of playing and singing together. Ibi spent a good deal of time and effort on getting us to play the piece with a light touch, and his constant emphasis on

getting it to work as a balanced piece of music, with the emphases correctly placed, was refreshing.

Anne Clements is much to be congratulated on organising this day, and in finding a tutor endowed not only with such musical skills, but also with such a personable character. NWEMF has not recently organised a great deal centred on the viol (though the last AGM workshop was another exception to this) – our small numbers can make such days precarious to organise – but today appeared to be a great success. Many people were keen to try the instrument; one man had made the journey from Nottingham specially, and others were keen to borrow the NWEMF instruments. Moreover, it was particularly pleasing to see a group of girls from Wirral Girls' Grammar School, who it is hoped will take away an enthusiasm to pursue their interest in the viol further. Altogether, it is much to be hoped that the day has encouraged people, both young and old, to start thinking of taking up the instrument. For more advanced players and singers the day offered a very pleasant experience of making music together, and encouraging others to do so, under the direction of a leading musician. Let us have some more NWEMF viol days!

Clive Tolley

And another view:

Saturday 9th June saw a less common form of NWEMF workshop – a combined day for singers and instrumentalists. This one had a number of twists. Firstly, we had as a tutor the very talented young professional viol player Ibi Aziz. Secondly, we had a number of people, including some very welcome youngsters, who were attending to try a viol and see if they liked it.

For me, as a modest and relatively inexperienced viol player, this was going to be an unusual day. Firstly my viol playing was going to be inflicted on the public and secondly I was going to be singing as well. In anticipation of the worst, I ordered spare top strings for both my tenor and bass viols. These are the ones most likely to break. Of course, the well-known Mr. Murphy paid a visit and

applied his Law: the 4th string of my bass broke whilst tuning it. Repeated throughout the day, "But lower strings never break..."

Izi started off by giving us a quick potted history of the viol and its repertoire. He stretched credibility by saying that not all Marais is difficult. We then split into two groups: the 'try a viol' group stayed with Izi and the rest of us took our voices and/or viols off with Roger where we tried some English madrigals of the non fa-la-la variety. We were deployed more-or-less one voice and one viol to a part. This proved to be interesting with being able to hear the work as an instrumental piece, as a vocal piece and as a combined instrumental and vocal piece. One of the issues with some of this music, which Roger discussed, is the perennial issue of which came first: the instrumental or the vocal version?

After lunch, the youngsters left us and we came together as one larger group. We now looked at some six-part music with Izi, with a viol disposition of TrTrTTBB. This proved to be challenging music for both players and singers with difficult off-beat rhythms.

This was a different and an enjoyable day with an opportunity to work with a first-rate professional player. More please!

Ron Kelley