

Alan Lane Memorial Weekend; Townsville, QLD, 2008

Warm sunny 26 degree days, refreshing sea-breezes, long walks along the Strand. ... Sounds like mid-winter in Townsville. The event: the Alan Lane Memorial Weekend, 29-30 June 2008.

The presenters at the ALMW were inspiring professional musicians with a wealth of experience in the teaching of their instruments, who willingly shared their expertise with workshop participants. Added to that was the collegial atmosphere and an opportunity to share ideas and experiences, and to be inspired.

The weekend conference began for me with Stephen Chin's advanced (Gr 4 +) violin master-class. Stephen has an admirable ability to analyse points of weakness in student performance, and to allow everyone to benefit from his perception. To paraphrase some of his comments:

“there is no quick fix” (on the need to ‘drill’ technical issues from the repertoire);

“don't say ‘excuse me’ for playing”, but “take the bull by the horns”.

Despite his (undoubtedly true) assertion that there *is* no ‘quick fix’, Stephen was nevertheless able to draw out even better performances from students - reinforcing their confidence and producing tangible improvements in the space of a few minutes.

Some of the string technical issues discussed with the advanced group included: the importance of consistent bow placement; bow pressure versus speed; the degree of pressure of the fingers on the strings, and the tonal affect of allowing the strings to resonate fully; finding just the optimum place for the bow to avoid scratches and get the best tone; chin pressure, relaxation and posture; and the need to take the *time* to train the ear to learn good intonation. I was surprised at the difference in sound produced when students were reminded simply to hold their instrument *up*.

The less experienced string players in the following day's master-class (grade 1-3 level students) were shown why it is necessary for the development of later more complex bowing techniques that they learn to keep their bowing thumb bent, and the importance of simply *planting(!)* their feet firmly on the ground for good physical balance and posture. He gave some simple exercises relevant to their repertoire to correct and enhance technique, and suggested the need for a bowing plan, considering all of *length*, *place* and *pressure*. There was a timely reminder to teachers – it's not enough just to say “use more bow”, but we really need to drill the students in this and other technical aspects so that they get to the point where they just do it, without the need to think about it. This (and plenty of time and patience) is also imperative in teaching intonation.

A common theme across all master-classes (not just strings) was how to encourage students to think musically.

“How would it be sung”?

“Learn to love the music - don't concentrate on the difficulties” (Stephen Chin)

“Imagine the tune, and how a listener would hear it.”

“Be confident in performance” – (as it really *does* make a difference to how musical it will sound).

Considerable emphasis was placed on piano pedagogy at ALMW, with three excellent presenters who shared their expertise with teachers and students, across all levels of pianistic ability.

Glenn Riddle's master-classes had a particular focus on AMEB syllabus material. As with all presenters, he was very encouraging to all players. Glenn made a number of points which were eminently sensible but nevertheless interesting to hear spoken. For instance – if it sounds good and pianistic, then it's ok to not be too pedantic but to keep moving on to other works. He emphasised for beginners the importance of developing a good hand position and good technique, and to develop strength in the fingers.

Even from the early stages, we can teach students through simple exercises to play one hand louder than the other, or with crescendo – decrescendo. (“Why wait until later?”)

He also encourages his students to *listen* to music as much as possible, as there is so much to gain for them from doing so. Listening to a recording of the piece they are learning or are about to learn can be greatly beneficial to their progress and development as musicians, and there is a wealth of music recording available on the internet which is readily accessible to our students.

Sonny Chua gave us a very real “meet the composer” opportunity, in which he assisted students in the technical aspects and interpretation of his piano works. He was keen to encourage students to interpret his works and portray their full character, to not necessarily slavishly follow editorial markings, and above all to have *fun* playing them – something which came through very strongly in his own performances. Having not heard his music before, I was certainly inspired to track down some of his teaching repertoire, as I was impressed by the focus of pieces on specific techniques and interpretive aspects of playing, and by the accessibility and attraction of his work for young (and older!) performers.

At the more advanced level of performance, Kathron Sturrock's approach was genuinely encouraging; and her wealth of experience provided us with many insightful comments. She also stressed the importance of developing a good and thorough basis on which to work from, and the role of repertoire in achieving this. I found her story at Monday morning's breakfast panel about teaching keyboard in England to very large classes of adults most interesting and inspiring.

Paul Dean and Margaret Schindler gave master-classes in woodwind and voice, and if their moving performance together in trio with John Colwill at the Sunday evening *Soiree* is any guide, I wish I could have seen some of their master-classes too, even though these are not my teaching areas. However, being in two places at once is not something I've yet learnt to master ... All credit must go to the organisers for the effort they went to in scheduling presentations, as it must have been extremely difficult to cater for every individual's interest areas, and I feel very fortunate to have been able to attend such a range of workshops over the two days.

John Colwill's brief but very much to-the-point discussion of performance anxiety was illuminating. His approach makes sense to performers at any level –recognising that a certain level of anxiety is *useful!* We really *don't* need to teach our students – or our own children – to feel *nervous*. In fact the “*n*” word should be positively discouraged! We should teach the young performer to recognise the effects of adrenalin - the less comfortable physical affects, and also its benefits, such as an increased level on concentration. We need to recognise and work with the positive effects of adrenalin, and its ability to empower us in performance.

A brief exercise illustrated perfectly the effect of the mind on what we can each do with our bodies, and the importance of rehearsing mentally. Breathe, act with confidence, talk to yourself positively, breathe!

Dr. Peter Roennfeldt shared his very down-to-earth and useful approach to Form and Analysis and how we can use Analysis as an *aid to performance*, in order to provide us with a greater understanding of the shape, design and structure of works, and the general interpretation of the score, as it is a valuable aid to seeing the “big picture” of the work as a whole. The real aim of analysis is to help the performer prepare the piece better, and not just as something esoteric to learn for the General Knowledge questions in an exam. The performance end product should be a unity of the piece + performer + instrument. He went on to review a variety of forms, but focussed particularly on the *general principles* of Sonata Form. In this, we need to be prepared to begin with the score itself, and not be limited by the “rules” of form, but be prepared for differences.

Many of the words of wisdom given by Dr Robert Keane in his presentation on Composition were relevant in a variety of aspects of music-making. He was an inspiring and entertaining speaker, and he stressed that composition must involve something more than putting music on paper – you must also get it *performed*. Composition must be about getting music *to* people; promoting your music is an essential part of the job.

The weekend culminated in a concert given by presenters, and included a marvellous performance by Dr Piers Lane (piano) and Jack Liebeck (violin) playing the Kreutzer Sonata (Beethoven). To hear first-class performers in such an intimate setting was a rare experience truly to be treasured.

An integral part of the Alan Lane Memorial Weekend was of course the opportunity to gather as a group of people who are dedicated to music, and, through our teaching, to giving others the opportunity for first-hand experience in music-making. Events such as the ALMW remind us that we are not alone as teachers of music, but that we all share in the occasional frustrations and frequent challenges of the profession, and the rewarding task of passing on the knowledge and especially the love of music to our students.

Tertia Hogan (recipient of MTAQ bursary)

As Tertia couldn't be in two places at once, I'd like to round out her thoughtful and insightful coverage with a brief mention of the other presenters. Trinity Guildball was represented by Tony Hodges (Manager of Victoria, SA, WA and Tasmania). Tony ran informative sessions that included the very latest syllabus offerings. Ara Vartoukian, founder of Theme and Variations, was responsible for lending us the magnificent Steinway Concert Grand. He also gave us an insight into some of the theory behind piano tuning as well as practical examples of the intricacies and challenges involved in this field.

Robyn Knibb

.... come to that, we mustn't omit the representatives from ANZCA (Robert) and AMEB (Marg) who gave presentations on their various examination syllabi... Hope there's no-one else we've missed. Copious apologies if we have!

Tertia Hogan