

Janet Walker (recorder)

I arrived at this year's Cambridge Early Music Summer School pretty much by accident. A chance meeting with a French cellist at an Easter early music weekend in Italy was the deciding factor: she had already signed up, and as a "newbie" herself, thought it would be good to have some moral and linguistic support. This suited me too; it's daunting turning up without knowing anyone at all.

From the moment I set foot in the beautiful grounds of Jesus College, I knew I was going to enjoy the week, if only for the lovely surroundings and the chance to explore Cambridge. But first contact with fellow participants at tea that afternoon was positive - everyone seemed friendly, and after the early evening meal we were shot straight into the first rehearsal with the entire ensemble and choir of parts of the Missa Scala Aretina by Frederic Valls. The theme was Spanish Baroque, of which I knew little, and enjoyed discovering; particularly the role that the Scarlattis played in the musical life of the Spanish and Portuguese courts.

This rehearsal set the pattern for a non-stop week of six hours a day intensive programmed rehearsals (with time in the afternoons for privately formed groups, should you have any energy left), starting with sectional each morning, followed by several sessions of ensemble work, and then the full complement each evening. There was a continuous and stimulating input of new music, right up until the last day, and competent sight reading at pretty much full tempo was expected, and mostly delivered.

The composition of ensembles was regularly switched around to give everyone a chance, and there was little sense of "ability streaming" though I imagine the tutors were astute in their assessment of our capabilities when choosing music and groupings.

As a returnee to more serious playing after a very long lapse, I had to concentrate and count very hard, but my initial nerves soon gave way to sheer excitement and sometimes exhilaration: I had forgotten what a joy it could be to play with an orchestra and be swept along in its corporate energy. Sometimes stage fright tripped me up, but I was usually able to get on top of it thanks to the support of other players and our excellent tutors. I had gone prepared to sing in the choir if there wasn't enough work for the recorders, but I and my co-player were kept fully employed. It was also very useful to do sectional work each day: I hadn't played in a wind ensemble since university days and really enjoyed it. I didn't need convincing about the merits of baroque oboes, but I fell in love with the beautiful bassoons.

The tutors, Philip Thorby, Peter Holman, Judy Tarling, and Gail Hennessy, aka The Parley of Instruments, were unfailingly energetic, encouraging, good-humoured and present. It must have been exhausting for them, but somehow the momentum was sustained throughout the week. Philip Thorby, who directed the full rehearsals, deserves a special mention for keeping everyone going, and grinning, at their lowest moments of fatigue. The week ended with a student concert, at which the highlights were undoubtedly an introduction to the lovely silvery sound of the Swedish Nyckelharpa, and a stunning performance of some American country music on a baroque violin and harpsichord! We were also privileged to hear two concerts by the Parley; it was a real treat to listen to performances by outstanding players, which, as someone commented, made you want either to go home and practise very very hard for the rest of your life - or to burn your instrument! The final evening was a concert before the paying public, at which the major works were presented. I think it went well - I was too paralysed with stage fright to know. I hadn't played in public since about 1980. Jesus College chapel was such a lovely venue in which to perform that I trust the audience was enveloped in a cloud of heavenly music.

So, on reflection, would I go again? Most certainly - I left feeling much encouraged that I could and would recover former levels of competence, and that rather than burning my

instruments, it was well worth continuing to practise and learn. On paper it's not a cheap "holiday" (holiday not being really the right word for it) but at least for me, it was outstanding value for money, and enjoyment definitely outweighed anxiety at the end of the day. The accommodation was luxurious in private ensuite rooms, and the catering was adequate if sometimes disorganised. The venue will be different next year as Jesus College is not available, but it's hard to go wrong in Cambridge. A more compact site might have been more practical, as there was a lot of time spent walking between rehearsal venues, and I often had occasion to be glad I was a lightweight recorder player.

One practical tip for wind players: if and when I attend something similar again I will equip myself with a second recorder @415, eg such as the resin ones made by Bernolin; my poor saturated instrument was consulting it's union about terms by the end, and needed a week off to recover! Incidentally, the week is categorically @415, which simplifies things wonderfully.