

Behind the scenes at the museum

Helen Michetschläger reports on a project to repair old, damaged instruments so they can be used by Manchester schoolchildren, rather than just be thrown away



The temporary workshop at Manchester Museum

Olympias Music Foundation is a charity based in Manchester, UK, which offers free one-to-one instrumental lessons to the children of low-income families. A few months ago I met its chief executive Jo Yee Cheung, who told me it had been awarded a grant from the Oglesby Charitable Trust for a new initiative: Olympias Recycled Orchestra. This is a project to repair and upcycle instruments, rather than discarding them to landfill as soon as anything goes wrong. But the problem was, who will do the work? Many violin repairers are too busy to work on basic children's instruments.

I had an idea: to bring together a group of violin makers with relevant backgrounds and blitz through the

instruments over a working weekend. I was delighted by the enthusiastic response: Rob Cain's experience with Luthiers sans Frontières made him an obvious choice, while Sarah and Matthew Turnock and Ellen Wise from 23 Violins in Banbury were also perfect as they undertake a lot of educational work.

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All good workshops need apprentices, so I invited Kanai Brand and Aidan Bradley from the Newark School of Violin Making.

A few weeks beforehand, Jo and I spent a morning going through the donated instruments and the out-of-commission Olympias stock. I then compiled spreadsheets of the work to be done and the fittings to order. Thanks are due to The Sound Post and Josef Teller for offering generous discounts.

Early one Saturday in late March, we arrived at the light and spacious workrooms at the top of the Manchester Museum. Some of us had to be torn away from the vivarium stocked with tropical frogs that we passed en route to the lift. Then we set to work on the 40 violins and 20 cellos. Most needed basic

maintenance: checking bridge heights and curves; making pegs work; new strings; cleaning etc. There was a nice cello with cracks in the front – unsurprising as it had been played without a soundpost! The cellos with broken necks were a priority; on Saturday we glued them all and on Sunday pinned the joints, ready for set-up later. Rob focused on bow rehairs with Aidan as his assistant, stripping out the old hair so that he could work efficiently. Kanai worked with me on the cello necks. Sarah, Matthew and Ellen provided invaluable expertise for tackling some of the knottier problems, such as using leather-lined nutcrackers as a safer alternative to pliers for removing jammed pegs.

The Olympias violin teachers had been talking about their wish to offer viola lessons, to enhance ensemble playing. Although the charity has been given several violas, they are all large, so fractional-sized instruments were needed. I suggested that we convert some of the violins to violas using the hole-in-the-heart method pioneered by Stringers (see *The Strad*, June 2001). The idea is that a hole is drilled through the front of the viola underneath the treble-side bridge foot. Then a longer soundpost is made, which is glued and pinned to the bridge foot. This decouples the bridge from the treble vibrations of the front and enhances the lower strings, giving an effective viola sound.

We were keen to involve the whole Olympias community in the project. Their orchestra rehearses at the museum on Saturday mornings, so we were besieged by lots of excited children and their parents who had never seen anything like this. One fascinated small boy made regular return visits to check on our progress, and a mother said that if I ever needed an apprentice, she was up for it.

The teachers were also keen to benefit from our workshop. Cellist Dan Springate was especially eager to learn more. We paired him up with Sarah, herself a cellist and teacher, and he learnt how to deal with poorly fitting pegs and to trim a bridge to the appropriate height. Sarah and I gave a brief presentation on instrument maintenance to the teachers, which was videoed so that it can subsequently be used as a resource.

With Sarah's help, I put together two 'Olympias Maintenance Kits' for the teachers, including a tape measure, peg paste, dry soap and chalk for dealing with sticking or slipping pegs; 6B pencils and sharpeners for the grooves in the nut and bridge; bridge curve and string height templates for checking; tubes of clock oil for tight adjusters, fine pliers for stuck adjusters, and tweezers for string fitting. We also left microfibre cloths and instrument cleaner. We also made laminated sheets with basic maintenance information and a chart of sizes.

As we reflected on the weekend, Jo reminded us what we'd achieved when she said, 'How amazing that so many people have an old violin collecting dust in their attic! And that so much good can come from a bit of time and tenderness, to make these instruments come to life again for our young musicians.'

That weekend, more than 20 instruments were completely finished

Rob Cain (left) explains bow rehairs to Olympias musicians



and a dozen bows rehired, with several more instruments well on the way to being ready later. Working in an open workshop brought many benefits for Olympias teachers and pupils: they could see our work and ask questions, and begin to develop a better understanding of their instruments and how to look after them. The team members generously took instruments and bows away to finish later, and we agreed that the Newark students would take on the challenge of the cracked cello.

Another time, there are a few things I'd change to make everything run even more smoothly. It would have been helpful to triage the instruments in advance, as well as assess them for the work to be done. I thought of three groups: two-day jobs such as gluing and pinning cracked cello necks, which benefit from two pairs of hands; the easy jobs that can be done quickly by luthiers of all skill levels; and everything else.

It was a satisfying and enjoyable weekend, and next time we're all coming for long enough to have a proper look at those colourful amphibians! ●



Example of a 'hole in the heart' viola conversion