

# NZFGW Mid-year report

*Serenity Thurlow, NZFGW Fellow, 2009*

So far, this year has been all that I expected and also one of the busiest and most enriching times of my life. After finishing my Masters degree at the end of last year I went straight into post-graduate studies with Professor Thomas Riebl at the University Mozarteum. I had worked with him before through chamber music and at masterclasses but it has been an exciting opportunity to work in depth with one of the viola-world's most sought-after teachers. The atmosphere in Professor Riebl's class and in the viola community at the Mozarteum and in Salzburg is one that is challenging, yet always supportive and a vibrant mix of people from all over the world. As a post-graduate student my studying here is more self-directed than as a Masters student as I am considered mature enough as a musician to know what it is that I need to work on. Professor Riebl gives me invaluable feedback and offers me the freedom and respect to try out new things.

The nature of the post-graduate course at the Mozarteum is one that encourages seeking active experience with professional orchestras while still retaining the support of one's teacher and the university environment. To that end I have been playing regularly with the Salzburg Chamber Soloists, a small chamber orchestra, sometimes as the principal viola. While the majority of our concerts take us to the major European countries such as Germany, Switzerland, France, Spain and Italy, we have also been invited to play in poorer countries such as Croatia and Bosnia & Hercegovina. A particular highlight this year was a tour through many of the smaller centres in the USA which included children's concerts and lectures. Out of twenty-two people in the orchestra on this tour we had fourteen countries represented and something like eleven languages natively spoken. While German and English were the main languages spoken for rehearsals, I was able to practise my Spanish and even pick up a fair amount of basic Serbian. This, in turn, became very useful for our time in Bosnia.

At a suggestion from my sister in New Zealand, I collected postcards from some of the towns and cities we visited and sent them to the bilingual class (where my sister is an assistant) at Rowley Avenue School which is a decile 1 school in Christchurch. Feedback from the class teacher was that the postcards led into a useful discussion between the children of goals and how education is the pathway to achieving what you wish from your life – something that I firmly believe in.

As well as the Salzburg Chamber Soloists I have played with the Deutsche Kammerakademie Neuss, a professional orchestra in the north of Germany and also with the Salzburg Camerata, the pre-eminent orchestra in Salzburg and one of the best chamber orchestras in Europe. In fact, my first experience with the Camerata was being called up and asked if I could come to rehearsal in a few hours because someone had become ill. I turned up to the rehearsal and had to sight-read an entire three programmes worth of music without preparation. That particular project involved four concerts in four days and travelling from Austria to Italy to Switzerland within that time. Certainly, one needs to be quite flexible to be a musician in Europe but it was an unforgettable experience to play for the first time with an orchestra of that calibre.

One of the aspects I like the most about the Mozarteum as a university is the willingness of many of the professors to collaborate with the students in ways musically rewarding to both.

My favourite example of this is the once-a-semester chamber music “Sightreading Party” which is open to all students and involves many of the performance professors. I will never forget the experience of playing through two of Mozart’s “Viola” Quintets with Lukas Hagen, the first violin of the famous Hagen Quartet.

I was also recently involved in a one-off Mozarteum project with Rainer Schmidt, second violin of the Hagen Quartet, where we spent a week studying a Haydn and a Mendelssohn quartet, first as quartets, then as a chamber orchestra comprised of four quartets with Rainer Schmidt directing. The goal of the week was to work together as seventeen individuals instead of the usual orchestral method of having one person give orders and all others follow orders. The project was an immense success which culminated in a concert that was still being talked about weeks later. Rainer Schmidt is an amazing person who combines awesome musical knowledge with incredible humility and openness.

I am beginning to come to the end of my time here in Austria and while I have been learning so much here and will be sorry to leave this environment, on the other hand, I am very much looking forward to coming back to New Zealand and being able to share the things I have learnt here as a musician and as a person. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women from the bottom of my heart for their support.