



# LONDON CELLO SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER

# 23

NEWSLETTER  
Issue: Autumn 2014

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• *Sebastian Comberti*

It's a testament to the remarkable persuasive powers of Selma Gokcen that this newsletter even exists, some eleven years after the launch of the LCS. When Selma called me back then to ask me to be a part of the organising committee that included Ralph Kirshbaum, Raphael Wallfisch, Steven Isserlis and Keith Harvey, among many other illustrious cello legends, well, how could one even think of refusing the honour?



Since then the events staged by LCS have embraced almost every facet of the cello world -- I say almost, when in fact year on year the committee dream up even more aspects to explore! On Sunday the 16th November it is the turn of the duo, a much neglected but hugely important aspect of cello history. Why? Well, think back

to a world before recordings, before mass travel and even before lightweight cello cases (if you've ever tried to lift an 18th century wooden cello 'coffin' you'll understand how so many instruments have in fact survived the centuries - by and large, they weren't moved around much!). Until as late as the early 19th century, well after Beethoven's keyboard/cello sonatas were written, cellist-composers were composing their sonatas to be played by two cellos alone, either as an equal duo, or most often in the form of a principal and accompanying voice. During the 19th century and the rise of the cello virtuoso, masters such as Gruetzmacher, Piatti and Klengel took some of the best of these pieces and, for better or worse, turned them into fully fledged piano-accompanied works. They should be lauded for their research (in the days before IMSLP-- imagine!) and for bringing pieces to light that might otherwise have lain forgotten by the world at large; but it is always fun to rediscover the sources and explore the works in their original form.

An obvious example is the huge output of Luigi Boccherini (celebrated, you may remember, as part of the LCS season in 2005, his Anniversary year). Among the many gems of his sonatas, all of which were written and published as two lines of music, a solo cello, and an accompanying one, is the Sonata in Bb, G565. It's instantly recognisable as the famous concerto in that key, but

when heard in this context it sounds altogether very different and more intimate--challenging of course, when played by two cellos, but immensely rewarding nevertheless.

It is well worth taking any of the standard Baroque sonatas: Vivaldi, Barrière, Eccles even, and exploring the possibilities of playing them with just two cellos. It's certainly no easy matter for the accompanying cello either, as they would have been expected to fill in the harmony where required, a skill that is all but lost today -- maybe the subject of a future LCS forum?

Even after the advent of a keyboard in almost every musician's home, and the prevalence of the duo sonata, some diehards continued to write in the genre of two cellos, and thanks to dedicated publishers, we can enjoy these. But beyond that, the sound of not one but two cellos, seems to have inspired a few to explore the rich sonorities further, and some of these works will be heard in the concert on the 16th November.

One that won't be heard however, for reasons of scale, is a piece scored for two cellos and huge orchestra by the Hungarian composer Emanuel Moór. Now I have to declare a personal interest here, as I was fairly instrumental-- pun intended-- in seeing this glorious work brought back to light only last year. But the journey towards its discovery involved the larger cello community, and especially the LCS co-founder Keith Harvey. Back in 2001, I was persuaded to start a record label, inspired, as it happens, given the context of this article, by hitherto unrecorded sonatas of Boccherini. One of my most important supporters was Keith, a cello hero of mine since as long as I can remember, who most generously made his extensive music library and recording collection available to me.

One of the first Cello Classics releases was 'Great Moments in Cello Playing' (OK, I was new to the game, and didn't realise CD titles needed to be a bit snappier!) and the opening track was of Zara Nelsova playing the Prelude by Emanuel Moór. Who? I'd never heard of him. But it turned out that 100 years earlier, he was the toast of Europe, and lauded by Pablo Casals no less, as one of the great composers of the day. Shortly after that release, I was contacted by a distant relative of Moór's, thanking me (!) for issuing the only CD ever released containing that composer's music, and did I know there was a huge amount of music written by Moór for cello-- sonatas, concertos and even a cello quartet? I didn't, but a bit of research, not least at our own Westminster Music Library, which incidentally owes its own existence partly to Moór's estate, revealed many of the forgotten



gems. The result was that I persuaded Gregor Horsch to take on the challenge and produce the first ever recording devoted to Moór, Cello Classics CC1017.

It was at yet another LCS event, that I happened to be chatting to Li Wei Qin, then a recent Fournier award winner. He had just given an astonishing performance of Peteris Vasks' 'Das Buch', and I was able to persuade him to record it for Cello Classics, along with other works for solo cello. When I asked Li Wei, what he'd like to record next, he said, "Well, what about something together?" I vaguely remembered there was a Moór work for two cellos and orchestra, written as it turned out for Casals to play with his wife, Guilhermina Suggia (not all the history books are in agreement about whether they were actually married, but you get the general idea). All I knew about the work, apart from seeing the score of course, was that Casals and Suggia had toured it in Russia in 1908 and at the first performance, received six curtain calls, and had to repeat the second movement as an encore.

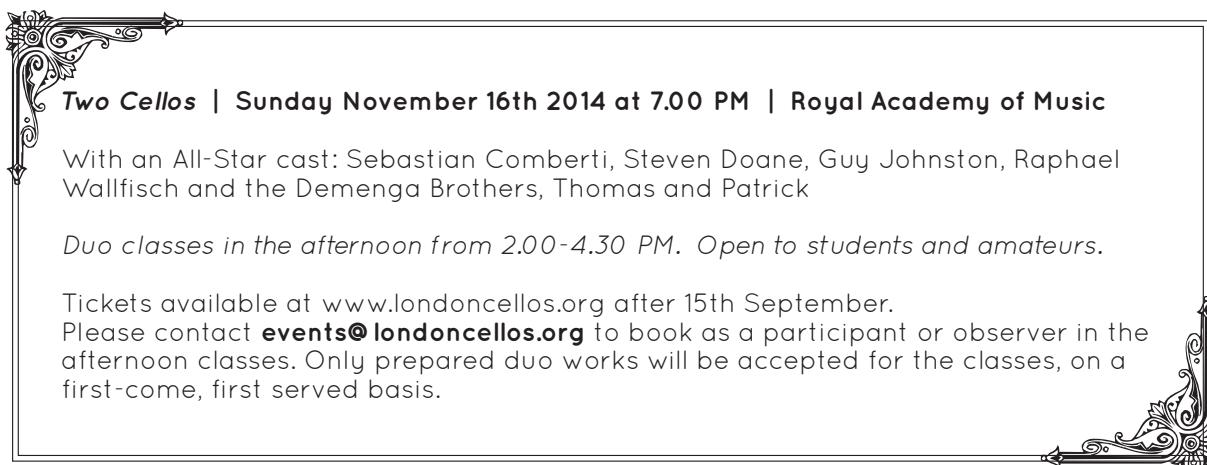
On the strength of that, we decided it must be possible to make something of the piece, and duly arranged the recording, to take place in Li Wei's adopted home city of Singapore, with his Conservatoire's excellent orchestra. Even with all the research I had done, and the reports of the work's early success, I must confess my heart was in my mouth as the opening bars unfolded-- what if the reports were exaggerated, and its obscurity was in fact justified? As is probably obvious, I needn't have worried; the four-movement work echoes Brahms, Dvorak, Strauss and even early Schoenberg, has wonderful soaring melodies, and is surely a magnificent addition to the repertoire (call me biased). I sincerely hope the piece is taken up in the concert hall; it's not easy-- Li Wei complained that one particularly

demanding passage was the hardest thing he'd ever had to play-- but rewarding nonetheless. Of course it's a shame we couldn't include it in the concert on 16th November, but the size and complexity of the orchestra make it a challenging and costly proposition.

So instead Raphael and I will be playing a delightful party piece that Selma Gokcen introduced to us. Despite the fact that we share a long family connection, Raphael and I had never played together, until I invited him to teach on a cello course I was starting in the Tuscan hills. Selma, who also teaches on the course, came up with the Piatti "Serenade",

and we instantly fell in love (with it). It may not be the most profound music ever written, but it's huge fun, rather in the manner of an Italian operatic duet.

Also not as well known as it should be is the neo-Baroque Suite for Two Cellos and Piano by Giancarlo Menotti. It was written in 1973 for Piatigorsky, with whom Raphael was studying at the time. I'll leave it to him on the 16th November to relate the circumstances of its composition (the Russian accent doesn't work too well on paper!). Worth looking out for is Raphael's excellent recording of the *Fantasia* for cello and orchestra by this all-too-seldom heard composer.



**Two Cellos | Sunday November 16th 2014 at 7.00 PM | Royal Academy of Music**

With an All-Star cast: Sebastian Comberti, Steven Doane, Guy Johnston, Raphael Wallfisch and the Demenga Brothers, Thomas and Patrick

*Duo classes in the afternoon from 2.00-4.30 PM. Open to students and amateurs.*

Tickets available at [www.londoncellos.org](http://www.londoncellos.org) after 15th September.  
Please contact **events@londoncellos.org** to book as a participant or observer in the afternoon classes. Only prepared duo works will be accepted for the classes, on a first-come, first served basis.

## On the Edge

### Sacred Fire

• Zoë Martlew

Wrapped in tin foil, running as fast as I can under a green strobe whilst scrubbing a furious tremolo behind my heavily amplified bridge, I'm chased to the floor by two dancers in luminous alien bodytards. Flat on my back, arm movement triggering video sensors, I play some long high harmonics with what's left of the bow, trying to disguise my heavy breathing pushing the cello up and down under the now still spotlight.

I'm on stage somewhere in Dusseldorf as part of an experimental dance theatre production, surrounded by eye-wateringly expensive electronics equipment from IRCAM in Paris, my senses hyper-tuned for the choreographic changes that cue my semi-improvised part, instructions for which I'd received barely three hours previously.

As usual, the phone had rung the day before asking if I'd be able to fill in for someone. Of course, I said as usual, no problem. Then, as is

now my habit, I put the phone down, counted to ten and tried to figure out what I'd got myself into this time.

You see, I'm the person they call when they need someone to do something really weird and difficult at no notice--a scenario that is doubtless the by-product of a constantly evolving, kaleidoscopic life as a musician.

Already drawn to contemporary music as a teenager, I spent my twenties performing scores resembling astrophysics charts, music that my former cello teachers Christopher Bunting, Joan Dickson and David Strange would have agreed went somewhat beyond the demands of Popper's High School of Cello Playing.

Whilst such radical technical antics and relentless, brain crunching helped acquire a working six octave fingerboard geography and a certain

geekygratification, the countless hours of unpaid practice, angry beardy weirdy audiences, beginnings of raging tendonitis and a profound longing for melody led me to resign from eight contemporary music ensembles in a single day.

At which point I tried Everything Else. Theatre, chamber music, folk, rock, pop, jazz, film, performance art, radio and TV presenting, lectures, masterclasses, blogging, you name it.

Down the pit of *Les Mis*, a trumpet player saw my desperate features a mere two shows in and said, “Don’t worry, love. The first 16 years are the worst”, and then went back to watching the footie on his phone whilst playing the next cue.

In the cavernous studios of Abbey Road I witnessed the UK’s finest orchestral and ensemble soloists die slow deaths in D minor at 40 b.p.m., paid at the best rates per hour.

In a category A prison our piano trio played Ravel and Shostakovich to serial sex offenders. An inmate put up his hand afterwards: “Is it marked *senza vibrato* at the beginning of the first movement?”

You just never know who’s in the audience.

During a workshop with autistic kids, a profoundly deaf boy in a wheel chair suddenly lunged forward to shove violent fingers into my cello’s f hole. It was quite clear he’d had enough of my funky E Lydian.

There is no more demanding school of improvisation than education work. That, and “Improp- era”, a crazily talented group who invent operas on the spot using instructions from the audience.

“OK folks, the musicians will now perform for you Humpty Dumpty in the style of Vaughan Williams, Palestrina and Stockhausen. Starting.... NOW”. It’s like walking the plank.

But perhaps not as scary as the orchestral solo, working your way through a symphony in anticipation of those few solo bars with all your colleagues listening. Research shows that the adrenaline performers experience can be as high as that of a jet fighter pilot during combat.

The experience gave me new insight into the extraordinary speed with which British orchestras put concerts together, barely playing through the programme before the concert. It was moving to witness the heroic resilience of those orchestral musicians: trudging up and down the M1 late at night, dawn check-ins at Luton airport, disgruntled families back home, still managing to pull world class performances out of the bag in the face of frequently useless and wildly over-



paid conductors year in year out.

An orchestral novice still enraptured with the wonderful music, I turned round to the comatose guy sitting behind me during a break in a Brahms rehearsal. “How many times do you think you’ve played this piece?” I asked him. “Oh, “ he said, “maybe five, six hundred times.”

For this reason alone I would never take an orchestral job. The sacred fire which fuels this marvelous life as a musician is too precious to douse in the name of security.

So I started to write my own music and words, manifesting in my one-woman cabaret romp *Revue Z: a blonde, a cello, a whip and a lot of digital playback...* which hits the Wigmore in 2016 and elsewhere, as my website will explain.

And Schott’s have just taken me on this year as composer! Hooray! This year they are publishing four of my cello pieces and two small choral pieces. You’ll recognize my stuff as there’s a large “Z” printed on each cover.

By the time you read this, I’ll have spent a fortnight performing and coaching at Southeast Asia’s first ever chamber music festival in Saigon, premiering works for cello, video and electronics in Copenhagen, taking part in a London Sinfonietta concert in Singapore and dressing up as “dead Venus” for an improvised performance and DJ piece back in Denmark.

The email this morning: “Will you be happy to wear purple contact lenses, have movement sensors attached to the bow and sing some phrases in Danish?”

But of course!

[www.zoemartlew.com](http://www.zoemartlew.com)

# Cello Talk

## “Thumb-Frets” for Beginners

• Michael Bird

I took up the piano at age eight – and the cello at age 65. I am acutely aware of that 57-year gap and am always looking for dodges, wheezes and cheats to help fill it. (Art is amoral. My art is, anyway.) Quite why I took up the cello at that particular time I don’t know, but I’d had for some years a growing urge to perform in chamber music, Beethoven quartets especially. But not in a way that would draw particular attention to myself; somewhere in the lower depths would suit me nicely; I toyed with the viola briefly but found it just too uncomfortable to hold and quickly gave up.

I knew that good rhythm and rich tone were important – but nothing was more painful than bad intonation. As a late starter I felt impelled to use any means to get my notes in tune. This is why I invented Thumb-Frets.

A Thumb-Fret is a little lump, bump or ridge on the *underside* of the neck precisely located opposite certain notes: in my case opposite B, C and D on the A string: that is two semitones, three semitones and five semitones from the nut. They are exactly the equivalent of those big stripes or other highly-visible markers on the *top* of the fingerboard which announce to the whole world that you don’t know where the notes are. My other objection to visual markers, besides the public humiliation, is that that there are already too many things to watch: the sheet music and the conductor or, in small groups, your fellow-players. The sense of touch is, by contrast, strictly private to you, and most people don’t know you are cheating. They may however remark favourably on the accuracy of your intonation.

I usually place either my first or second finger opposite my thumb when the thumb feels one of those lumps. When the *first* finger is opposite the B, C or D fret, of course I get B, C or D. When the *second* finger is opposite the B, C or D fret, I get B flat, B natural and C sharp. So, on the A string we have located A, Bb, B, C, C sharp and D – and their equivalents on the three other strings. You might ask, why not go on even further up? Well, with first finger on E, we are in fourth position and that is easily found in the traditional way, by the fact that the thumb is in the crook of the neck of the cello. Come back a semitone and you have E flat or what I call “three-and-a-half”

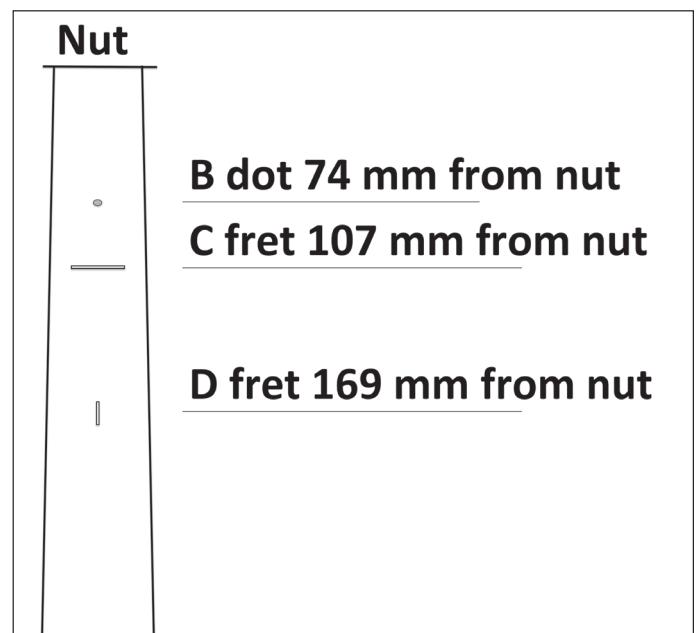
position. Besides I want to keep things simple, and three is a number even I can manage.

The three Thumb-Frets obviously have to be different from each other so you know where you are by feel, especially when in a hurry. My three are: a **dot** in the middle of the neck; a **cross-strip** athwart the neck; and a **lengthwise-strip** along the middle of the neck, thus:

- opposite the B on the A-string;

— opposite the C; and — opposite the D.

They are very easily made from either string or rubber bands. The dot is just a knot. The three frets are held down with Scotch tape, which endures for months.



The easiest way to locate the Thumb-Frets is by ear, or with a tuner. Just make a mark on the finger-board next to the A string with a very soft pencil for the notes B, C and D, then follow round with the edge of a strip of paper and make a mark on the bottom of the neck. On the accompanying diagram the distances shown, of 74, 107 and 169 millimetres from the nut respectively for B, C and D, are applicable to a stop (string-length) of 666 millimetres on my 1760s English cello, about four percent shorter than the normal full-size of 692 mm. On a full-size cello the three distances would be 77, 111 and 176 mm if you wish to do it mathematically.

### **Some queries I have received:**

**Do the Thumb-Frets hinder the movement of the thumb?** Not unless you are addicted to squeezing the fingerboard with a vice-like grip that any teacher will tell you is all wrong. The more easily I know my location the more willing I am to let go. The most adventurous child is the one who feels most secure; same with my left thumb.

**I was wondering about the efficacy of the lengthwise-strip - how long is it? If too long, it would not define position with sufficient precision.** The strip is just one centimetre long. A semitone is 3 centimetres in that area, so if you played with your thumb on the end of the strip instead of the middle you would be out by half a centimetre, or

one sixth of a semitone. If all amateurs could be that accurate, we'd be very happy campers.

**Do the Thumb-Frets render unnecessary proper “mapping” techniques for landing the right finger in the right place?** Certainly not: Thumb-Frets and mapping should complement each other. Do the mapping-move first, but verify with the Thumb-Fret. And of course your ear.

**A last point:** it is not essential, but when learning a new piece I put handwritten marks on the score under the note in question: a red dot for the **dot**, a red squiggle for the **cross-strip** and a different red squiggle for the **lengthwise-strip**. Design your own personalized squiggles!

## Of Special Interest

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Cellists are always talking about Bach and bowing, it's no secret! The possibilities are endless and as our tastes change over the years, the articulation we hear in performances and recordings varies more and more. The London Cello Society has tracked down two cellists in the know to help us understand what we can do to emulate the playing style of Bach's era - and there's more to come in the next issue!



**Susan Sheppard** studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Derek Simpson and afterwards with André Navarra. In her 20s she began to play the baroque cello and was soon one of this country's busiest performers on period instruments, playing principal cello with the Academy of Ancient Music, the London Classical Players, and most recently the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, of which she is a founder-member. She has given concerts in many parts of the world, including Poland during the rise of the Solidarity movement, where a member of the audience told her that he believed her to be the first baroque cellist to perform in his country since the 18th century. Susan has recorded the complete chamber music of Handel with the ensemble L'École d'Orphée and made the first period instrument recording of all nine Vivaldi cello sonatas, for CRD records. In 1999 Susan recorded

the six solo suites of J.S. Bach on CD for Metronome Records and in 2000 was artist in residence at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, for the 250th anniversary of Bach's death.

“For many years I have taught baroque cello at the Royal Northern College of Music and Trinity Laban Conservatoire. However, one of the most interesting aspects of my job is that I teach many ‘modern’ cello students who are keen to learn about baroque style and use that knowledge when playing their modern cellos. Most of these students bring along a Bach suite, very often finding the bowing (articulation) marks in the manuscripts we have of the suites very hard to play convincingly. They are often tempted, like the majority of 20th century editors, to change these bowings to ones which ‘work’ better.

Possibly the greatest revelation for players taking up the baroque cello is that playing Bach's articulations is much - and I mean much - easier with an 18th century style bow which is lighter and more suited to the subtly varied strokes required than the Tourte-style bow which plays sustained legato so well.

When I ask these students to try my baroque bow they are always impressed by how well it works in Bach. They ask if they could use one on their modern cellos but I don't think that is the answer. Much more practical is to simply move your hand up the stick two or three inches (the exact distance is up to you) and make sure your second and third fingers are on the hair to maintain more or less the hold you

would use back at the heel. The bow instantly feels lighter and more manoeuvrable, making common Bach patterns, such as 3 notes under a slur followed by 3 separate, much easier.

Many of my students adopt this small change and so far none of them have had disapproving comments about their bow hold in exams. Actually, I doubt the examiners even notice!"



**Charles Medlam**  
studied the cello  
with Jane Cowan  
in London, Maurice  
Gendron at the  
Paris Conservatoire,  
Wolfgang Herzer  
in Vienna and  
Heidi Litschauer  
in Salzburg before  
becoming interested  
in the bass viol

and baroque cello at Nikolaus Harnoncourt's performance practice classes. He founded London Baroque with Ingrid Seifert in 1978 and has played some 2500 concerts with the group world-wide. He plays bass viol, modern and baroque cello in approximately equal measure. His book "Approaches to the Bach Cello Suites" was published in 2013.

"Cellists worldwide have elevated the Bach suites to almost biblical status, and it is no surprise that belief systems have grown up, which largely obscure their original function. It is as good as certain that Bach wrote the suites for himself to play on a *violoncello da spalla*. This "arm-cello" was large enough to be played at cello pitch, but small enough for violinists to play using their habitual diatonic fingerings, thus solving at a stroke all fingering problems.

Despite this new information, cellists will still want to interpret these master works and some will wish to investigate "period" performance and baroque bows. What was the normal cellist's bow hold in the baroque era? Judging by iconographical evidence and descriptions in treatises, it looks as if the eighteenth century cellist held his bow much



like his modern counterpart, but usually with the hand some distance away from the frog. Most baroque bows work well if we put our fourth finger where we normally put our first, and some balance better with the hand even further away from the frog.

Unlike the Tourte model, early bows vary widely and one has to react to the differences. Using a baroque bow with metal strings, however, is less successful. It needs the rough surface of gut strings to generate resistance for the more rhetorical articulation of the baroque, and additional friction to seek out the colour of the upper partials, which are more present on the lighter baroque instruments. In contrast, our modern set-up is perfect for sheer volume and the seamless legato required for later music.

This particular cellist, however, believes that there is close to nothing in the baroque vocabulary which cannot be realised with conventional equipment. The head is so much more important than the fingers."



# Members' News & Views

## • From Peter Ball:

The sixth London Cello Society Amateurs' Cello Day was held in June, led by Gill Walshaw in the home of Mariette and Peter Ball in Wimbledon. The day was once again made into a great success by Gill's imagination, inspiration and vitality which motivated us all to play to our best abilities.

The 12 of us started together en masse. We improvised to a short melody played by Gill. We listened to a masterclass when Claire bravely played from a Bach suite. We broke into quartets where we played Cleverness by Haydn, a Pavanne and a piece from Mellow Cellos. We were blessed with a sunny day so lunch was in the garden with treats brought by participants. We then formed two sextets and prepared for the final session with all 12 of us together again. We played an extract from *Salut d'Amour* arranged in two parts. It was a great experience with a house ringing to the tones of cellos playing together.

## • From Lionel Handy:

My CD with pianist Nigel Clayton 'From Bohemia to Wessex' has just been released. This features Martinu Sonata no. 2 and the world premiere recordings of the Sonata by John Barton Armstrong and the Sonatina by Peter Thompson. The Barton Armstrong is a large scale work in one movement and the Thompson a concise ten minute delight in three movements. The CD is Sleeveless SLV1011 and is available from Sleeveless Records: info@sleevelessrecords.com and Amazon.

## • From Richard Holmes:

Following the successful prototype Holmes-Maslanka Starter bow which incorporates a half size French style double bass frog with a thicker full size cello stick, a further eight more are currently being made to be ready sometime this autumn. The bow enables cellists to try out my new bow hold which I think has many advantages over the usual one, including the possibility of varying the hair tension while playing. Any cellists who are interested, should contact me at holmesdrs@gmail.com. I am hoping to eventually conduct trials of the new bow.

## • From Marilyn Sansom:

I would like to offer the Barenreiter Urtext edition of the six Bach Suites, for £15 (+ postage) and two paperback archive books on Casals (with many photos of his life) and

Fournier, in a series of *Les Grandes Interpretes* in 1955 (covers worn, £5 each, plus postage). Also, "Jacqueline Du Pre, A Genius in the Family" by Hilary and Piers Du Pre, 1997 (hardback, £9, plus postage), and a stainless steel cello sound post setter (£8, plus postage). I also have two vintage 'coffin' cello cases, if anyone wants solid storage boxes. These need to be collected from the Canterbury area - price to be agreed. Please contact marilyn.sansom@me.com or call 01227 752275.

## • From Oliver Mansfield:

St. Dunstan's College Cello Day 2014 is a unique and remarkable opportunity for students, parents, teachers and enthusiasts who love the cello to come together. The day includes Parent/Teacher Workshop, Exam Workshop and a Q&A with the remarkable cellist Alison Moncrieff-Kelly, as well as a Recital and Masterclass with the fantastic duo Matthew Lowe (Cello) and JP Ekins (Piano). There will be stalls selling all manner of cello accessories as well as the chance to perform in a mass Cello Ensemble and performance workshops. For more details visit: [www.oliver-mansfieldcellist.co.uk](http://www.oliver-mansfieldcellist.co.uk)

1st November 2014

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• **Robin Aitchison** and **Sarah Mnatzaganian** are pleased to announce their next international bow exhibition, Take a Bow 2014 which takes place from 18 October to 30 November. Over sixty bows by thirty five makers will be available for testing and purchase at their workshop home at 7 Cambridge Road, Ely CB7 4HJ. Players wishing to visit the exhibition in Ely are invited to make a three hour appointment, during which they will have sole access to the bows in a quiet and comfortable music room. To arrange your appointment, please phone 01353 668559 or email [aitchmnatz7@hotmail.com](mailto:aitchmnatz7@hotmail.com). For further details, see [www.aitchisoncellos.com](http://www.aitchisoncellos.com)

