38

Spring 2022

Newsletter Editors
Josh Salter and Kathy Weston
editor@londoncellos.org

Contact us
events@londoncellos.org

LONDON CELLO SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER

How to Fly Your Cello:
An Online Class – Tools for Making Music with Ease

Lisa Liske

During the time of COVID-19, as musicians are trying to make artistic sense of the challenges the world faces, I had the privilege last year to get caught up in the founding of The Cello Camerata with Wendy Warner and Jonathan Kramer. The Camerata was an online international weekly class for students (intermediate level and pre-professional), to play for master teachers. We had a very inspiring year and a half of global connection through our common obsession with the art of cello playing. This year, as people have resumed busyness in their immediate surroundings, I have begun a new project based upon my long-held quest to discover easy ways to access technical and interpretive freedom, and share these with students.

How to Fly Your Cello is a set of concise, time-efficient and comprehensive 'cello activities', the result of a career spent analysing the components of music-making. As a young musician, I undertook to keep developing as a cellist while pursuing an undergraduate degree in the liberal arts (the Great Books program at St. John's College). I sought distillations of cello technique so that I could maintain and continue to grow as an artist while in the midst of broader studies, and freelancing. I went on to become busy concertising, teaching and also parenting my own children, but always collecting and refining these distillations. I came to refer to them as *How to Fly Your Cello*, a metaphor for the glorious imaginary sensation of flying unfettered.

How to Fly Your Cello has now become a drop-in online space for immediate help with technique and musicianship. Together with occasional guest colleagues, I host this Saturday session for students to sign in any week with nuts-and-bolts musical and technical concerns for immediate solutions and inspiration. The Zoom class, accessible anywhere in the world with an internet connection, offers cello students of all stages a place to bring questions or frustrations. Teachers can refer students when they'd like someone else to reinforce work on a specific aspect of cello playing or repertoire, when another voice would be helpful.

Teachers are invited to sign in with their student to watch the session.

The class is an opportunity for teachers to have someone there 'in their corner' to assist in getting the message through if there is a stuck spot – a place where students can get an informal assist. This also provides a chance for me to keep developing my thoughts and processes for helping students grow in the art and craft of cello playing at this time when I have let go of a large studio in order to write. I am not accepting private students at this time, and this class is not the same as a cello lesson. Sessions are limited to four or five people, and are tailored to give attention to the specific issues students bring to the class that day.

Of course, my ideas owe much credit to all those cellists and teachers who have come before and whose playing, teaching and writing I have encountered either directly or indirectly. This I acknowledge with gratitude. These influences include: Pablo Casals (through his students I have encountered and the writing of others about him); Emanuel Feuermann (whose sister, the pianist Sophie Feuermann, I had the privilege to coach with over many years); Bonnie Hampton and Irene Sharp (my teachers during graduate school); Anner Bylsma (in masterclasses, a visit, concerts and through his book *Bach, The Fencing Master*); Steven Isserlis (in concerts and masterclasses, his writing and interviews and others he has coached); Hans Jorgen-Jensen; Early Music specialists Anthony Martin, Elisabeth LeGuin, David Wilson, Stephanie Vial and Barbara Krumdieck; Jonathan Kramer (cellist/ethnomusicologist and author of *What in the World Is Music?*); and innumerable wise teaching colleagues in our discussions about the art of teaching (especially Annette Costanzi, my pedagogy teacher). Most importantly, I owe much to my students over the decades of my teaching life. From them, I learned to ask the right questions. For them, I was determined to find some useful answers, to make easier this challenging instrument and the art of making meaningful music. Indeed, answers have often come from the students themselves. To all of these gifted contributors, I say thank you.

I hope you will spread the word, and consider joining the class if you are a student. If you are a teacher you can join by sending a student, and if you like also attending as a teacher-observer any Saturday morning.

- **Sessions take place Saturday mornings (Eastern Time, USA), 11am until noon on Zoom.**
  - sign up by the week any time up through 10 a.m. on the Saturday of the session you want to attend by sending an email to: communitycelloworks@gmail.com
  - send a $15 payment via PayPal: communitycelloworks@yahoo.com or Venmo: @Lisa-Liske
  - If there is more than one cellist in your household, the fee remains the same.

- **All levels, beginner through young professional, will benefit from this approach to analysis of the art of cello playing and music-making.**
  - Parents practising with their young children are welcome to sign up for a session with their child or alone.
  - All students (age 3–adult) are welcome, and all levels of playing (beginner through young professional, and adult amateur).

You can read more about Lisa Liske here:
https://thecellocamerata.wordpress.com/about/
and here: https://communitycelloworks.com/

Of Special Interest

Cellos, Concert Halls, and the Holy Grail of Musical Acoustics: Some Personal Musings • Michael Jameson

In theory, at least, it should all be so very simple – but it isn't! Take your bow and draw it across a taut string. The friction created by the interaction between the two causes the latter to miraculously come to life, as the mechanical force exerted by the former excites what we call – somewhat simplistically – *vibration*.

Basic physics reveals that this beautifully simple scenario affords an almost perfect acoustic signal source. But there's a perennial problem, which instrument makers, acousticians and architects have grappled with for centuries.

Most of us will have played on simple 'box' cellos or practice cellos at some point. Several years ago, I helped prepare a so-called 'Trench Cello' used during the First World War, which was subsequently played by Steven Isserlis on a recording made for the Hyperion label. Designed to be packed up (if necessary at great speed!) into a rectangular wooden box, which doubles as a crude resonator, it was at best rudimentary, though anybody who has heard the recording can only marvel at the range of tone colours which Steven managed to coax from it.

But most primitive cellos – if they even deserve such a title – have no such added sophistication. I remember asking Mstislav Rostropovich about his first ever childhood cello which (using his own brand of memorably idiosyncratic English!) he described to me as 'just a broom-handle with a string stretched along it'. Needless to say, it produced virtually no audible sound at all, lacking any form of resonator.

Traditionally, as we see from even the most primitive bowed instruments, the resonator was usually a crudely fashioned wooden box, sometimes a hollowed-out gourd, or in other cases, nothing more than a desiccated animal skin stretched across a wooden frame.

Each of these configurations, however, enabled the sounds produced by the vibrating strings to be amplified, because the much greater surface area of the box, gourd or stretched skin could now interact with the surrounding air, and create the sound pressure waves which we perceive as musical sounds.

It is clear that the great Cremonese instrument makers, such as Antonio Stradivari and the Guarneri dynasty, and legendary Venetian cello makers such Domenico Montagnana and Matteo Goffriller, and also David Tecchler of Rome, devoted considerable time and energy to researching and experimenting with overall cello dimensions, and with the thicknessing and arching used in the construction of their instruments.

But in Stradivari's case, all of his earlier cellos were constructed to a much larger pattern than many modern cellists might have imagined, and all but two of these early Strad cellos, the *Medici* (1690) and *Castelbarco* (1699), have been considerably reduced in size.

The *Medici*, for example, has a body length of 792mm, but sometime after 1700, Stradivari devised his 'Forma-B' model, whose body length of around 762mm is much closer to the overall dimensions used today, of 742 to 760mm approximately.

Several factors influenced the development of Forma-B, such as ease of playing, especially in higher positions, but no doubt acoustical considerations too played their part. No less fascinating, however, is the fact that these defining advances were achieved with a degree of mathematical exactitude which seems astonishing given that Stradivari and his contemporaries worked entirely by hand, creating masterpieces whose tonal and aesthetic qualities have seldom been equalled and never eclipsed.

But for all that, the past thirty years or so has witnessed a growing interest among modern instrument makers in understanding more about the physics of sound, and how science can enhance the craft of lutherie.

Today, modern technology often works hand in hand with traditional craftsmanship, as makers employ such techniques as wave form analysis to determine the factors which influence the ways in which the front and back plates of an instrument actually work. Nodal vibration points can be 'mapped' accurately, and even chemical analysis of varnish constituents can help to determine

which substances can least impede the vibrational characteristics of tone woods.

Given what we know about how the great makers of the past actually selected their materials, at least some of this might seem like little more than yet another attempt to re-invent the wheel! For example, an apocryphal story concerning the celebrated Austrian maker Jacob Stainer relates how forest villagers thought his countless hours spent with his ear pressed up against tree trunks while he tapped at them with a hammer to gauge their resonance was sure sign of madness. That his instruments were highly valued by Bach, Mozart and countless others would seem to suggest otherwise!

What about concert halls, those palaces of dreams in which great music is constantly recreated? One of my private passions on orchestral tours has always been to creep unseen into the main body of the hall well before anyone else shows up for rehearsal, and just enjoy the living, breathing ambience of these great acoustic spaces, where even silence is somehow magically, galvanically charged with a life-force all its own.

Of course, it all comes back to that same vibrating air-filled box, reminding us of the incredibly close affinities between the instruments we play and the halls in which we do so. Whether it be the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Symphony Hall Boston, Birmingham's Symphony Hall, Vienna's Musikvereinssaal, the Philharmonie in Berlin, not to mention a panoply of brand new architecturally stunning and acoustically dazzling venues such as the wonderful Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, or Shanghai's state-of-the-art Symphony Hall, there's little doubt that there's never been a better period in which the world's greatest instruments have been able to shine so brilliantly in buildings which seem tailor-made to bring out the very best they have to offer.

Cello Talk

Interview with William Pleeth: Part I • Selma Gokcen

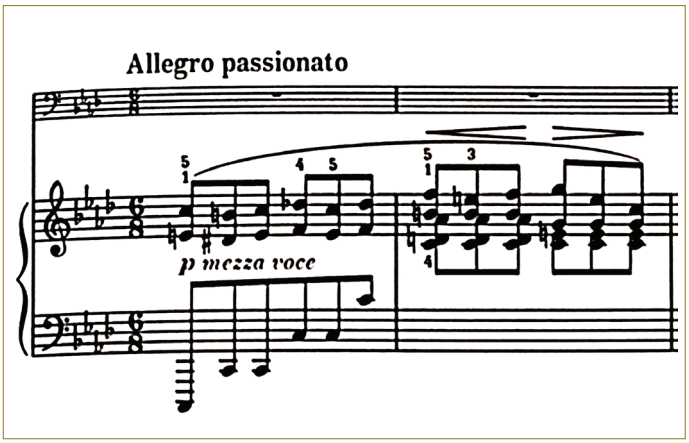
London, 1 September 1995

What are some of the first things you notice in a new pupil?
I talk to them to learn about their make-up, their mentality and their approach to music. What are their motives? I expect them to say 'I want to be a musician', not just a cellist, though few say so. My starting point is the person, and it's the person I get involved with immediately. I like to see how that person is balanced in order for something to come through the instrument when they play. Not only their aims, but aspects of their past studies interest me. A young French cellist once came to me, and it wasn't long before I discovered she was on the brink of suicide. She had spent one whole year with a teacher on nothing but finger exercises. If you're only like a doctor who dispenses medicine impersonally, you will not be able to do much for your pupils other than helping them with a fingering or bowing.

In your book Cello [published by Schirmer Books] you speak about the dangers of separating technique from music. Do you believe that the cello playing of today is in part a result of the emphasis on the perfection of technique, on the craft of playing?
First of all, perfection of technique doesn't exist. It's an ongoing process and it's endless. However, I believe that the way technique is handled actually limits its development. Reaching out for technique comes through encountering great works of art. For example, various sentiments can be expressed through different kinds of finger pressure upon the string. What worries me is that it is very natural to be unnatural. Fear, determination and tension are the enemies. Pupils come to me who are so intent on the fight to play the cello that they have actually closed off their capacity to listen. And, of course, how you concentrate comes out through the fingers and heart.

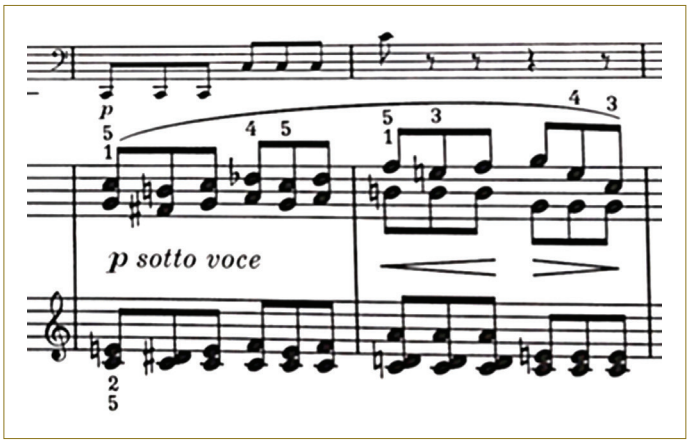
The question is: are you going to lower the music to your technique or raise the technique to meet the demands of the music? The Haydn D Major Concerto, first movement, has those arpeggiated passages that go right up the cello, and how do most cellists I hear play it? With 'convenience' fingerings that do little to express the soaring virtuosity of the music. One has to be as courageous as the passage. I hardly find that anywhere – comfortable, easy fingerings, playing it safe, playing what 'works'. This mentality limits technique rather than reaching for it.

I expect people to master any number of fingerings for the same passage. They should know the map of the cello in order to develop their versatility and imagination. If they know what sounds and characters are produced by various fingerings, then it gives them the right to choose. Cellists should be able to conceive colours before they put in fingerings, like good conductors who know what colours and nuances they want to hear from the various instruments. In the Brahms Op. 99 Scherzo, the repeated Cs in the cello part possess a contrasting colour, which is echoed by the piano in the opening bars of the movement [see Example 1].



Example 1: Brahms *Sonata* in F major, Op. 99, *Scherzo*: Bars 1–2

Most cellists, however, choose a convenient fingering which negates the colour, covering the sound as the passage rises by moving across to D string, rather than opening it up by finishing on the A string.

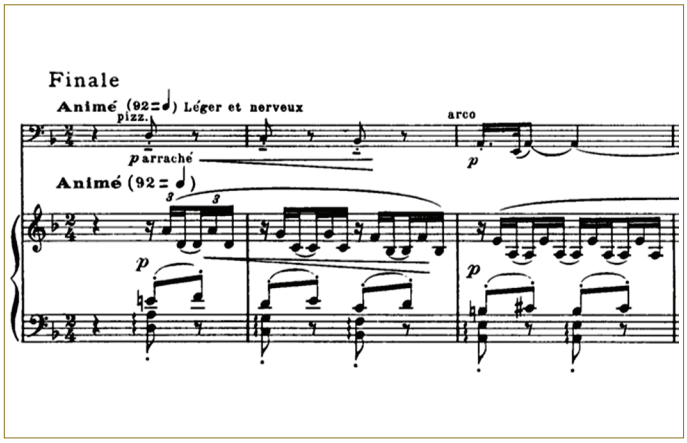


Example 2: Brahms *Sonata* in F major, Op. 99, *Scherzo*: Bars 33–34

The development of the germ of a student's thinking is what is important. Everything is there to be seen. Electricity was found, not made; it was there, after all, waiting to be discovered. This business of people running from one teacher to another, hoping to pick up this or that knowledge, slows down inventiveness and the powers of observation. Whatever the given abilities of the pupil, imagination and inventiveness must be developed. I never had a lesson after the age of sixteen.

In your teaching, you often mention aspects of the music related to a particular culture, tradition and language. Why is it important for the pupil to make these connections?

If you went to the theatre on different evenings and saw Shakespeare, Ibsen, Weill and Coward, would you expect the actors to perform them in the same way? And yet, what I hear in most musical performances is the equivalent of wearing the same clothes and mouthing the same words. Why? Because language and culture are not investigated. In the Debussy sonata, cellists often don't understand that it is a primitive work. Ravel and Debussy were fascinated by primitive, old cultures – Debussy in particular by early Spanish culture. The last movement figure is not flirtatious; it has a Moorish flavour [see Example 3].



Example 3: Debussy, *Sonate* (1915), *Finale*: Bars 1–3

It was a revelation to me to observe your teaching of the Bach solo suites. Could you speak about your approach to these works?

In a nutshell, forget about any bowings marked in the part, so that the pupil can see voicings and shapes clearly, as a keyboard player would. It helps to avoid making wrong slurs and brings out the inherent counterpoint. I abhor all these editions. [Using editions of Bach] is like coping with a garden full of weeds. It sidetracks the pupil, making it more difficult to discover the architecture of the music. Furthermore, students don't question them. I believe there is an edition in America which has no markings of any sort [Vandersall Editions].

Speaking of style, I occasionally get a reaction from

pupils by playing them *The Swan* in the style of Bach. They laugh and say that it sounds quite funny. 'Why then,' I ask, 'do you play Bach in the style of Saint-Saens and don't laugh?'

I believe these distortions of style have come about for several reasons. First of all, pitch has to do with *geist*. Sounds reflect the emotion of a piece, and, of course, over time pitch has been changing. All my life, I have played on pure gut A and D strings on my Strad. It should be a part of string players' education to learn to handle gut strings with their different textures and sounds. I once asked a pianist playing the Beethoven A major Sonata, Op. 69, to withhold the use of the pedal. He looked at me as if it weren't possible, but when he finished, he said: 'Isn't it marvellous? One hears all the lines so clearly.' We begin to approach what spirituality these composers were after through sound. And we can embrace less of this one-sided approach to sound that afflicts so much of modern performance.

Another phenomenon I encounter amongst cellists is the habitual vibrato. They can't switch it off, even if they want to. I remember one pupil in particular who vibrated in mid-air when she played on open strings! Again, it's a question of the physics reflecting the sentiment. What kind of sensitivity would make people play Palestrina like *Pagliacci* and vice versa? When we walk on ice, our feet instinctively seek a different tread than if we're walking on firm ground. When it comes to cello playing, we need to develop much more sensory awareness the capacity to listen.

What neglected works of value for the cello might you bring to our readers' attention?

There are two aspects to the host of wonderful nineteenth-century cello concerti. Most of the so-called second-class cello music doesn't get played, while much of the second-class violin music does. These concerti are also wonderful vehicles for learning – works by Volkmann, Molique, Lindner, D'Albert. As a kid, I learned thirty-two concerti with my professor Julius Klengel. This included a few of the standards, of course. It was part of our training. The Pizzetti sonata, for example, is lovely Verdi for the cello. Cellists are often brainwashed into thinking our repertoire is limited. I think it is our process of investigation that is limited. One must be nosy. There are thousands of Baroque sonatas. Even if we don't learn them all, we should know about them.

Regarding encores, I used to like to play something slow and send the audience to bed quietly. Not noisy applause-getters, as is so much the fashion. It's a habit of the ego to want to tickle the palate. If you have that other side, to be able to delight an audience with something magical is enough.

The problem is that as we go along the path of history, someone comes and rolls up the carpet behind us, behind our journey. Yet, in order to go forward, one must be able to go back. That's why it's all so limited. We have too many one-character musicians.

Cellozone – A New Ensemble-Playing Initiative for Adult Learners

• Michael Jameson

Emerging during the uncertainties of successive COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, *Cellozone – Ensemble and Play*, a novel concept in cello ensemble playing for adult learners and amateur cellists – is the brainchild of Hampshire-based freelance cellist Judith Fleet, a familiar face in the cello sections of the Royal Opera House Orchestra, LSO, BBC Concert Orchestra and many other leading UK orchestras.

After initially taking up viol playing aged eight, Judith was first attracted to the cello as a ten-year old, when hearing Dvořák's cello concerto for the first time proved to be a defining experience for her. While at school in East Sussex, her first cello teacher Peter Allington inspired and guided her early adventures in cello ensemble playing, encouraging his pupils to play in a variety of cello groups, and providing special arrangements as well as organising various ensemble-playing events, concerts and even short courses. As well as acquiring a deep interest in viol consort playing, Judith also began to play in a cello quartet, three of whose members went on to formal studies at music college.

At 13, she began studies with Florence Hooton,

and later entered the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, becoming a student of Stefan Popov, but her interest in ensemble playing quickly morphed into something more substantial, as a member of a Guildhall-based cello quartet called *Bow Belles*. The quartet proved hugely successful, and played regularly for a wide variety of functions and events taking place throughout the UK, and as players for *Live Music Now* concerts.

'Stefan Popov also strongly encouraged my interest in cello ensemble playing,' Judith relates, adding that 'we even had an arrangement for four cellos of the Bach *Chaconne*, in which the solo line was shared amongst the players!'

'I've always really enjoyed coaching young players in youth orchestras, and taking sectional rehearsals,' she continues, 'and so it wasn't a massive leap to see how all this could translate into an initiative aimed at adult learners and amateur cellists who want to explore ensemble playing in a non-competitive and relaxing atmosphere, where everyone is able to contribute without straying outside of their personal cellistic comfort zone.'

'We always include Bach Chorales, for example, which have really high value for developing that unique blend of sonority a cello group can create, and we have lots of other arrangements too, some designed to address specific technical challenges, and others just for fun.'

'But everybody gets to play together, and that can be a revelation, particularly for players who don't have regular opportunities to play with others, and it's such an important aspect of developing the self-confidence needed to try things which are a bit more adventurous … and there's always time set aside for anyone who might have prepared a solo piece which they just want to play in front of an audience of other cellists, but in a completely non-threatening atmosphere.'

Cellozone sessions have been held so far in the beautiful surroundings of Bury Court (www.bury-court.com), an idyllic complex of newly converted half-timbered barns and other buildings normally used as a wedding and function venue, near Bentley in Hampshire, and just off the main A31 road from Farnham to Winchester.

With ample space available to seat the players in a large circle, and with superb acoustics, the Bury Court team have generously made this performing space available for *Cellozone* events, and the venue is already hosting other chamber music events aiming to serve a growing local interest.

Repertoire encompasses a wide range of periods and contrasting genres, extending from early motets and Bach Chorale transcriptions to fun arrangements of popular pieces and other well-known favourites old and new. *Cellozone* also has the advantage of portability and events can be held at any suitable venue. Judith would welcome enquiries from any group of like-minded cellists (sessions are available for adults and children) who wish to learn more and develop their skills while playing together.

Numbers participating are usually around eight–ten players, so that everyone can enjoy exploring ensemble-playing techniques in a friendly, mutually supportive atmosphere under Judith's guidance. Cellists everywhere are warmly welcomed to take part in these unique ensemble-playing events.

Full details of future events and contact information can be found at www.cellozone.co.uk.

From our Members

• From Philip Egan
Obituary: Michael Nebe

Michael Nebe, cellist, teacher and conductor died on 8 October 2021 after a long illness fighting cancer. Michael was raised in Germany and came to London in 1970 to take his master's degree in music analysis at Kings College, followed by postgraduate studies with Florence Hooton and Colin Hampton at the Royal Academy of Music. He made his Wigmore Hall debut in 1977 and made extensive tours as a cellist and chamber musician in Britain, the USA, Europe, Canada and Australia and was guest lecturer at the conservatoires of Washington DC, Brisbane and Canberra. Michael was a member of the Piace Trio and from 1995 of the Plaegan Piano Quartet, latterly the Plaegan Piano Trio. From 1990 until his death, Michael was the musical director of the Whitehall Orchestra (formerly the Civil Service Orchestra), conducting ambitious programmes with the orchestra three times a year. During those years, he engaged many international artists, including a number of cellists: Leonid Gorokhov, Raphael Wallfisch and Jürgen Wolf among them. Michael also conducted the great Turkish pianist Idil Biret on a number of occasions in London and Istanbul. Alongside his busy conducting and playing career, Michael taught the cello and spent many years teaching with Bromley Youth Music Trust. In the aftermath of Brexit, Michael took British citizenship. Michael was a kind and generous man and will be much missed by family and music colleagues. He is survived by his civil partner of 47 years, Philip Egan.

• From Noel Moffat
The Sound of Pennies Dropping in Cello Beginner Land … Finally

1.Teacher was totally correct: no pulse, beat, counting = no music!

2. Exercise City! Feuillard, Popper etc. important: not too much time on these for oldies as we have 'ahem' remaining time issues.

3. Exams … Mixed feelings after five years of cello: essential for me (goal driven ex-judo player); not so for others: totally a personal choice.

4. Reading about music and musicians, watching and listening to music are all essential.

5. YouTube; an absolute go-to resource for learning cello. Long live the cello galácticos (not the same as slavishly copying them of course). The six Bach cello suites: ten cellists: ten totally different interpretations. And we thought scales were difficult enough!!

6. A few updated cello thoughts from a humble beginner. The more I learn the less I know seems to fit! But the more I love my cello.

Happy playing, fellow beginners

• From Nicci Whitaker
How Much Can We Fit in One Room and Still Teach?

When the door bursts open and a large, black cello case appears, I just have time to snatch my spike back out of the way so that Ruby, who follows the case into the room, does not trip over it, sending everything flying. That happened last week. Sophie is finishing her lesson and I want to hear the last page of Squire's *Tarantella* before she goes. A quick glance at my watch tells me we are over time.

'You'll just have to play it twice as fast,' I jest, and she does.

While Sophie plays and Ruby unclips and slides her cello out of its case, I try to work out how to get Sophie, her cello and bow, music, backpack and case out of the room and install Ruby. This is not a spacious room even when it's empty. As well as the three of us with our cellos, cases and bags, there is a keyboard and computer table, shelves with music, four chairs, two music stands and a wall covered in guitars. A bass viol dozes behind me in its musty case. It reminds of a puzzle I had as a child, which involved sliding numbered tiles around to get them in order. We manage, but I doubt we quite succeeded in maintaining a two-metre distance!

The LCS thanks our members Josh Salter & Kathy Weston for their expert assistance with our newsletter preparation.

Graphic Design • Maria Karamanou