



# VIOLA

## Shulman in Ireland

by Annette Caruthers

This spring the orchestra of Northwestern College, conducted by Mary Sorlie, made a tour of Ireland and England. The tour promoters wanted the group to play works by American composers and no one had ever played Alan Shulman's *Theme and Variations* for viola and orchestra in Ireland. As the work has a prominent harp part, and harp is the national instrument of Ireland, it seemed the perfect work for the tour. Elizabeth Cregan was chosen as the solo violist for these premiere performances. Elizabeth is half Irish, and for her giving the premiere performances in Ireland was a highlight of her career so far. I interviewed Elizabeth for this article in early July.

Elizabeth had first heard the work at the Viola Congress in Ann Arbor about 15 years ago, and it made such an impression on her that she still remembered that hearing, and knew she wanted to play it. She first worked on the piece in September of 2002 and began seriously preparing in February of this year.

Feeling really confident about performing from memory took a lot of serious preparation. As soon as she was able to play the piece at a performance tempo, Elizabeth started playing with the CD (recorded by Schotten) to test her memory. Then in March she began playing for people, including her husband and sister. These run-throughs were to tell her where any weaknesses in her memory were. In April she wrote it out twice... every note... from memory. Elizabeth also worked often by playing at half tempo, to test whether or not she really could anticipate the next few notes as she played. She says, "If I don't hear in my mind what note is coming up next, I don't really know it." When writing it out,

she hears it in her mind first.

Once the piece was basically learned, she started recording herself at least 50% of the time. When Elizabeth was sure of herself, she played for other professionals. She got ideas on better projection from Tom Turner and Stella Anderson, reworked some musical ideas with Sabina Thatcher, and got personal coaching and performance ideas from Alice Preves. She also performed the piece on her students' recital this spring, and at the orchestra's spring concert at Northwestern College. This first performance with the orchestra did make her a bit nervous, but she learned to focus on her own part and trust the conductor to bring the ensemble along with her.

Elizabeth does yoga regularly, and during the preparation time she began doing much more of it to stay relaxed. With deep relaxation she would take the time to go through a complete performance in her mind in real time. In her coaching sessions she focused on setting a routine for performances; stopping for a few minutes before stepping on stage to prepare mentally and breathe deeply. Elizabeth believes, "I'm just a vessel for the music," and that in performance, God speaks through the music. Part of her routine is to picture the Mother Mary and call on her for help in the performance. In Limerick it was cold and clammy, and this performance was especially important to Elizabeth. When she pictured the Mother Mary and asked for her help, she could feel an electric current come through her body, and gave a great performance! This electricity she felt "turns fear into excitement" for the performance.

I asked Elizabeth what advice she

might have for someone doing a similar performance. She was very clear about this: you must really know the piece. Know the notes and what you want to do with it. "And know that you are not alone in performance. Let go of your ego; let go of your fear." People want you to succeed and to play beautifully; audiences are very supportive.

Another question was about how the performances might affect her teaching. Elizabeth said she was pleasantly surprised to find that after hearing her play on her students' recital and learning of her performances in England and Ireland, many of her students' parents look at her differently now and are more aware of her expertise. Her students also take her more seriously. The change she wants to make is to help her students more to "play from their hearts."

*Elizabeth Cregan is principal violist with the Minnesota Sinfonia, and has performed with a variety of orchestras including the Minnesota Orchestra, the Minnesota Opera, the San Francisco Ballet and Bolshoi Ballet orchestras, and the Yamagata Symphony Orchestra of Japan. She gave the world premier of the Domine Concerto for viola and orchestra in Los Angeles and in Minneapolis. Elizabeth has a private studio at her home in St. Paul.*

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