The 33rd INTERNATIONAL VIOLA CONGRESS
June 1st to 5th REYKJAVIK, ICELAND
Official Congress Programme

Wednesday June 1st – The Nordic House (Norræna húsið)
10:00 International Viola Society Meeting (Board only)
15:30 Masterclass: Yuri Bashmet
17:00 Nordic Viola Society Meeting (General)
21:00 Festival Club – Kaffi Reykjavík

Thursday June 2nd – The Culture House (Pjóðmenningarhúsið)
09:00 Registration in The Culture House (09.00–17.00)
09:00 Masterclass: Claudine Bigelow
09:30 Lecture: Alexander Technique: Dan Barach (Music Room)
10:30 Masterclass: Matthew Dane
12:00 Lunch (not included in the registration fee)
13:00 Lecture: Icelandic Music – Past and Present
Bjarki Sveinbjörnsson, musicologist
14:00 OFFICIAL WELCOME
Dr. Michael Vidulich, IVS president,
Sesselja Hallárdóttir, ICEVS president,

Young Viola Players: Suzuki Viola Pupils – Sarah Buckley,
Jón Leifs:

Icelandic Folk Songs (arr. Ingvar Jónasson)
The Icelandic Viola Society Members

14:30 Recital: Icelandic Music
Ólafur Axelsson: Portraits of Angels for Viola and Piano – Premiere
Stefanía Ölaísdfóttir, viola
Víkingur Ólafsson, piano

Áskell Másson: Kadensa for Viola Solo
Pórunn Ósk Marinósdfóttir, viola

Þórkell Sigurbjörnsson: 6 Icelandic Folksongs for Viola and Piano
Þórarinn Mári Baldursson, viola
Kristinn Órn Kristinsson, piano

Mist Þórksdóttir: Lively Rag for Solo Viola
Svava Berndarósdfóttir, viola

Jórunn Viðar: Variations on an Icelandic Folksong for Viola and Piano
Guðrún Þórarinnsdóttir, viola
Sóleig Anna Jónsdóttir, piano

Elín Gunnlaugsdóttir: Kærelík mér kenn þekkja þinn for Viola, Violin and Voice
I attended the XXXIII Viola Congress at Reykjavik, Iceland, June 2-5, 2005 where I was invited to present a Lecture Workshop on the Alexander Technique and its application to Viola performance. My presentation was one of thirty three major events presented at the congress. Participants at the Congress included violists from Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Faroe Islands, Denmark, England, Germany, Holland, France, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Russia, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America. The institutions represented at the congress included the University of Minnesota, University of Iowa, University of Oklahoma, Hartt School of Music of the University of Hartford, University of Southern California, University of Montreal, Brigham Young University, Illinois Wesleyan University, University of Houston, SUNY-Oswego, Boise State University, Bethany Lutheran College, Hendrix College, Akademia Muzyczna Krakow (Poland), Fontys Conservatorium (Holland), Icelandic Academy of the Arts, Torshavn Music School (Faroe Islands), Norwegian State Academy of Music, Royal Northern College of Music (Manchester, UK), University of Queensland (Australia) and the Conservatorium of Music of Wellington University (New Zealand). Members of musical ensembles represented include the Iceland Symphony, Slovene Philharmonia, Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, Swedish Chamber Orchestra, Swedish Radio Orchestra, Royal Swedish Opera Orchestra, The Botticelli String Quartet (Of Texas Tech), Camerarctica of Iceland, Cross-Town Trio (USA), Darkwood Consort, and Duo Zelandia (New Zealand).

The conference consisted of lectures, masterclasses, concerts and outings. The lectures included discussions of The History of Icelandic Music by musicologist Bjarki Sveinbjornsson, The Timbre of the Viola by Icelandic Viola maker Hans Johannsson, and Music's Positive Contribution to a National Economy by Professor Agust Einarsson Phd. Econ. Since I have very little background in Icelandic topics, these lectures were very informative and helpful in understanding the character of Iceland and its people. All three lecturers spoke English very fluently and gave well prepared presentations with a touch of humor.

My lecture on the Alexander Technique was attended by participants from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Germany and the USA. I first presented the rationale for the Technique, how it came into being, and what the basic tenets of the Technique are. I asked for volunteers from the group to illustrate how these principles are applied in everyday movements. Once the basics of the Technique were presented, specific problems in viola playing were addressed. Three of the participants had specific problems which they discussed with me at the conclusion of the lecture workshop. I arranged to give these three individuals private one hour sessions. I found the response of the group to be very positive.

Pamela Goldsmith of the University of Southern California gave a very excellent lecture-recital of the J.S. Bach Suites for cello as transcribed and performed on the viola. She discussed the basic character of each of the following dances: the allemande, the courante, the sarabande and the gigue. In order to understand the Baroque performance style she felt that acquiring a Baroque bow was essential. She illustrated the capabilities of the Baroque bow by performing the E flat Suite. She also illustrated the art of
improvisation. She played the Sarabande of the E flat Suite as written, then on the repeat played an improvisation with added ornamentation. She gave members of the audience a notated version of this improvisation so that we could follow along as she played. I thought her class showed a great understanding of Baroque performance practices.

Of the master classes, two very famous violists Yuri Bashmet of Russia and Lars Anders Tomter of Norway presented classes in which they coached students in musical repertoire. Yuri Bashmet coached performers in the first movement of the Schubert Arpeggione Sonata, the first movement of Schumann’s Marchenbilder, and the Cadenza of the Penderiski Concerto. His class was disappointing. He seemed to have trouble expressing himself. His English language skills may have hindered him, but most people felt he is a great performer but not a good teacher. Lars Anders Tomter on the other hand is not only a masterful performer but a knowledgeable and effective pedagogue. He coached an Icelandic violinist on the Hindemith Op.11 No.4 Sonata and within five to ten minutes transformed his playing. By simply changing the angle of his viola to a more horizontal plane, and loosening up his torso with a rotary movement, this young man’s sound blossomed forth in an expansive wave of sound. A sound which had been stiff and uninteresting became free and beautiful. The next students that Lars Anders Tomter coached performed a Duo for two violas by Frank Bridge. Here he worked on their legato bowing. One of the performers held her upper arm too low in bowing and when she approached the frog did not use her elbow to precede the wrist in going from up bow to down bow. Once these adjustments were made the change in her legato sound was remarkable. Tomter’s ability to transform a person’s playing within minutes was one of the high points of this Congress for me.

Patricia Pollet, violist, from the University of Queensland in Brisbane gave a very fine master class. Pollet had a clear analytical approach. She found the basic weakness of each the participants and pointed out remedies. Each student was shown what the next step should be in their future development. I agreed with most of her assessments, and liked the fact that she was aware of the use of the body and how it affects the playing.

Matthew Dane of the University of Oklahoma gave a well thought out session on the first movement of the Schumann Marchenbilder. His approach was a note by note approach in which he coached every aspect of the musical and tonal requirements in building a phrase. I was impressed by his ability to take a performance that was quite ordinary and transform it into quite a stylistically satisfying one.

The last master class I attended was given by Lawrence Wheeler of the University of Houston. Wheeler is a very fine violinist with a beautiful Testore viola. Many of his comments to the students were excellent, but his understanding of the way the body works in performance is not appropriate from the Alexander Technique point of view. His methods may work in an endgaining way, but would eventually cause other tension problems.

I could not attend Claudine Bigelow’s master class because I was presenting my own lecture workshop at that time.
The two most important concerts of the conference were given by Yuri Bashmet and Lars Ander Tomter. Bashmet conducted the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, in which he performed the Hoffmeister Viola Concerto and the Shostakovich Sinfonia for Solo Viola and Strings. He also conducted the Schubert Symphony no.3 and the Britten Two Portraits. This was a highly successful concert. The Iceland Symphony responded very well to Bashmet's leadership. Most of the violists who attended this concert found that Bashmet's performance of the Hoffmeister Concerto was stylistically inadequate. He played all the notes but the tone quality and bow strokes were not in keeping with the Classical style. However the Iceland Symphony was obviously inspired by Bashmet's conducting and gave a rousing account of the Schubert 3rd Symphony. I was impressed by the exceptional quality of this orchestra when one considers that Rejkjavik is a city of 100,000 and the whole population of Iceland has only 300,000 people.

Lars Anders Tomter gave the most musically satisfying and exciting concert of the conference. He presented a recital including Robert Schumann's Adagio and Allegro, Vieuxtemps' Sonata in B major, Franck's Viola sonata in A, Brustan's Capricci for Violin and Viola, and Isang Yun's Duo. Every aspect of Tomter's playing, his dynamic contrasts, rhythmic pacing, lyrical phrasing, and tone colorations were all played with a serious purpose and natural spontaneity that elicited the most positive response from the participants of the Congress. I was also impressed by Tomter's well co-ordinated body use and relaxed stage presence, and beautiful tone. The sound he produced was one of great warmth and fullness. His instrument is one of the few rare Gaspar da Salo violas in existence. These instruments made around 1590 produce a dark velvety viola tone of great beauty.

Garth Knox was the third most famous violist at this congress. Unlike Bashmet and Tomter, Knox is a specialist in avant garde music by composers such as Luciano Berio and Hans Werner Henze. I have never been a fan of Berio or Henze but hearing Garth Knox perform Henze's Serenade (nine character pieces) for solo viola I was truly impressed with Knox's musicality and economical use of the bow. Knox's empathy for this music and his ability to project the inner core of this music to his audience has made me reconsider my attitude toward these composers. Perhaps Knox's playing was the most revealing to me of anything I heard at the Congress because he opened my mind to a whole category of music that I had formerly rejected.

Other concerts at the Congress featured various themes as follows: Icelandic music which featured Icelandic folk music in arrangements for viola and piano, a series of variations on an Icelandic folk tune, and the most significant work on this concert was by Elin Gunnlaugsdottir called Salmar atomoid for voice, flute, clarinet and string quartet. This was a very beautiful haunting work perhaps the most noteworthy Icelandic work of the Congress. The soprano Marta Guðrun Hallidórsdóttir had a beautiful voice which she used with consummate artistry. Interestingly enough her sister Hildigunnur Hallidórsdóttir who played violin in the ensemble accompanying her sister introduced herself to me as a former Alexander Student of mine from the Eastman School of Music. This was a surprise.
A second concert titled the Multifarious Viola featured unusual ensembles including viola, saxophone and piano, violin and viola, viola solo, and viola accompanied by string quartet. The combination of viola and saxophone has become a popular one and was featured last year at the congress held at the University of Minnesota. The most stunning and exciting performance of this concert was the Three Madrigals for viola and violin played by Steve Larson, viola and Annie Trepanier, violin. Steve and Annie are a married couple who have honed their skills as violin and viola duo to a level rarely encountered except in artists such as Perlman and Zuckerman. Korey Kondol of the University of Minnesota presented a premiere of Tivar for viola solo and string quartet. This was an exciting piece with a lively interchange between the viola and the string quartet. Basically I liked this piece but felt the composer could improve it by some revision.

A third concert titled Nordic Music offered compositions from Iceland, the Faero Islands, Denmark, and Norway which featured unusual combinations such as viola and harpsichord, viola and bass clarinet and viola and marimba. The fourth concert titled The Diversity of the Violin featured the music of France and Canada. A married couple, Matthew Dane, viola and Christine Jennings, flute from the University of Oklahoma performed a Baroque duo for flute and viola by Francois Devienne and then added a harp and performed the beautiful and exotic trio of Claude Debussy. Both works were performed with consummate artistry. Milhaud’s Quatre Visage for viola and piano were given a first rate performance by Ken Martinson of the University of Florida, and Jean Coulthard’s Rhapsody was played with passionate brilliance by Jutta Puchhammer-Sedillot of the University of Montréale. The French preoccupation with delicate colorations and dynamic subtleties was revealed in the Debussy and Coulthard while the Devienne and Milhau’d presented the love of humor and programmatic vignettes.

A fourth concert featured music for viola, viola d’amore and oboe form Iceland and Slovenia. A fifth concert titled the Diversity of the Viola featured a beautiful work I had never heard before Josef Jonsson’s Fantasia Elegiaca. Halvorsen’s famous arrangement of the Handel Passacaglia for violin and viola was given a virtuosic rendition by Lawrence Wheeler of the Univ. of Houston and Iceland’s most famous violinist Cudny Gudmundsdottir, who received her musical education at the Eastman School of Music and Juilliard School.

A fifth concert celebrating the 80th birthday of Luciano Berio was already discussed in my paragraph describing Garth Knox’s artistry. However this concert also featured Carlos Maria Solare who performed Berio’s Naturale for Viola, Percussion and Tape. Garth Knox presented one of his own works Viola Spaces for three violas. This was an ingenious work showing the possibilities of extending viola technique in new and untried ways.

A sixth concert featured the music of Finland and Sweden. Max Savinkangas a violinist and composer from Finland presented two of his own compositions for the viola. Both were experimental and highly avant garde pieces showing a lot of imagination and great virtuosic skill on the part of the performer. An interesting feature of his presentation was
his use of a viola which he and viola maker in Finland had designed which resulted in an instrument of a highly resonant tone on all the strings. This is a feature that is usually hard to achieve on most violas. On this same concert a Swedish violist Hakan Olsson presented two modern Swedish works for solo viola which were played with great beauty of tone and exceptional phrasing. The following day Hakan Olsson performed the Baroque Swedish composer, Johann Helmich Roman’s Assagio Nr.2 in g-minor for solo viola at Skalholt, an ancient Icelandic Church which we visited as part of a short five hour tour of Iceland called the Golden Circle Tour. This solo Baroque composition played so beautifully in the resonant acoustics of this ancient Icelandic shrine was one of the high lights of the Congress. Olsson’s artistic gifts were admired by all.

The seventh concert titled the Duo Zelandia featured a violist and guitarist from New Zealand. Donald Maurice, the violist and guitarist Matthew Marshall are both excellent performers and presented a program of varied styles from Vivaldi, Paganini, Schubert, Rodrigo and Piazzola.

As mentioned above the final day of the congress featured the Golden Circle Tour which included a visit to the continental divide, the geysers, a waterfalls, Skalholt (historical Church) and culminated in a banquet for the participants. After the banquet we returned to Reykjavik were we heard the final concert of the Congress which featured Sweden’s most famous violist, Henrik Frendin who performed on a Grande Electrik Viola with the accompaniment of Henrik Frisk on a computer. This concert was very well done. However when one compares the artistry of Garth Knox who has spent most of career performing only avant garde music to that of Frendin, who performs this music as well as other styles, one has to find Frendin’s approach shallow. He simply hasn’t discovered the inner core of the music.

I found this congress to be a very exciting and stimulating series of events. The ability to meet so many outstanding performers and pedagogues from such a variety of institutions and cultures, to exchange ideas and compare reactions was indeed enlightening. The exposure to Icelandic and Scandinavian music of composers I had no knowledge before this congress was a positive experience. My ability to enjoy and appreciate the more avant garde composers such as Luigi Berio and Hans Werner Henze, and to really evaluate a really definitive performance of this music (such as that of Garth Knox) to a competent but perfunctory performance is an insight I gained at this congress. While Lars Anders Tomter’s recital and master class were the crowning events of the Congress, the many beautiful performances and variety of styles employed by the various artists all had something unique and individual to offer. The master classes showed how the various teachers approach each student and solve their technical and musical problems. All of the above provides me with a lot of inspiration and corroboration of all the things I am doing right, and insights into things I can do better. I was gratified that my presentation of the Alexander Technique was attended by a truly interested group who were willing to participate in the class and even ask for private work at the conclusion of my presentation. I wish to thank those who provided the grants that made this trip possible.