

# THE ROAD TO VIENNA

From rural Denmark to Vienna's Musikverein, Rita Fernandes discovers the Scandinavian Cello School's distinctive educational ethos while on tour with its cello octet



The enchanting sight of dozens of glowing, white-gowned Viennese debutantes stops me in my tracks. They're adorned with tiaras and long opera gloves, and exude a girlish excitement about their imminent performance. It's 9.59pm on 18 January 2024, and as I'm bumped out of the way by other rushed ball attendees, I snap back to my original task – to find a spot in the Great Hall of Vienna's Musikverein for the 10pm opening ceremony of the 100th Vienna Philharmonic Ball.

Although I do find a rare spot, the best view by far is that from the dozen phone cameras peeking over the top of the crowd – a sight the first edition of the ball in 1924 would certainly not have included. And yet, as I observe the social elites (literally) fanfared in, feel the foot taps on the

154-year-old floor to the beat of the Vienna Philharmonic playing Johann Strauss II's *Unter Donner und Blitz*, and see hundreds of debutantes gliding effortlessly across the varnished wooden floors, I am transported back to those opulent times.

The reason I'm attending this exclusive ball is that for the past week I've been following a cello octet on tour, the final performance of which is at the ball. The tour began in a much more down-to-earth setting, however: on a farm.

That farm is the home of the Scandinavian Cello School (SCS), on the Danish coastline 40 miles south of Copenhagen. It was founded in 2016 by London-born, British-Danish cellist Jacob Shaw, who's now executive director. 'SCS was born out of a wish to provide a support network for cellists – and it now supports all musicians – for things outside "traditional" education,' says Jacob. The school offers mini-residencies, lessons and professional support for young cellists and ensembles. Its ethos is the Danish idea of the 'collective', as Jacob explains: 'We don't only practise together – we cook together, we fish together and we farm together.' In recent years, the school has gained considerable reputation within the industry by being linked to several competition laureates and up-and-coming players. 'SCS provides a calm and pastoral atmosphere, a wonderful balance between hard work, delicious food, meaningful conversations and satisfying performances,' says one of the school's youngest recruits, Luka Coetzee.

The school's SCS Cello Ensemble (an octet comprising Jacob and seven hand-picked young cellists) was going on tour – called SCS on the Road and taking place from 13 to 18 January. Their last one was partially cancelled owing to Covid, but nevertheless went viral when a photo of them playing for cows graced the *New York Times* front page.



Debutantes dancing in the Musikverein's Great Hall for the opening of the Vienna Philharmonic Ball

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The SCS Cello Ensemble performing in the Musikverein's Glass Hall at the Vienna Philharmonic Ball on 18 January

This year's ensemble comprised the following cellists (ages accurate at time of publishing) in addition to Jacob: SCS board member Petra Kušan (from Croatia), Canadian Luka Coetzee (19), Austrian Tara Stranegger (20), Polish Gustaw Bafeltowski (22), Taiwanese Tzu-Shao Chao (22), Polish Maria Leszczyńska-Thieu (25) and American–French Johannes Gray (27). Some had attended the school since its formation, others were there for the first time, and all were at different stages in their careers (some recurrent competition winners, others full-time members of professional orchestras). 'Different mindsets, backgrounds and ideas inspire one another,' says Jacob.

### 13 JANUARY

I am greeted at Copenhagen Airport by Jan Flessel, Jacob's brother-in-law and the videographer filming the tour for the school's ongoing documentary series *The Musical Farm* (which began in 2023). It's easy spot the school while approaching it from afar: a large collection of houses flying the Danish flag on otherwise flat, extensive farmland. However, the cello case bolted to the front house, old cello pegs hung alongside keys and an old Royal Mail postbox can only be seen once you arrive.

The school comprises two farmhouses, a horse cottage, a Japanese cottage, a music room and a polytunnel – as well as poultry, pigs and two, tiny, adorable farm cats, Anna and Elsa. I shelter from the windy 3C exterior by entering the thatched-roofed main house. It is the quintessential farmhouse: mostly wooden, flooded with natural light and with the smell of a crackling wood fire. Not so quintessential is the sound of a cello resounding through it.

Jacob rushes past in odd socks and ushers me to the loft area: 'Just take whichever room you like!' On my way I encounter the



Cellists strolling the school's grounds on a snowy day

source of the music: Tara practising. The full group only started rehearsals the day before, and it's a mammoth programme, different permutations of which they will perform almost every evening in the coming week.

As I go to roam the grounds, I ask Marc Casanovas – a Tonmeister and an SCS advisory board member – how to lock the door on my way out. He laughs warmly and says, 'Rita, we don't need to lock anything here!'

And now, off to the pub! The tour's first concert is at Café Bliss in the small town of Store Heddinge – a 15-minute drive away. We arrive and set up in a large back room filled with a haphazard collection of couches, boxes and chairs. The group's dynamic is a mix of slightly reclusive members and others – already good friends – socialising freely. Flessel is gliding around the room filming it all. ▷



The Scandinavian Cello School



Café Bliss back room on 13 January before the performance. (l-r) Tara, Rita, Johannes, Maria, Marc, Tzu-Shao and Petra



Jacob introducing the group and programme at the Café Bliss concert

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## FOR ME, THE BEST WORD TO DESCRIBE JACOB SHAW IS 'BAFFLING'

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The ensemble files into the sold-out pub in their white SCS hoodies. During the concert, passers-by outside are perplexed at the sight of a silent crowd staring at eight cellists in a usually noisy pub. It is these reactions that the organisers of this concert, entitled *Who's Afraid of Classical Music*, hope to confront and aim to change.

The programme includes tailor-made arrangements – many by ensemble member Maria. 'They showcase different players and the idea is that we are all equal members and parts,' says Jacob. Particular highlights are Luka's dazzling solo in Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen* and Johannes's poised solo playing in *Encore* by Jérôme Ducros.

The programme also features *Ave Maria* by Giulio Caccini, the Largo and finale from Dvořák's Symphony no.9, Glazunov's *Chant du ménestrel* (with Tara as soloist), Roby Lakatos's *Ja vstretil vas, mama* ('I have met you, mum'), Marguerite Monnot's *Hymne à l'amour* (an Edith Piaf song), Giovanni Sollima's *Violoncelles, vibrez!*, Bent Fabricius-Bjerre's *Norwegian Sunset*, Carlos Gardel's *Por una cabeza*, the finale from Strauss's *Don Quixote* (with Jacob as soloist), a local folk song, *The Little Fisher Girl*, 'Modinha' from Villa-Lobos's *Bachianas brasileiras*, and Hans Christian Lumbye's *Champagne Galop* (complete with champagne popper and Johannes and Tzu-Shao clinking beers while the others play). Appropriately, the gig finishes with *Unter Donner und Blitz*.

### 14 JANUARY

The day begins with a game of cello Tetris as we try to fit eight cellos into three cars – but not before Jacob hands me my very own SCS hoodie! We then drive to the day's concert venue, Traktørstedet Højeruplund, a traditional Danish restaurant in the nearby town of Højerup.

For the full Danish experience, the concert coincides with the coronation of the new Danish king. Alongside a livestream of the event, the ensemble plays the Danish national anthem. In the concert, a balance between eight individuals and one unified group starts to fall into place, with a growing sense of musical and technical harmony between them. And as they did at the pub gig, they receive a well-deserved standing ovation from the local crowd.

The day finishes with dinner cooked by the lovely Karen Johanne Pedersen, Jacob's partner. Some of us sit cross-legged on the living room floor, throwing logs on to the fire as it sizzles down; others are sitting at the dining room table. Jacob and Karen's four-year-old daughter Elise runs around politely offering us pieces of sparkly tape. Not that we need to break the ice, given the familial set-up, but a game of *Cards Against Humanity* late into the night does a pretty good job of it anyway. That evening, I also have a chat with Jacob.

There are many words to describe the force of nature that is Jacob Shaw. For me, the best is 'baffling'. An endless number of projects flutter around his mind, such as an SCS record label, becoming a fully self-sustainable farm, fundraising for new buildings, making documentaries – the list goes on. Each time I email him to fact-check this article, there are new ones.

Also endless is his commitment to the cellists. 'All gains on the school's side are meant to be mutually beneficial for us,' >



says Johannes. ‘Jacob used all the royalties from his previous recordings to part-fund our CD recording.’ (Oh, the tour is also connected to a CD project, by the way.) And following his Royal Northern College of Music professorship being announced this March, Jacob is already in the process of establishing a partnership between the Manchester school’s cello class and SCS. He is also close to the cellists personally. Having lived at SCS for a few months, Tara is all but part of the family and seems almost to act as an older sister to Jacob’s two daughters. And Petra is a close friend of his from university days.

Jacob is also a known entity in the local community. From 2022, for a year, he was director of culture for the opening of a new visitor centre at Stevns Klint – a Unesco World Heritage Site and the area’s most important attraction. And SCS musicians frequently perform in community spaces and appear in local newspapers. It is not lost on Jacob, however, that looking outwards is essential for the school’s growth. ‘It’s important not to stay cocooned – but to go out further than the Unesco cliffs,’ he says. ‘By playing at important venues, SCS has established itself even more, and can use the contacts to help even more young artists,’ adds Johannes, who is also a student-voted artistic adviser to the school.

But for all his grand visions, Jacob (and, by extension, the school) is guided by a simple ethos: ‘The more noise we can make to change things from the grassroots up, the more chance we have to change things in the greater music world.’

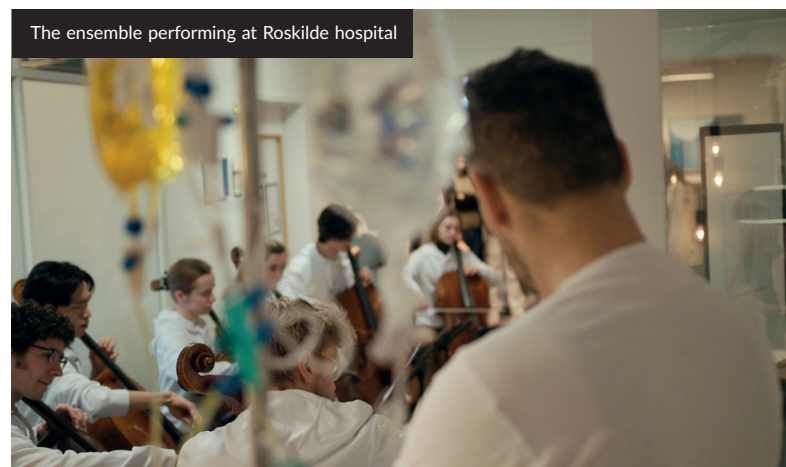
Just as baffling is Jacob’s personal life these past few years. This tour marks one year of cancer remission, following his battle with stage 4 Burkitt lymphoma. ‘Even after his severe sickness he has even more energy and drive,’ says Tara. The next day, the ensemble is due to perform at the Roskilde hospital where he received his intense chemotherapy.

## 15 JANUARY

Scattered amid table, floor and couch in Jacob’s family home, we enjoy a *very* local breakfast: bacon from the backyard. As I chat to Johannes, a colourful succession of passports is being passed to Jacob, who is checking in the cellists for the Vienna flight. Johannes thinks the tour is going better than expected, considering there’s been such little rehearsal time. We flow into other topics,

continuing in the car on the way to the hospital, now also joined by Gustaw, Luka and Maria (by the end of the tour, all driver-passenger combinations become exhausted – I think). The conversations with these genuinely interesting musicians, whether at dinner or in the car, make it easy to forget that I am here to work.

At the hospital, I watch the colourful patchwork of cello cases pass through the sterile white corridors. Flanked by chemo infusion bags and other medical equipment, the ensemble sets up in the corridor in front of a large window, behind which ▶



The ensemble performing at Roskilde hospital



A champagne toast at the school after the hospital concert. (l-r) Jacob, Johannes, Tzu-Shao, Gustaw, Rita, Ragnheiður, Luka, Petra, Maria and Tara

shielding patients are watching the performance. Jacob's nurses and his family are also there.

Here, more than at any other gig, the group feels intensely connected. The concert's gravity yet informality seems to give them incredible emotional freedom. 'I was just trying not to cry while performing,' many of the cellists – most of whom knew Jacob during his cancer battle – tell me afterwards.

A well-deserved champagne toast kicks off a six-course tasting menu in the evening. It is made almost entirely with the farm's produce by top chef Luis Moreno. And while we eat oysters, Jacob eagerly tells me about yet another idea – combining fine dining with curated musical performances.

## 16 JANUARY

It's 8am, and a freezing night has resulted in a pristine dusting of snow over the fields. It also results in me, Marc and Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir (another Tonmeister) spending half an hour defrosting the car lock. Boiling water did the trick in the end.

The car now unlocked and loaded with kilos of recording equipment, we drive to Traktørstedet Højeruplund again, this time for an intense recording session. The sound engineers listen from a back room, surrounded by an army of SCS-stickered cello cases. 'Receiving professional help with recording really helped me to understand the routine and lifestyle of a professional classical musician,' Tara tells me.

The concert this evening is at Marjatta, a local centre for people with learning and developmental disabilities. As the group's performances continue to improve, they feel that they have more space to play with interpretation, and you can see them smiling at each other throughout.

## 17 JANUARY

As my visit nears its end, I worry about what a 'professional' feature on such an organic experience will look like. Only upon later reflection do I realise that this kind of challenge is entirely the >

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At Marjatta, before the concert



Recording session at Traktørstedet Højeruplund



Concert at Vemmetofte Monastery (see page 57)

point of the tour and the school. ‘The musicians also meet at festivals or even competitions,’ says Jacob. (The recent Lutosławski cello competition, for example, saw three cellists from the current tour in the semi-finals.) ‘So it can be great for them to have that friendly face and “SCS spirit” when they meet in an otherwise pressured situation. The most important aspect of education for me is being in an atmosphere where there is encouragement from your peers.’ In the evening, they play another successful concert at Vemmetofte Monastery, four miles east of the school – after which the focus turns to Vienna.

18 JANUARY

At 5am, a starlit sky guides me to Jacob’s house, where we convene to make the trip to the airport in a van. Jacob plays cello Tetrís one last time, and then we are off. On the airport tarmac, I admire once again the collection of colourful cases being walked in unison. The next, and last, time I’ll do so is down the Musikverein corridors.

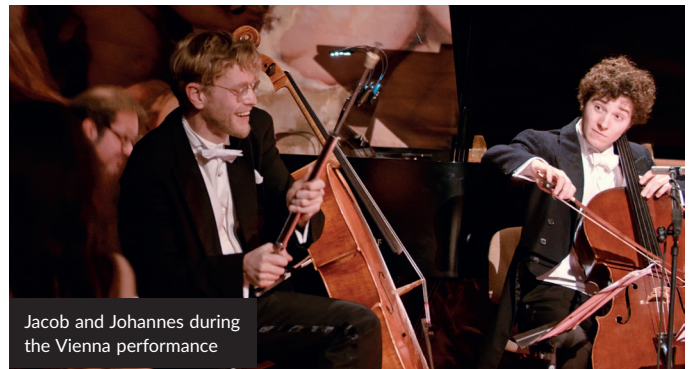
The group is performing at 11.30pm in the Musikverein’s opulent Glass Hall, one of the many small performance spaces that will be hosting 45-minute performances throughout the night (the ball runs from 10pm to 5am), during which a waltz band plays all night long in the Great Hall.

In my full-length ball gown, sitting at a dimly lit cocktail table under a weighty chandelier, I watch their soundcheck (occasionally reading, wide-eyed, the luxurious, golden-laced drinks menu). It is easy to forget when seeing people perform in pubs and hospitals for a week just how high their level is. But seeing them here leaves me in no doubt about their abilities. I well up thinking about the transformation the ensemble has undergone this past week – from a tentative group in the back of a pub to playing like family at the Musikverein.

Their comportment is also refreshingly unpretentious. This is a testament to the effectiveness of the rest of the tour’s – and the school’s – unique educational ethos. In an industry where success tends to equal playing in the biggest halls or performing the most difficult pieces it would do classical musicians considerable good to perform in rural pubs and hospitals once in a while – let alone for a number of consecutive days. And while this is a noble sentiment that most of us *dream* about, Jacob has actually made it a reality and proved that it is a more-than-worthy counterpart and complement to the activities of institutions that have existed for hundreds of years.

I also can’t help but notice that Jacob is still wearing odd socks. ●

ALL PHOTOS: JIAN FLESSLER



Jacob and Johannes during the Vienna performance



Johannes introducing his solo piece in Vienna



Luka at the Vienna performance



The ensemble’s colourful cases at the hospital, plane to Vienna and Musikverein corridors