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Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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SPECIAL FEATURE ON ANTONIA BUTLER

(see credits at end)

The cellist Antonia Butler will be remembered as a dedicated and well-loved teacher, having held important appointments at the Royal College of Music, the Birmingham School of Music and the Menuhin School. However, in the 1930s and 1940s and 1950s she was a distinguished soloist (for example, giving a number of 'Prom' performances accompanied by the BBC Symphony Orchestra) and chamber music player for many years before deciding that teaching was her real joy in life.

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As a primary-school girl her progress was so fast she was soon able to join in the family music-making - one of her earliest memories was playing at their home with the violinists Jelly and Adila d'Arnyi (imagine, they were the great-nieces of the celebrated violinist Joseph Joachim!). As a reward she was given a gold coin which she treasured all her life. In fact, it was a recommendation from the d'Arnyi sisters that allowed her, at only 13 years old, to go to Leipzig to study for four years with the Julius Klengel at the Conservatoire.

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Klengel taught her to develop her own individual musicality (and to his other students too, William Pleeth said the SAME thing of him!) and, in addition, she learned so much of the concerto repertoire, especially the Brahms Double Concerto for cello and violin which she played twice with the Conservatoire Orchestra. In this Double Concerto her own interpretation was greatly influenced by her studies with Klengel, and she is quoted as saying: "*Klengel had heard performances by its dedicatees, Robert Hausmann and Joseph Joachim, and he was able to pass on some very good advice especially on tempi*".

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Butler went on for a further three years study with Diran Alexanian at the École Normale in Paris which was important in an entirely different way from Klengel. Alexanian went into minute detail about every aspect of the music and Butler remembered how Pablo Casals and Emanuel Feuermann and many other famous musicians would sit in on the sessions.

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Back in Britain and with the formation of a true concert artist she became cellist of the Kamaran Piano Trio, and gave duo performances with violinist Arthur Catterall (including this very Brahms Concerto!). In 1941 she married the pianist Norman Greenwood, who unfortunately was called up (military service) the day after their wedding. After the war they appeared frequently in sonata recitals and broadcasts from the BBC. The duo became known for their innately musical interpretation, and interest in the work of contemporary British composers. By the way, their son, Richard Greenwood, is also a pianist.

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The composer Arthur Honegger was a close personal friend and Butler played his cello sonata in Paris with Honegger's wife as her partner on the piano; Butler always felt an affinity with this work because Honegger was able to advise them personally. Now a personal anecdote, but I'm not looking for applause: I performed this Honegger Sonata in the London Southbank (Purcell Room) in the 1980s and according to the Sunday Times I gave only the THIRD British performance ever of the work (the other was Pierre Fournier), composed in the aftermath of World War One. Though I suspect that perhaps Beatrice Harrison might have played it too, but no dates or info are available....anyway I feel in an elite group!

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When her husband died in 1962, Butler gave sonata recitals with a number of pianists including Angus Morrison, but her concert activities were gradually overtaken when she started to teach because she found it increasingly rewarding. I remember her as an old lady but still professor at the Royal College of Music, London when I did an ARCM exam for cello teaching and she was on the exam panel (and gave me very high marks, haha!). Many people spoke of her with terror, but I found her very friendly. I was told later that if you took music seriously and were humble you did fine, but if you were shallow and/or arrogant she found it very disagreeable!

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Antonia Katharine Margaret Butler, cellist:
born London 1 June 1909;
married 1941 Norman Greenwood (died 1962; one son);
died Farningham, Kent 18 July 1997.

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Credits:

I wish to credit Margaret Campbell for some of this fantastic information on Antonia Butler...



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Also both general musical and cello based articles, directories of famous historical cellists, and many other items of interest

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