

Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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SPECIAL FEATURE on WILLIAM PLEETH

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Born: 1916, 12th January (London)

Died: 1999, 6th April (London)

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William Pleeth had a very different kind of background to many other cellists. Born into a Jewish family of Polish exiles, William Pleeth started the cello at aged 7. He had heard a cafe musician play the cello, and immediately was fascinated by it. He studied with Herbert Walenn at the London Violoncello School, before continuing with Julius Klengel in Leipzig. Incredibly, at just 13, he was the youngest student ever admitted there, but he was simply an amazing youthful prodigy; in a short time he memorized the Bach Suites, the Piatti Caprices and twenty-four cello concertos! Despite Klengel being in rather of the 'older' school in cello playing, he was a wonderful teacher for Pleeth, guiding him carefully but allowing him at the same time to flourish for himself. Whilst in Leipzig, the 'youngster' had the marvellous opportunity of playing cello quartets alongside the amazing young Feuermann and Klengel himself!

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At the age of 15, in 1931, Pleeth first performed the Dvorak concerto publicly, at the Conservatory in Leipzig. It was also that year that he debuted with the Gewandhaus Orchestra, performing Haydn's D Major Concerto. His career as a soloist gradually gained momentum through the thirties, and in 1940 he performed on the radio with Sir Adrian Boult and the BBC Symphony, playing the Schumann concerto. He pursued a career as 'soloist' but in the fullness of time came to realize that playing chamber music was what gave him most pleasure.

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Few people know that during the Second World War he served with the British army for five years, marrying the pianist Margaret Good in 1942, He was a founder member, in 1952, of the Allegri String Quartet, and was also closely associated with the Amadeus Quartet.

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He premiered various works with his pianist wife, such as works by Edmund Rubbra. His repertoire was very large, and he took interest in many little played works such as the Enescu Sinfonia Concertante or concertos by Scandinavian composers.

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His book CELLO is the first volume of the Yehudi Menuhin Music Guides.

Menuhin wrote in the Introduction: *"Long years of happy association have served to confirm my admiration for ... my beloved and trusted colleague Bill Pleeth...when I awarded Jacqueline du Pre, then still in her teens, her first prize at the Royal College of Music...I exclaimed as soon as I heard her: She must be a student of Bill Pleeth!"*

A mention should also be made of a wonderful series of teaching videos made at Aldeburgh near the end of his life, on major works for the cello. These are now available on DVD from Cello Classics.

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Teaching work became vitally important for him – he was head of the cello department at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London from 1947 to 1977. His students included Jacqueline Du Pré, Robert Cohen, and his own son Anthony.

Du Pré said of him:

"a wonderful teacher who knew exactly how to guide one or correct a mistake with kindness and understanding".

In 1977 he began teaching at the Menuhin School. Certainly he was one of the most beloved and sought-after cello teachers in the world and in his latter years his pupils would travel any distance to have lessons or attend master classes.

Cohen said:

"As the years passed, I learnt how exceptional a person Bill was; how he stood as a pioneer in his teaching methods, and yet he gave each student individually crafted disciplines to help fulfil their personal potential; how almost uniquely for a teacher, he never sought fame through the exaltations of his students careers."

Also, a mention that I visited him regularly during a year or so after having finished music college. Why did I think this was a good idea? It was perhaps because I had concentrated up to then on big concertos and virtuoso works, and felt that a more intimate chamber music approach in pieces like the Schubert - Arpeggione or Boccherini sonatas would give a counter-balance. Sessions were serious but always respectful. I am sure that subconsciously many little tips entered my way of playing!

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I would credit Douglas Cameron, Herbert Walenn and William Pleeth as being perhaps the three outstanding contributors to the British cello world, for the sheer quantity of excellent cellists that each has produced. Can one still speak of an English/British cello school in this day and age when any student can hear CDs or buy videos, and adopt and adapt any useful technique from any corner of the globe – I would argue that with the top drawer of musicians YES we can; there is something ‘modest’ about British cellists, who generally are conscious to blend even their fully soloist lines within the overall texture of a work and not be the ‘star’ from afar, but that would be the subject of an entirely new article; and maybe I am biased!

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