

Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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SPECIAL FEATURE on CHRISTOPHER VAN KAMPEN

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Birth: 4th September, 1945 - Pinner, Middlesex, England

Death: 30th September, 1997 - Pinner

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Christopher van Kampen was a wonderful cellist who left us far too soon. He actually started out not as a musician - but by studying maths at Cambridge University's King's College. Cello lessons at the Royal Academy of Music with Douglas Cameron soon diverted his ideals fully into music after he advanced to the finals of the BBC Cello Competition during his first year at the academy.

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His career soon became highly varied. At the age of just 24 he was invited to become principal cello of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, a position he held for three years. However, his preference toward contemporary music figures such as Berio, Tippett, and Henze found a more congenial environment in smaller groups. In 1967 he joined the Nash Ensemble, a chamber group whose catholic repertory interests mirrored his own and he recorded numerous works as a member of the ensemble; he was to remain with the ensemble until his death.

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He served as principal cellist of the London Sinfonietta in the 1970s and remaining closely associated with the group into the 1990s, when he gave premieres or major early performances of The Protecting Veil and Mark-Anthony Turnage's Kai. Several solo cello compositions were written for and premiered by van Kampen, and Christopher was also a member of the Brindisi String Quartet and other small groups.

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He appeared as a soloist with most of the leading British orchestras. As mentioned, he was a specialist in contemporary music and collaborated, as soloist under their batons, in works by Luciano Berio, Hans Werner Henze and Sir Michael Tippett. Premieres he gave included Hans Abrahamsen's 'Lied in Fall' (a work written especially for him) in 1988, and in 1990 the UK premiere of H.K. Gruber's Cello Concerto, which he also played at the 1991 Proms. In May 1994 he gave the London premiere of Mark-Anthony Turnage's Kai with the Sinfonietta. He was especially well known in his native country for his frequent performances of John Tavener's The Protecting Veil, for cello and orchestra (remembering one at the 1992 Aldeburgh Festival with the London Sinfonietta).

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He also performed Britten's complete works for solo cello at the Wigmore Hall, and both Shostakovich concertos in one sole concert at St. John's, Smith Square. His solo recordings ranged from works by Janáček, Hindemith, Debussy, Kurt Schwertsik, Tim Souster and Nicola LeFanu, to repertoire pieces such as Schubert's String Quintet with the Fitzwilliam Quartet.

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It could be said that Christopher van Kampen struck a perfect balance between mainstream and contemporary repertoire in both orchestral and chamber performances over a remarkably varied and durable career, with the happy occasions of glorious solo opportunities too. Yet he always remained a calm and gentle figure - I remember him from being invited to coach 'us' young cellists of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain and thought he was a lovely person, he spoke for the good of the group and never criticized an individual to his or her face!

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Professional contemporaries also spoke wonderfully of him, with comments like:

"He was absolutely devoid of any professional jealousy"

"Working with him was sheer pleasure"

He was married (later divorced) from Marcia Crayford, and they had one son and one daughter. He died in Pinner on September 30, 1997, taken away by cancer. The Nash Ensemble soon after played a concert in his memory.



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