

Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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SPECIAL FEATURE on PIERRE FOURNIER

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Pierre Fournier was born in Paris on 24th June 1906, and known in his lifetime as "the aristocrat of cellists," because of his lyrical playing especially with the bowing arm, and for his impeccable artistic sensitivity. Fournier was the son of a French army general, and as a child was taught piano by his mother. However, at the age of nine he suffered a mild case of polio and lost some of the dexterity in his legs and feet; therefore no longer able to comfortably use the piano pedals he searched for another musical instrument, and luckily for us turned to the cello!

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He quickly made good progress on his new instrument, and was able to win entrance to the Paris Conservatoire, where he became a pupil of Paul Bazelaire, and later Anton Hekking. He graduated at the age of seventeen, in the year 1923. Maurice Marechal called him "the cellist of the future." Fournier became well known in 1925 after a successful performance with the Edouard Colonne Orchestra in Paris, and began to give concerts all over Europe. In the period 1925-1929 he was a member of the Krettly Quartet, led by Odette's brother Robert Krettly. But Fournier played with all the great musicians of his time, including Cortot, Thibaud, Furtwangler, Karajan and Kubelik. Together with Artur Schnabel, Szigeti and Primrose he recorded nearly all of the chamber music of Brahms and Schubert. Unfortunately the acetates on which the BBC recorded the series deteriorated before they could be copied to a more durable medium.

In the years 1937-1939 Fournier directed the cello class at the Ecole Normale, and from 1941-1949 also at the Paris Conservatoire.

Fournier made his first tour of the USA in 1948 to great acclaim in New York and Boston. Virgil Thomson wrote in the New York Herald Tribune, "I do not know his superior among living cellists, nor any...who give one more profoundly the feeling of having been present at music-making." However, his performance in America became a big embarrassment when it was revealed in 1949 that Fournier had collaborated with the Nazis during the occupation of France. He was found to have performed 82 times on "Radio-Paris" – a German station – for which he had been paid a total of 192,400 francs. In France, the "National Purging Committee's Professional Branch for Dramatic and Lyric Artists and Performing Musicians" had found him guilty of collaboration, and had banned him from performing for a period of six months.

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Even so, this unfortunate affair did no lasting damage to his career. In the '50s he toured South America, often accompanied by Alfredo Rossi, a personal friend and former colleague. In fact, his performing career occupied more and more of his time, and he had to resign from his teaching post in Paris.

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He enjoyed modern music, as well as classical. Many modern composers wrote works for him, including Martinu, Martinon and Poulenc. Fournier played 3 instruments: a Jean-Baptiste Vuillaume 1863, a Matteo Goffriller 1722 and a rare Charles Adolphe Maucotel 1849. With the Maucotel he played the last 18 years of his career and made all his recordings.

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In 1956 he made his home with his family in Switzerland, but retained his French citizenship. In 1959 he appeared for the first time in Moscow, where he was to play most of the standard concertos of the cello repertoire. In 1963 he was made a member, and a year later an officer, of the French Legion of Honor.

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Fournier was still performing and playing well at the age of 78, when he gave a recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. He died in January 1986, at the age of 80. Until the end of his life, he taught privately at his home in Geneva: the British cellist Julian Lloyd Webber was among his pupils. As a teacher Fournier insisted that his students develop a smooth tone, and a high elbow for the right arm. He believed that the Sevcik violin exercises were valuable for cellists who wanted to perfect bowing technique. In 1988 the Royal Northern College of Music began an International Cello Festival to honour his memory.

His son, Jean Pierre Fournier was a fine pianist, and often performed cello/piano sonatas together with his father under the name of Jean Fonda.

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Dedications to Pierre Fournier:

** Works by Martinu including - 1st Sonata for cello and piano (also gave the premiere), and the Cello Concerto No.1. (plus giving the first performance of a new rescored version in the late 1950s).

** Nin - Suite Espagnole (4th movement - Andaluza).

** Martinon - Cello concerto.

** Frank Martin - Cello concerto.

** Poulenc - Sonata

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Known Premieres (apart from the above) given by Fournier:

** Ravel - Chansons madécasses.

** Faure - String Quartet (well, his group gave the 2nd performance!).

** Roussel - Cello Concertino (1937).

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Special Friendships:

Cortot, Thibaud, Furtwangler, Karajan, Kubelik, Artur Schnabel, Szigeti, Primrose.

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Anecdotes:

** he was the teacher of, and also had an 'affair' with, the British cellist Amaryllis Fleming!

** when he became cellist of the Cortot and Thibaud trio, he was taking the place of Casals.

** Even at an early age Fournier was renowned for his bowing facility. Later in life, Fournier became a friend of another great French cellist, Paul Tortelier. Once, meeting backstage after a recital by Tortelier, Pierre said congratulating him, *"Paul, I wish I had your left hand."* Tortelier replied at the instant, *"Pierre, I wish I had your right arm!"* Lovely to see great cellists as colleagues and not in pointless competition!

