

Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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NORINA SEMINO

NORINA SEMINO (1901–1980) was a British cellist of Italian birth. She had studied privately in her birth land, and was to all extents a prodigy. She made her debut at the age of twelve, and then began touring all around Europe.

She became a British subject at 27 years old, by marriage to the cellist and conductor Livio Mannucci in 1928, and from then onwards was based in the UK. The following year she gave her debut radio broadcast performance at Savoy Hill. And gave a cello recital, accompanied by Harold Craxton, in the Wigmore Hall (London).

Semino was known to have performed with the Hastings Municipal Orchestra under Julius Harrison and the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra under Dan Godfrey and Richard Austin; I am supposing both either as principal cello or as concerto soloist.

She was a member of the New London Trio, established in 1932 with violinist David Wise and pianist John Pauer. In 1936 she had broadcast from Lausanne, and in 1938 from Scandinavia. There is also information of her broadcasting the Rachmaninov - Sonata in G minor alongside pianist John Pauer in 1941 on the BBC Home Service.

Semino was probably only the second ever cellist to perform the Alan Bush - Concert Piece for Cello and Piano, Op. 17 (1936). Both the cello and piano parts are demanding technically, having been described as a “*substantial Concert-Piece of 1936, a musical mirror of the European war clouds*”

She was the original cellist of the Zorian String Quartet when it formed in 1942. It was an all-female quartet, still quite a novelty in those days! She participated in recording the String Quartet No.2 in F sharp by a young Michael Tippett at Decca's London studios on 18th-20th December 1947, the original Zorian Quartet consisted of: Olive Zorian and Marjorie Lavers, violins, Winifred Copperwheat viola and Norina Semino cello. The group also played the premiere of music by Britten, gave the British premiere performances of quartets by Ernest Bloch and Béla Bartók.

It is not known how long she stayed with the group but ‘may well have’ passed her position over to cellist Eleanor Warren. Some sources say that the quartet disbanded in 1949. Other sources say that it continued to perform for at least another ten years, because there is evidence that the violinist Frances Mason and the cellist Eleanor Warren were members of the Zorian Quartet well into the 1950s.

Her playing was said to use a ‘restrained’ vibrato whilst coaxing out attractive cello lines – maybe a descendent from the Piatti school of cello playing?

Notable performances and recordings that have been documented with Norina:

27th March 1943 – Tippett, String Quartet No. 2; premiere, Wigmore Hall, London; 1947, premiere recording

3rd July 1944 – Priaulx Rainier, String Quartet in C; premiere, Wigmore Hall

5th March 1945 – Doreen Carwithen, String Quartet No. 1; premiere, Duke's Hall, Royal Academy of Music

2nd–3rd July 1945 – Ralph Vaughan Williams, song cycle *On Wenlock Edge* for voice, piano and string quartet, with Benjamin Britten (piano) and Peter Pears (tenor); Decca 78rpm recording

21st November 1945 – Britten, String Quartet No. 2// premiere, Wigmore Hall; // 1946, same work, in premiere recording His Master's Voice 78rpm C.3539

1946 – Henry Purcell, *Fantasia upon One Note Z.745* for string ensemble, with Benjamin Britten (second viola); His Master's Voice 78rpm recording C.3539:230

19th October 1946 – Tippett, String Quartet No. 3; premiere, Wigmore Hall

1948 – at the first Aldeburgh Festival: Tippett, String Quartet No. 2; Purcell, *The Golden Sonata* (Trio sonata in four parts in F major Z.810, realized by Britten); Frank Bridge, *Phantasy Quartet*, with Britten (piano)

In 1955 she was participating in the Philharmonia Orchestra's big tour of the United States, under Herbert von Karajan – what a cello section that was on that trip!: Raymond Clark - John Holmes - Maurice Westerby - Tom Hill - Peter Beavan - Norina Semino - Alexander Kok - Eldon Fox - Wilfred Simenaue – and Peter Halling.

I haven't been able to find information about the last twenty years of her life, but yet once again we are looking at a most important European lady cellist who is unfortunately largely forgotten today.

Photos: Semino, cellist of the Zorian quartet and a close-up underneath:



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