

Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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STEPHEN DE'AK

by Celloheaven

Stephen De'ak was born in Hungary in 1897, and died in California in 1975. He grew up in a musical family, his brother and sister playing violin, and his father (though a civil engineer) had a strong appreciation of good music. When De'ak was seven he started cello lessons, and entered the Royal Academy of Music at the age of eleven. He studied under the famous cellist David Popper from 1911 to 1913, and made his concert debut in 1919 at the age of twenty-two. In 1927 De'ak joined the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, and later taught at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. He joined the University of Southern California faculty in 1943. His "Modern Method for the Violoncello" has been used by multitudes of beginning cellists.

In 1973 De'ak wrote a biography of David Popper (author of the well-known "High School of Cello Playing," and many cello compositions). This book, titled simply "David Popper," (with a forward by Janos Starker), was published in 1980 by Paganiniana Publications. It is a book that every cellist would find enjoyable and profitable to read. Popper was one of the truly great masters of the cello, and is perhaps only second to Pablo Casals in bringing cello technique up to its present embodiment.

Here follows a few excerpts from De'ak's biography of Popper, in which we find Popper's contact and appreciation of Pablo Casals, and De'ak's friendship with Popper:

"It was noticeable that Popper closely observed the rapid rise of Casals. Casals' first concert in Budapest had been on February 8, 1911, and Popper had been unable to attend because he was in Gries with his son. As we noted in his letter to Schiffer, he had wished to know what Casals had played, by him. At the close of the last group Casals had played three pieces by Popper: "Warum," "Mazurka" (Op. 11) and "Arlequin." The choice of these popular pieces must have pleased the composer.

"On subsequent recitals Casals performed Popper numbers on the program, including: "Tarantella," "Chanson Villageoise," "Spanish Serenade," and "Vito."

"It was my (De'ak) privilege to witness the exit of an era which was fast vanishing and the beginning of a new musical approach: the uncompromising submission and sublimation of the artist to the will and ideas of the composer. This trend was of course not entirely unique. Clara Schumann, Bulow, and Joachim had taken the first steps in this direction.

"In art, as well as in appearance, Casals was not the prototype of a nineteenth century romantic. He was short in stature, already balding in his thirty-fifth year, an austere, intensely concentrated ascetic visage when on the stage, eyes closed when he played: a solitary messenger of the great masters, through their most intimate language. The new audiences of the twentieth century instantly sensed the fresh musical experience, which was both a leap into the new century, and a reinterpretation of the old. Casals brought a unique sound even to Popper's music, with which, by the way, the master was not in complete agreement. Casals was very well acquainted with all of Popper's works, and many, many years later--in 1960--he said to me, "...I played almost everything Popper wrote!"

"In the fall of 1912, Popper suggested that I meet him at his house and that we go together to hear Casals that evening. Since Mrs. Popper did not intend to go, he had an extra ticket. I felt privileged to take her seat, and to escort my teacher to the concert."

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