

SPECIAL FEATURE on CHRISTOPHER BUNTING

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Birth: 8th August 1924 - London

Death: 28th July 2005 - London

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Christopher {Evelyn} Bunting was an English cellist with an international reputation, and a most highly regarded teacher. He was in fact a cellist, pianist and composer, giving concerts, broadcasts and master-classes throughout Europe, Australasia and the United States. He thought deeply about the psychological and physical influences that lie behind technique. He gave premieres of some notable cello concertos of his era.

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Born in London, his father was a civil engineer in India and an amateur pianist; his mother, also played piano and cello. Not surprisingly then, Christopher played the piano from a tender age five. The following year he also began playing the cello, studying with Ivor James. On both instruments he was to become 'a force'!

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He began an engineering course at Bristol University, but music called him and he abandoned this and he changed courses to study music at Cambridge University. However, these studies were interrupted during the Second World War by army service, and he finally gained his music degree in 1947. At about this time he studied with Maurice Eisenberg, both in the USA and during Eisenberg's visits to England. Eisenberg being much in the 'Casals' school of thought, the logical step he took was via a scholarship to study with Pablo Casals himself in Prades, Pyrénées-Orientales in 1952.

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By this point he had already given a most successful debut recital at the Wigmore Hall with the wonderful accompanying pianist Gerald Moore. A big step for Bunting came in 1955 - he was entrusted to give the first performance of Gerald Finzi's Cello Concerto at the Cheltenham International Music Festival with Sir John Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra, working closely with the composer during its composition stages. This one performance achieved him a very important status as one of the leading British cellists. Soon afterwards the same performers took it to the Proms, and Sir Adrian Boult conducted it at the Three Choirs festival. He soon acquired an international reputation. He gave duo recitals with pianists Yonty Solomon, Peter Wallfisch and others, and gave master classes.

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The Proms and the Royal Festival Hall saw Bunting offer the first performances of Alan Rawsthorne's concerto, under Sir Malcolm Sargent in 1967. It is little known but he also gave the first British broadcast performance of the Shostakovich Cello Concerto No.1. Not only that, but Bunting gave the premiere of his very own Concerto For Cello And Strings in 1984 at St Paul's church, Covent Garden, and the work was later broadcast by the BBC.

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The Daily Telegraph described him as 'a master'. Die Welt remarked on his 'highly developed musical comprehension, prodigious technique and outstanding artistry', and the Swedish press called him 'one of the greatest instrumentalists of today'. Such was his prowess on both cello and piano that he recorded the Brahms E minor Cello Sonata playing BOTH parts!

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In 1991, now with a vast rich experience, he was elected president of the British branch of the European String Teachers' Association; it is reported that he contributed much wisdom and advice to this association. In 2000, he was awarded the MBE for his service to music.

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However, from 1994 his performing career came to an end; he was suffering from a spinal condition which was never satisfactorily diagnosed. Although confined to a wheelchair, he continued to teach. His own teaching method was influenced by Casals's detailed analysis of the music performed; Bunting was a demanding but inspirational teacher. As I have mentioned he was a most accomplished pianist, and often played sonatas with his students - lucky students! He also had an incredible memory for orchestral scores, being able to name virtually every specific instrument with a passage of interest in any bar of any major cello concerto - this I saw in my own eyes! For six years - from 1963 - he taught at the Yehudi Menuhin School. For many years he was professor of cello at the Royal College of Music, and also with a few students in the Guildhall School of Music, both in London.

His pupils came from many parts of the world, and were generally taught the bowing and fingering of Casals, quoting from Casals "*the difficulty of cello playing is to know how to get from one note to the next*". Bunting was a generous teacher, and he wanted to share his thinking on mastering the cello with all who wanted to listen. I remember that I did a successful college audition for him at the Guildhall, an offer that I wasn't able to take up on at that point.

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Some years later I had the opportunity to perform as soloist in the Finzi Cello Concerto at Eton College and thought “*who better than Christopher Bunting to give insights on this work?*” - so I got in touch, not sure if he remembered me or not. Anyway, he warmly received me in his Hampstead home...we must have passed three hours or so on the Finzi music and he wouldn't accept a penny for his charming and useful advice! Yep, a GENEROUS teacher indeed!

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Bunting died in 2005, aged 80. He was married and divorced three times. He had a son, Mark, who predeceased him, and a daughter, Philippa.

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Apart from his own concerto for cello and strings, he wrote a big spectacular fugue for six cellos based on Beethoven themes (especially on the opening of the Cello Sonata No.3 in A Major!), an elegy for cello and piano, and numerous short pieces.

In the teaching sphere he wrote "A Portfolio of Cello Exercises", and then in 1982 he wrote his grand treatise "Essay on the Craft of Cello Playing", regarded as the most important of Bunting's writings. This was so popular it was reprinted in 2000. In this volume he was able to fit an extraordinary amount of information and thought, but in a very readable and accessible form. The exercises in this, and the Portfolio of Cello Exercises, are much appreciated by cellists great and small; they address technical problems in the most simple and effective way. It also contains an in-depth study of the mental and physical factors that affect the correct functioning of the practice of the cello and the development of mastery. The first part includes two exercises for the development of a competent and artistic bow technique; whilst the second part is dedicated to the action, position and movement of the left hand. It proposes new ways of considering the various positions and movements, and uses ideas about the action of the fingers initially proposed by Casals.

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Finally, I would like to include this fragment from Lowri Blake, writing of her former teacher:

“Christopher was a formidable teacher. An endless supply of inspirational technical exercises, plus his extraordinarily fertile musical imagination, made for compelling lessons. I learned how to practise, and how to perform. Time and time again, he brought me back to the notion of balance - of method and music.”

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