

SPECIAL FEATURE on JOAN DICKSON

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Birth: 21st December 1921 - Edinburgh, Scotland

Full Name: Katherine Joan Balfour Dickson

Death: 9th October 1994 - London

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Joan Dickson was a most important Scottish cellist and cello teacher. She was born in Edinburgh, to Marjorie Balfour Lowe and Dr Douglas Dickson (a lawyer and Writer to the Signet). In fact, she was born into a very musical family, and throughout her childhood friends and family members gathered regularly to enjoy playing together, fostering her lifelong love of chamber music. In 1934, when Joan was just twelve, the legendary Professor Donald Francis Tovey brought Pau (Pablo) Casals to Edinburgh, where he performed Tovey's own Cello Concerto, and where her father Dr Douglas Dickson acted as musical host to the distinguished musical visitors!

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She studied with Enrico Mainardi in Paris. Mainardi was her mentor, and she one of his most distinguished pupils, along with Siegfried Palm. It was Mainardi's contention that an instrumentalist in a chamber group had to study the entire score, not just his part, something which Dickson embraced wholeheartedly.

Her first recitals in Edinburgh (1942) and London (1953) showed her immense skill and promise. In 1953 she became a founder member of the New Edinburgh Quartet - apparently some people commented that she led it, such was her influence and preparation within the group! Then in 1958 she joined the Scottish Piano Trio, and later still the Clarina Ensemble. Composer Iain Hamilton wrote his First Cello Sonata in 1958 specifically for Dickson - a work commissioned by the University Court of the University of Glasgow and was premiered by the cellist accompanied by the composer at the piano. She worked primarily in the United Kingdom. She was also a notable performer, giving many duo recitals with her long-time partner Joyce Rathbone. Joan also collaborated regularly with her sister Hester, who was also a pianist and a piano accompaniment lecturer at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland until 2014. In 1965 Joan was awarded the Worshipful Company of Musicians' Medal for Services to Chamber Music.

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Although cello recitals and chamber music were her specialties she also made numerous concerto appearances with professional orchestras. She regularly performed as a guest soloist with the Scottish Sinfonia and the London Chamber Orchestra. Apart from the standard repertoire, she was also noted for Hindemith's Cello Concerto and special works written for her by David Dorward, John Purser, and Frank Spedding. However, in general her tastes tended to be conservative - the three B's (Bach, Beethoven, Brahms) above all - I remember attending what I then considered an agreeable but somewhat austere Beethoven recital in the Wigmore Hall, London (must have been way back in the 80s). For Joan Dickson, chamber music is the essence of all that is greatest in music and she saw it as infinitely beneficial in the development of young players.

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Teaching became more and more important for her in later life. She taught at the then Royal Scottish Academy of Music ever since 1954, and she became an important professor at the Royal College of Music in London from 1967 onwards. Her activities in education also included serving as a professor at Britain's University of Durham since 1981 and the specialist Purcell School of Music.

Her many students included Moray Welsh, Melissa Phelps, Alexander Baillie, Richard Harwood, Andrew Shulman, Ruth Beauchamp and Louisa Tuck.

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She wrote some simple exercises titled "Freedom of the Fingerboard" to help young cellists to develop a confident left hand technique. The present published edition replaced the ESTA publication of 1995, and is now published under licence granted by the Estate of Joan Dickson in favour of ESTA's "Nutshell Fund". The Contents include: High Jumps / Olympic High Jumps / Rocking Scale / Sliding Scale.

Her pioneering involvement with ESTA stemmed from a deep concern for fostering the highest possible standards in string teaching at all levels. At ESTA courses and similar events she preferred to call her classes "workshops" rather than "master classes", reflecting her unpretentious attitude to her role as teacher and facilitator. Her influence was widespread and embraced conservatoire, private practice and peripatetic class teaching both at home and abroad. She was the frequent host of master classes at the Oxford Cello School and the Gathering of the Clans, something of an extended cello focus group. She also created an educational video on bowing principles.

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When away from cello performing and teaching she could be found relaxing on the golf course, in croquet and table tennis, and she even became an enthusiastic computer user when they were still in an early stage of development!

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Her lasting legacy is captured by many cellists. Here are some examples:

RICHARD HARWOOD - *"It's no exaggeration to say that Joan Dickson was an inspirational figure for any young cellist who came under her spell. I, myself, was especially fortunate to have a closer relationship than most to this wonderful lady who, very quickly, became a kind of musical grandmother to me"*.

STEVEN ISSERLIS - *"An elderly cello-teacher called Joan Dickson, whom I respected a lot (and who was incidentally one of the few cello-teachers who managed to remain on good terms with my irascible mentor, Jane Cowan) invited me to dinner, and gave me a stern lecture about the reports she'd heard about my grimaces. 'More is less,' was her message about stage antics; and how right she was. Suitably chastened, I returned home, and thenceforth made a conscious effort never to show more emotion than I was actually feeling as I played – to be honest, in fact"*

Steven also said in Twitter: *"At the very end of her life, I visited her in a hospice; lying in bed, she was still energetically demonstrating correct and incorrect bowing techniques!"*

JULIAN LLOYD WEBBER - *"I must admit that once I was away from her and I had a chance to think back on what she was trying to tell me, I realized that she had some great things to say. Although I didn't appreciate her advice at the time, she did help to establish a good technical foundation for me; all those Feuillard and Cossmann drills were very helpful"*.

MORAY WELSH - *"It's only now that, looking back on my years of study in the mid-sixties, during my later teens, I realise how incredibly lucky I was to have come into contact with Joan at a very important time in my life. It isn't exaggerating to say that my lessons with Joan were the central focus of my very existence, at that time. It was as though in those lessons I felt that Joan had a key to opening up entirely new dimensions in music. She was also someone with whom one could discuss a wide variety of subjects, and whose help, at a time of teenage existential angst, was invaluable. "*

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She passed away in 1994. At the end of that same year the British composer Caroline Bosanquet wrote an 'Elegy' which was dedicated 'In memoriam Joan Dickson'. It is scored for duo of cello - piano.

The Joan Dickson Chamber Music Fund was established in 1997 to honour the memory of Joan Dickson, a founder member of ESTA (UK) and Vice-Chair to Sir Yehudi Menuhin.

She firmly stands as one of Britain's most prominent and most important teachers of the twentieth century.



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