

Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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SPECIAL FEATURE on DENIS VIGAY

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Birth: 14th May 1926 - Brixton, London

Death: 27th June 2015 (London)

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The popular 20th century British cellist Denis Vigay first came to widespread attention when he studied at the Royal Academy of Music, on a scholarship at the tender age of 15, with Cedric Sharpe. Born in Brixton in 1926, he came from a musical and theatrical family and while still a pupil at Battersea Grammar School, he and his close friend Dennis Lewell had already set up a schoolboy orchestra, called the Tooting Bec Orchestra, to raise funds for charity. From this early age one could see his generosity!

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At the 'RAM', apart from his studies with Cedric Sharpe he also played in the First Orchestra under Henry Wood. However, his studies were interrupted by military service - he was part of ENSA and in the band of the Royal Engineers. At the end of World War II he was posted to Naples where it is said he would sell his cigarette coupons in order to buy tickets to the opera!

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Having completed his studies at the RAM, he was appointed principal cello of the Sadlers Wells Opera Orchestra. This was the first of a long line of principal cello posts he was to hold in his career. One anecdote from the Sadler's Wells Orchestra is a performance of 'La Traviata', which had to be abandoned when the conductor could no longer see the stage on account of the fog that had seeped into the theatre! One has to remember that these were still the days of heavy London smog, such as you see in the old films.

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In 1956 became principal cello of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. I am not sure how long he was there, but I suspect it was not for a long time. This is because he returned to London, upon the appointment as principal 'cello of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and was principal there during the Boulez years, regularly participating and even playing as a soloist in the Proms.

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From now on he had a glittering orchestral career. He went on to become principal 'cello of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields under the artistic leadership of Sir Neville Marriner, and as a member of the Academy Octet, making many recordings and touring all over the world. Indeed, his playing is featured not only on a number of Academy of St Martin albums, but also on film and popular recordings, including The Beatles' "Sgt Pepper 's Lonely Hearts Club Band"

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The post at the Academy of St Martin in the Fields allowed him to work extensively as a freelancer. For example he worked with most major orchestras - nearly always as principal too - including the Boyd Neel Orchestra, English Chamber Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, on soundtracks to major British and American movies and on albums. But this freelancing career also gave him the opportunity to be a professor at the Royal Academy of Music, London, and he was a tutor for many years of the cellists of the National Youth Strings Academy. Denis was latterly principal cello with the Rehearsal Orchestra for many years, passing his wealth of experience over to the next generations of British cellists. Incidentally I was a 'Rudolf Kempe' scholar in that orchestra for a few seasons - a wonderful time - yet when I was very active there (even helping out in the office!) we unfortunately never came face to face!

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The attached painting below is very poignant:

Full credit to the artist [adelewagstaff | from the easel... \(wordpress.com\)](#) who said this of Denis Vigay:

"I drew and painted Denis while leading the 'cello section during many courses, both in London and during the Edinburgh Festival and it was an absolute privilege to play in the same orchestra. He was such a modest and charming man, with a wonderful sense of humour and gentleness. I have missed him during recent years heading up the section, he was a wonderful figure to draw during rehearsals. Rest in peace Denis."

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Denis Vigay was still very active in the 21st century, finally passing away in June 2015, aged eighty-nine. He had married Greta in 1952; she died the previous year. They had three children; Martin, Karen and Teresa. Martin fully followed in his father's footsteps - he has for many years been a member of the Royal Opera House Orchestra.

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