

Cellists' Corner

Brief Career Details of Important Cellists

prepared by David Johnstone from public information

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PAUL TORTELIER

By Karel

Paul Tortelier, the famous French cellist, was born March 21, 1914 in Paris, where his father was a carpenter and cabinet-maker, who played the violin and the mandolin.

He was given a cello at the age of six by his mother, who loved the cello and wanted a cellist for a son. She guided him every step of the way and followed every avenue for his advancement.

Beatrice Bluhm was his first teacher, and she emphasized the flexible wrist and free bow arm of the Franco-Belgian school of cello technique. When Tortelier was ten he entered the Paris Conservatoire. There he studied with Feuillard and then with Gerard Hekking, who taught him to love Bach and to make the suites "dance."

When Tortelier was sixteen years old, he won first prize at the Conservatoire, while in Gerard Hekking's cello class. He had already gained much experience as a professional cellist, having performed in the cafes and cinemas of Paris. His first orchestral job was as assistant principal of the Paris Radio Orchestra. He played the Lalo Concerto, when he debuted in 1931 with the Concerts Lamoureux. He also performed with the Calvet Quartet.

He studied harmony for three years with Jean Gallon in the Conservatoire (he received first prize in composition), and was a member of the Monte Carlo Symphony Orchestra from 1935 to 1937, where he played under the batons of Toscanini and Bruno Walter, as well as with Richard Strauss, who conducted his Don Quixote, with Tortelier playing the cello solo. (He became internationally associated with Don Quixote, and played it with many orchestras around the world.)

In 1939 he became solo cellist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitsky. He eventually performed concerts with all the famous conductors and orchestras of the mid-twentieth century. A French critic wrote, *"If Casals is Jupiter, then Tortelier is Apollo."*

Tortelier was a friend of Pablo Casals, and was invited to be principal cellist at the first Prades Festival, which commemorated the 200th anniversary of Bach's death. He admired Casals very much and imitated some of his technique. He said of Casals, *"...he was probably the first cellist to use his left hand in the manner of a pianist--that is, by normally placing only one finger on the string at a time, rather than keeping all the fingers clamped down. This allowed the fingers to vibrate freely."* (From The Strad, April '84) Ginsberg wrote, *"Creative fantasy and a youthful abandon are inherent in his performing style."*

Tortelier was so moved by the Israeli effort to establish a homeland that he moved to Israel to assist in the effort. He was forty years old then, at the height of his cellist powers. He and his wife and their two children lived in Mabarith, a Kibbutz, just a few hundred yards from the enemy border.

From 1956 to 1969 he was a professor at the Paris Conservatoire, and at the Folkwang Hochschule in Essen, from 1969 to 1975. Shortly thereafter he became the first Westerner to be an honorary Professor of Music at the Central Conservatoire in Beijing, China. He was a Frenchman, but advised his students to avoid French music. Not that he disliked it, but he realized that the public wanted to hear Beethoven and Mozart. He taught his students to be international in their musical tastes and performances. As is the case with Rostropovich, Tortelier gradually began to do more conducting as he grew older.

He had an outgoing, lively personality, and taught master classes on British television. The classes were quite popular, even with people who knew little about the cello or classical music. Tortelier has a reputation for being a great story-teller, and a wide knowledge of art and literature, as well as music. He not only is an excellent performer, but also a composer of many cello works. His Sonata Breve (Bucephale), and Alla Maud are particularly well-known, as are his two cello concertos.

His edition of the Bach Suites came out in 1966. He said, with regard to the Suites, *"To breathe life into music is more important than to prove respect for it."* In 1971 he published his cello method, *How I Play, How I Teach*, which is particularly useful in training pupils to play modern music. He was founder and president of the "Mouvement Beethoven Association," begun on the 200th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, and designed to support progressively-minded composers.

Paul Tortelier died in December of 1990, at the age of 76. His musical legacy is carried forward by his son, Yan-Pascal Tortelier, the internationally famous conductor of the BBC Philharmonic (recording on the Chandos label). Amongst his better known cello students are Arto Noras, Raphael Sommer, and Jacqueline du Pre. Yan-Pascal's sons are presently collating the writings and compositions of their grandfather.

For further information the reader is advised to read Ginsberg's History of the Violoncello, Campbell's The Great Cellists and Edward Seckerson's "The French Connection."



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