

Centenary Reflections on Cecil Aronowitz, by Nicola Lewsey

As I reflect on the fact that on March 4th this year we are celebrating the centenary of the birth of Cecil Aronowitz – my husband from 1967 till his death in 1978 - I realise, with something of a shock, that I have outlived him for roughly the same number of years that Clara outlived her husband, Robert Schumann. This reminds me what a natural affinity Cecil had with Schumann's music. I remember particularly how movingly he played the last movement of 'Märchenbilder' and the wonderful melodies in the piano quartet and quintet. Like Schumann, Cecil was quite a quixotic character, not always easy to fathom. And he could be very stubborn. It was this stubbornness which sustained him through his strong beliefs, even though they might go against the tide sometimes. He was particularly stubborn when it came to his viola. It was mocked by many who felt it was a poor relation compared to those being played by colleagues with their Strads and Amatis. Even Benjamin Britten felt he should be playing on a more 'distinguished' instrument, to the point where he lent Cecil his own viola – which in turn had been bequeathed to him by his teacher, Frank Bridge. Cecil politely brought it out when playing for Britten, but he always returned to his own beloved instrument as soon as possible.

Since his death the viola has been owned and played by a former pupil, Eric Rycroft, his sister, Anne, and now Louise Lansdown. No greater compliment could be paid to Cecil, me or his viola that these distinguished violists have wanted to own and play this viola whose origins are still uncertain but which does produce a lovely sound. Louise's career to a certain extent mirrors that of Cecil (whom she never met) in that she is Head of Strings at the Birmingham Conservatoire. She is also South African and when she first obtained the viola was teaching at the RNCM, where Cecil was the first Head of Strings.

I and my family are celebrating the centenary in Birmingham and in Snape with concerts. In Birmingham, Nobuko Imai was to have been the performer but sadly had to pull out at the last minute due to an injury. Her place has been taken by another former pupil, Simon Rowland-Jones which perhaps gives the occasion even more significance. He will be playing – amongst other works – Hindemith's Trauermusik, a work which Cecil held dear and played many times.

Aldeburgh was the place where Cecil most loved to be. He had a great rapport with Britten and Pears and took part in every Festival there from 1949 until his death. His dream for many years was to see a School established there and within just a couple of years of his death this dream came to fruition. Cecil founded the Britten-Pears Orchestra (formerly known as the Snape Maltings Training Orchestra) and became the first Director of String Studies. He established the String Quartets course, known originally as the International Academy of String Quartets. So it is entirely appropriate that – by coincidence – we will be attending a concert on the morning of 4th March given by the Piatti Quartet as the culmination of their Residency at Aldeburgh.

On a recent visit to Snape I was overwhelmed to see how much the place has grown in the years since Cecil's untimely death. It is so strange to think that he died before the first building of the school was even open – classes were being held in all sorts of back rooms at the Maltings. Now it is a thriving and large Centre operating all-year round. He would have been chuffed indeed.

Nicola Lewsey. 22 February 2016