

## The Lionel Tertis-John White Collection

Carol White

A unique and comprehensive archive of material relating to Lionel Tertis and the viola is now accessible to researchers at Trinity Laban Conservatoire in London. It was the treasured collection of my late husband, John White.

John was an avid collector all his life. As a young boy he collected cigarette cards from which he learnt about history, cricket and music: three subjects that were of special interest to him. His passion for music resulted in childhood scrapbooks of pictures of musicians and when he changed from violin to viola he began to collect as much music as he could that included the viola.

He encountered Lionel Tertis on two occasions when he was a student. Tertis was one of the judges in an intercollegiate competition when the Simons Quartet (later to be renamed the Albarni) represented the Royal Academy of Music and he was on the panel for John's final exam at the Academy. John never forgot that as he walked into the exam he heard Tertis remark: "Another small viola!" As young professionals the Albarni Quartet had coaching from Sidney Griller who arranged for them to go and play to Tertis who, at the age of 89, gave them a very rigorous three-hour session on a Haydn quartet.

As John continued to collect information on the viola, he gradually concentrated his research on Lionel Tertis but it wasn't until many years later that he decided to incorporate all this material into a biography. During the course of this research he collected a large archive of material from a number of sources.

Through his connection with the Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition John met Lillian Tertis, Lionel's widow. Over the years they became good friends and she generously entrusted him with some very important documents, medals, diaries, letters and personal mementoes of her husband.

John's friendship with Harry Danks spanned many decades. Harry was a former pupil of Tertis and later became principal viola in the BBC Symphony Orchestra, a position he held for 32 years. After Harry's death, his daughter Ysobel gave John a significant collection of Tertis-related music much of which had belonged to the man himself. Of particular interest is a copy of the Walton Concerto which has Lionel's markings and an inscription to him from the composer: 'For Lionel Tertis with gratitude for everything he has done for this work, and for his magnificent playing of it, from William Walton Feb. 6<sup>th</sup> 1931'. The piano score is inscribed: 'To Harry Danks, a most sincere player of the viola to whom I wish all success. Lionel Tertis March 1<sup>st</sup> 1937'.

The catalogue of over 130 pieces of music includes original manuscripts of some of Tertis' own compositions, including Variations on a Passacaglia of Handel and *The Blackbirds*, and his arrangements for viola such as Delius' Violin Sonatas nos. 2 and 3 and Brahms' *Minnelied* and *Wir Wandelten*. The collection also contains numerous works dedicated to Tertis by such British composers as Holst, Dunhill and McEwen. Noteworthy, too, is a marked, enlarged copy of the solo part of Berlioz' *Harold in Italy* which Lionel used in later life when his eyesight was failing. Among

the personal copies used by Tertis are Sonatas by Bax and Bliss, Holst's Lyric Movement and Vaughan Williams' *Flos Campi* .

Tertis was a prolific writer of letters. Fortunately Lillian kept the correspondence he received from many eminent musicians and contemporaries such as Dame Nellie Melba, William Primrose, Fritz Kreisler, David Oistrakh, Arthur Rubinstein, Ernest Newman, Hamilton Harty and Sacheverell Sitwell.

A most interesting letter from Walton in 1932 refers to Lionel's performance of his Concerto in Edinburgh, his being in "a state of complete dejection" about his symphony which was not going to be ready for its planned first performance and good news that *Belshazzar* had been accepted for the International Festival at Amsterdam the following year. But it is the last paragraph that is the most intriguing: 'I hope sometime (not too distant) to write another concerto for you as a present, for I'm really grateful to you for all you have done for this one'.

In 1929 Tertis and Elgar exchanged letters about the arrangement of the Cello Concerto for viola. Elgar suggested that the inscription on the score should be "arranged by Lionel Tertis (with the composer's sanction)" and in 1933 Elgar thanked him for his "superb playing of your concerto" - a comment that emphasises Elgar's approval of the viola version.

There are also copies of numerous letters between Lionel and Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, the American pianist and patroness of the arts, which were written over a period of twenty years, more than seventy letters between Tertis and the luthier George Smith and the complete correspondence from Wilfred Saunders re the Tertis Model viola.

A fascinating array of over 200 photographs includes those of Tertis's parents, Lionel as a soloist and in various chamber ensembles such as The Chamber Music Players and those of fellow musicians such as Ysaÿe, Albert Sammons, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Henry Wood, Elena Gerhardt and Solomon. A photo that Tertis kept on his piano was of a portrait of Rubinstein that was signed: 'To my dearest Lionel, in memory of our lifelong friendship – devotedly – Arthur'.

John's research material contains original programmes and reviews, articles from magazines, typescripts of BBC radio programmes and information on the Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition including all the programmes from the event.

The collection's diversity is enhanced by Lillian's contribution; three of Lionel's passports, guest books from commemorative occasions, Tertis Model instrument plans, medals including the 'Knight of the Order of the Crown' which was bestowed on Tertis by HM the King of the Belgians in 1921 in recognition of his services to the Belgian cause during the war and, relating to this, three small notebooks in which Lionel recorded his experiences in Belgium in 1916.

This archive will appeal not only to viola enthusiasts but to instrument makers and musicologists. John would have been delighted that all this material has been kept together and has been added to Lillian's small collection. His wish was that it should be appreciated by, and available to, researchers for years to come.

The Tertis-White Collection is described on the [Archives Hub](#), and the music is catalogued at item level on the [Jerwood Library catalogue](#). Researchers are welcome; contact the library on [jlpa@trinitylaban.ac.uk](mailto:jlpa@trinitylaban.ac.uk) to make an appointment. There will be an exhibition based on the collection in spring 2017.

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***8 October 2016***