

Brian Hawkins, who died in October aged 84, was born in York in 1936 and brought up there, attending St Peter's School. A late starter, he learnt violin with his mother Irene from the ages of nine to 14. 'I was in the National Youth Orchestra and was not enjoying the violin,' he recalled. 'I looked across and saw the violas looking very relaxed.' His mother had a quartet and as he had big hands, he switched to the viola, studying first with Sidney Errington of the Hallé Orchestra. He remembered playing piano quartets at home with Francis Jackson, organist of York Minster, or Alan Wicks, later organist of Canterbury Cathedral.

With Errington, a Tertis pupil, he studied such things as the transcription of Delius's Second Violin Sonata; and York Bowen's First Sonata was his passport into the Royal College of Music. There he studied with Cecil Aronowitz, who told him: 'Never copy the way I play and never make a sound on the instrument which is not musical - even when tuning.' His first viola was a Samuel Forster, tightly strung with Aronowitz's recommended Jargar strings and a Resonanz tailpiece; but while still at the RCM Brian acquired an anonymous 17in German viola, made in about 1720. 'It had been used by a little girl as a cello - it's very slim.' A tall young man by now, he was able to handle a big instrument and he resisted Aronowitz's advice to have its neck shortened. Two years of National Service in the Band of the Royal Army Service Corps interrupted his studies, except for the odd lesson, but in his final year he won the Silver Medal of the Worshipful Company of Musicians and gave a recital at the RCM with Richard Nunn.

The New Edinburgh Quartet had just been disbanded and in 1960 another Edinburgh Quartet was formed by Sidney Newman of the University Music Department, with Miles Baster as leader, Julian Cummings as second violinist and Ian Hampton as cellist. Brian was invited to take the viola chair and he spent the next five years based in Scotland, playing in the Chamber Concerts in the capital and Glasgow and doing a lot of touring. At the suggestion of Hampton's father Colin, of Griller Quartet fame, the foursome started each rehearsal by reading through a Haydn quartet. They played Seiber, Reger, Berg, Schoenberg and Nielsen, as well as the Classics and music by their distinguished colleagues Hans Gál and Kenneth Leighton. They recorded a Haydn LP and one of Tippett and Bloch.

Brian, his wife Mavis and their two children returned in 1965 to London, where he freelanced in chamber orchestras and the English Opera Group. He was then asked to replace Eileen Grainger in David Martin's quartet, staying three years. With his cousins Susan, John and Charles Tunnell he made up a string trio and piano quartet - they recorded Bridge's Fantasy Quartet - and the string players also played in the Vesuvius Ensemble. Brian became a founder member of both the London Bach Orchestra (1967) and the London Sinfonietta (1968). In the latter year Janet Craxton formed her Oboe Quartet with Perry Hart, Brian and Kenneth Heath (replaced after his death in 1977 by Charles Tunnell, until Craxton herself died in 1981): their warhorses were the Mozart and Britten quartets but a number of pieces were written for them. Several BBC recordings are now on CD.

Meanwhile in 1972 Brian became a founder (with John Georgiadis, James Galway, Anthony Camden, Douglas Cummings, David Lumsden and Jane Ryan) of the flexible London Virtuosi group: among their records was a two-disc set of the Mozart and Michael Haydn Duos. 'Brian and I go back a long way, although he was RCM and I was RAM,' says Georgiadis. 'I think we first met on a music course in St. Bees in 1960. We actually played together in a Beethoven quartet on that course with Warwick Hill on second violin and Nicola Anderson on cello – amazingly I actually have a recording of it. Our friendship grew closer, as my first wife Susan Salter was also an RCM viola student.' While still unmarried, the two couples visited Paris. 'A funny side aspect to this trip,' says Georgiadis, 'was that quite against what I had in mind for a weekend in Paris with my new girlfriend, because Brian was such a gentleman with Mavis - not having the same "bad" intentions as I - it was he and I who ended up sleeping in the same bed! And you can imagine what a night that was - a tiny Parisian double bed that dipped seriously low into the middle, with both of us clinging desperately to our edges in an attempt to avoid bodily contact.'

Brian played in the Nash Ensemble and formed a duo with pianist John Constable. In 1979 he broke his wrist badly. It was at this time of crisis that I became acquainted with him. Fortunately he recovered the full use of his arm. He taught at his alma mater the RCM from 1967, at first coaching string quartets but gradually taking more individual students. In 1991 he became a Fellow of the College and in 1992 he was made Head of Strings. Well accustomed to examining and adjudicating, in 2013 he headed the jury for the Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition on the Isle of Man – the first time a violist had been given this role. He proved a popular chairman, able to head off any disputes almost before they started.

Brian was a lovely man, with many friends. He was lucky in that his inclination towards chamber music, while not making him rich, kept him out of the hurly-burly of the symphony orchestras. He never aspired to be a concerto soloist, although he produced a lovely focused tone of amplitude and quality. 'I do not consider the viola to be a solo instrument,' he once told me. 'It's more suited to chamber music. Viola players have to be versatile.'

TULLY POTTER