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CECIL ARONOWITZ - THE MUSICIAN, HIS VIOLA AND THE LEGACY

Cecil Solomon Aronowitz was born on 4 March 1916 in King William's Town, South Africa, to Russian and Lithuanian parents. He began to play the piano when he was a boy, but very soon expressed a wish to learn the violin at his school, the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

The idea of a Jewish boy at a convent is unusual enough, but as he told it, the Mother Superior said: "Well, Cecil, if you want to learn the violin, we must find a way of teaching you". So, they sent off for a book on the subject and one of the nuns was deputed to teach Cecil (10 years of age at the time). This unorthodox training gave him a somewhat hunched playing posture which he never lost. From 1928 he was a pupil at the school of music at Grahamstown Training College and from 1933 he began studying in Durban with Stirling Robbins.

In 1935 Cecil travelled to London on an overseas scholarship to further his studies with the Spanish-American pedagogue Achille Rivarde at the Royal College of Music; and in 1937 he took up the viola as a second study with Ernest Tomlinson, a fine player who was a regular guest violist with the Busch Quartet. Rivarde died in 1939 and Cecil's course of study was even more seriously interrupted by war service – latterly in the Intelligence Corps. When he returned to the Royal College in 1946, he felt unable to recapture his form as a violinist. So, for £25 he bought the viola which he would use for the rest of his career; and his change of direction quickly brought recognition in the 1947 Cobbett Prize for chamber music.

In 1948 Cecil Aronowitz started a 25-year stint of teaching at the Royal College and a 30-year collaboration with the Amadeus Quartet, one of the three great Leitmotifs of his career.

Norbert Brainin said: "When we started to play quintets at a very early date we played with all sorts of people, very good players, but in the end, we stuck with Cecil because in some way he suited us. He was very musical and sometimes it felt as if he was a fifth member of the quartet."

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Siegmund Nissel was even more definite about that: "We regarded Cecil as literally a fifth member of the Amadeus. He was extremely kind and a very good musician, although he refused to play on good instruments, and it was a joy to be in his company. I remember with particular pleasure the children's parties he gave for the children of the various musicians, especially at Christmas – he dressed up as Father Christmas"[2].

Norbert said of Cecil's viola: "It was a very ordinary instrument, and he was proud to tell you that his fiddle case cost more than his instrument"[3]. The various members of the Amadeus Quartet kept trading up until they were all playing on Strads or Del Gesù, but Cecil doggedly kept to his own viola and even when he had to borrow an Amati because his instrument had come unglued, he did not like it. Nor did he really enjoy playing the Frank Bridge viola that Britten lent him. The point about his viola was that it worked for him, and he made a splendid sound on it. Various attributions were attached to it, and still bears the label saying it was made by David Tecchler in 1730, but the latest wisdom from Charles Beare is that it is mid-18th-century French.

A wonderful Cecil story that Tully Potter regales so beautifully here just sums up Cecil's relationship with the Amadeus Quartet perfectly. A Cecil story concerning the Amadeus may be apocryphal, but I have asked all the survivors about it and none of them has denied it. As you probably know, they used to fight like cats and dogs in rehearsal. They were rehearsing with Aronowitz for a tour which would include some quintets, and things were getting a bit tense, when the guest violist had the temerity to point out a slight flaw in one of his colleagues' playing. Whoever it was, and I suspect the late Peter Schidlof, rounded on him and exploded: "Why should you have anything to say? You play like a pig!" Whereupon Cecil quietly got up, put his viola in its case and left. A few days later, Norbert phoned him. "Cecil, about that tour..." – "You don't want me; I play like a pig". – "But my dear fellow, we all play like pigs. Now, about that tour..."

In 1951 Aronowitz began teaching viola and coaching chamber music at William Glock's Bryanston Summer School, which moved to Dartington in 1953 and with which he was involved for 20 years. From 1960 to 1962 he led the violas in Menuhin's Bath Festival Orchestra and in 1963 he formed a duo with the pianist Nicola Grunberg, whom he married four years later. They had two children, Sebastian, and Tamsin. Hugh Maguire recalls Cecil as "the most wonderful viola player, always with a gorgeous sound" and "an incredibly busy man, racing round helping people"[4].

I have been lucky enough to have Cecil's unique viola since 27 December 2003. It came to me via a set of rather tragic circumstances that go back all the way to 1978. Cecil Aronowitz collapsed on stage whilst playing Mozart's C major String Quintet with students and staff from the Britten-Pears School at Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh on 6 September 1978. He never recovered and died in hospital the next day. His viola was terribly damaged as he collapsed and for many years the broken instrument remained with Charles Beare, who lovingly pieced it back together again. It was in 1983 when Eric Rycroft an ex-student of Cecil's (also a South African, and a student who had studied with Cecil at the Royal College) approached Nicola Grunberg (Cecil's widow) and asked if he could buy the repaired viola. He duly took possession of the instrument, travelled back to South Africa and adored playing on it for many years. It was in

2000 when Eric had a tragic motorbike accident and injured his left hand and arm, resulting in him no longer being able to play the viola! Eric was devastated, quickly sent the viola to his sister Anne Rycroft who was at the time a violist in the London Philharmonic Orchestra. She very sadly died from cancer in November 2003 and unbelievably I called Eric on Christmas day 2003 and he quickly said to me:” Louise, my viola is waiting for you in London. Go and get it!”. My dear friend Michael Freyhan took me to fetch the viola that has undoubtedly changed my life on 27 December 2003, and well... the rest, as they say, “is history”. According to some reliable sources Cecil apparently used to put the ash from his cigarettes into the f-holes of his beloved viola... and his 1890 Sartory bow that I acquired 4 years ago from Emile Cantor he used to bite intermittently when bored in rehearsals... not sure if I should believe these old tales!

I was not quite sure how I might be able to continue the legacy of Cecil’s viola the first few years after it came to me. My first idea was to write a book about Cecil and his incredible journey with his viola, but, somehow, this did not quite seem to be the right thing. It was over 10 years after acquiring Cecil’s wonderful viola when the Cecil Aronowitz International Viola Competition for violists aged 21 and under was launched at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. Thus far the competition has been held twice, 2014 and 2017. Timothy Ridout was the inaugural winner in 2014 (aged 19) who has gone on to forge an international solo career, adding the accolade of becoming the first ever British winner of the Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition in 2016. The 2017 winner was Emma Wernig (aged 18) from Los Angeles and a student at the Colburn School. The Cecil Aronowitz International Viola Competition has gone from strength to strength, with the first event only three days and the 2017 competition doubled as a massive festival and education symposium, running for an entire week. The latter competition also included a second and third prize, other major awards, over 80 master classes offered to young violists from across the UK and Europe, workshops in Birmingham Schools, lectures, daily recitals, and a luthier exhibition. Repertoire for the competition has been specially selected to reflect Cecil’s interests and philosophy as a musician. Solo Bach, the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante, a Sonata, Kreisler and either Bartok, Walton or Hindemith with orchestra.

Many thanks to Cecil’s family Nicola, Sebastian and Tamsin for sharing these stories and especially to Tully Potter for gathering much of this information together particularly the initial biographical material.

Extract from: VIOLA – SPECTRUM OF ARTISTIC IMPERATIVE

[1] Norbert Brainin, first violist of the Amadeus String Quartet

[2] Sigmund Nissel, second violinist of the Amadeus String Quartet

[3] Peter Schidlof, violist of the Amadeus String Quartet

[4] Hugh Maguire, first violinist of the Allegri String Quartet