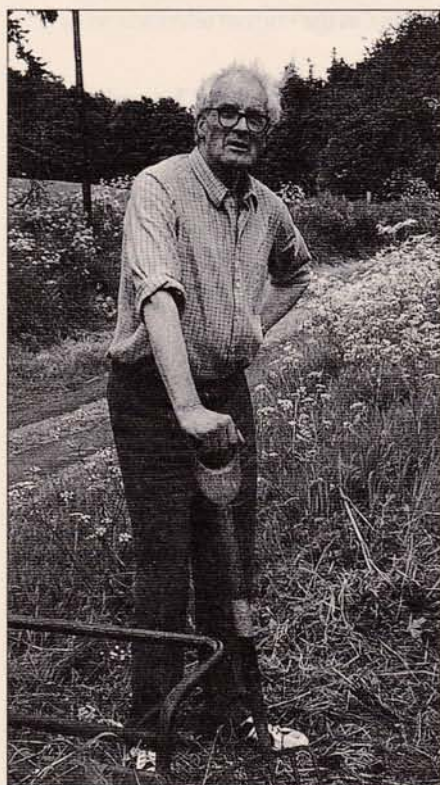


Christopher Cowan 1908-1999

Kingsgate House 1922-27, Master of Music 1953-70



The tall figure – the beaming smile – the majestic beat – that unshakeable belief that everything would be all right on the night – his wonderful capacity for seeing or hearing the best in anything – sitting through an inexpert musical performance with a rapt expression and eyes shut, actually hearing in his mind's ear what it really should be sounding like – his sheer enjoyment of life – taking the Quiristers on mystery tours in his car (always a little out of the ordinary – first a Jowett Javelin, then a brand new aero-dynamic Citroën) – crawling head first down the stairs at home just to see whether he still could; the last time had been when he was five!

In 1953 Christopher Home Cowan succeeded Henry Havergal as Master of

Music in the era when that post included everything – conducting Chapel Choir, First Orchestra, Glee Club, Music Club Choir and Orchestra; coaching House ensembles for Palmer Pot or Bobber and Schuster Pots; conducting concerts for the Winchester and County Musical Festival in the Guildhall, which gave hundreds of local schoolchildren their first taste of large-scale performance; teaching piano, organ and harmony; directing and accompanying the Quiristers' puppet operas (usually Mozart or Schubert); conducting the Mayor's Carols in the Guildhall; doing all the Music School secretarial and accounts administration – there was no Music School Secretary in those days! Christopher's achievement in strengthening and developing Winchester's post-war musical renaissance was outstanding. 'It was a wonderful inheritance that Christopher handed on to me in September 1970' writes Angus Watson, his successor. 'I noticed at once the truly musical values that Christopher had brought to the School, busy and happy music-making at a remarkably high level, and a tangible feeling that music was important to the institution.'

Among the Cowans' friends were some of the great musicians of the time, and they came to perform as soloists in the Music Club concerts in the Guildhall and Cathedral: Adila Fachiri and Jelly d'Aranyi (great-nieces of the legendary Joachim), Leon Goossens, Bernard Michelin, Olive Zorian, Frank Merrick, Peter Wallfisch, Isobel Baillie, Astra Desmond....

Christopher also started the Winchester College Subscription Concerts, bringing some brilliant young artists to New Hall at the beginning of their careers, notably John Ogdon, Julian Bream, Imogen Cooper and Andras

Schiff. Parties at 9 Kingsgate Street after concerts were hives of musical reminiscence. Stories abound: his white tie and tails locked in a cupboard with no key after everyone else had already left for the concert; a service about to be broadcast live by the BBC from Chapel with Jane calling from the kitchen 'Christopher, aren't you supposed to be there conducting? They're just announcing that they're going over to the Chapel of Winchester College' – a quick sprint through the garden gate and Trusty Servant passage...luckily Raymond Humphrey was marking time on the organ. Inevitably there were times when performances were a touch under-rehearsed, or messages didn't reach their intended destination, but these were mere blips in the overall picture.

It is largely thanks to CHC that the continued existence of the Quiristers at Win. Coll. was assured in the 1960s. At the time when Eton did away with its Choir School (a decision we are told it has since regretted), our Governing Body needed convincing reasons to justify maintaining ours. CHC gave the Headmaster, Desmond Lee, a meticulously researched paper with which he persuaded the Governing Body that the Quiristers must stay – and they were amalgamated in 1966 with the Pilgrims' School by agreement with the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral.

Some of his pupils have become distinguished musicians: composer and broadcaster Gerard McBurney; Peter Phillips, founder and conductor of the Tallis Scholars; Hugh Macdonald, the academic; Mark Venning (who played the organ at Christopher's funeral), head of Harrison & Harrison the organ builders; violinist Bill Benham; cellist and conductor Charles

Medlam; cellist Timothy Mason (who died in 1997); singer Charles Brett; and there are countless others who owe to Christopher much of their love of music. Steven Isserlis, the cellist, writes 'I began my cello lessons with Jane Cowan when I was ten, and met Christopher (nicknamed Crinan for somewhat obscure but irresistible reasons) shortly thereafter; along with everybody else, I adored him immediately. Whereas Jane was a fiery-eyed musical prophet, he was gentle, quiet, always on the lookout for a joke, be it good or groaningly awful, but he was as serious and passionate about music as she was. Although we children always claimed him as one of our own, we soon found out that his rehearsals and lessons were to be taken seriously. He was dedicated, profoundly knowledgeable and wonderfully inspiring.'

Born in Dalkeith, Midlothian on 13 November 1908, Christopher spent much of his childhood in the Borders. He was sent south to prep school at the age of nine, where his piano teacher helped to lessen the shock by introducing him to painting, which was to become an abiding interest. He was then sent to Winchester, a school at that time frequently chosen by the Edinburgh legal establishment, arriving in K House in 1922. (He wore his Old Beloeite tie with much relish on special occasions throughout his life). As a pupil of George Dyson, the Master of Music, he distinguished himself as a pianist and organist, was a member of the Shooting VIII and began his life-long routine of an early morning swim in the river. He won an organ scholarship to Trinity College, Oxford where his music degree was combined with a pass degree in French. Conducting lessons with Malcolm Sargent and piano lessons with Frank Merrick rounded off this part of his musical life, and he was thrilled with the fact that Merrick's teacher Leschetizky had been taught by Czerny who was a pupil of Beethoven. After an early spell at Winchester, his first teaching post was at Tonbridge in 1932; he then became Director of Music at Dover College (1935), at Sedbergh (1938), at Uppingham (1950) and finally Master of

Music at Winchester in 1953 where he remained until he retired in 1970. He always kept in close touch with his colleagues at other schools, and was President of the Music Masters' Association in 1955.

Jim Peschek writes from Uppingham 'The Cowans helped so many people in need by taking them into their home, or by giving musically promising youngsters employment in exchange for free lessons in music, and board and lodging.' The same was the case at Winchester. Christopher's house in Kingsgate Street was a haven of civilization of an unusual kind. His wife Jane (née Harvey Webb) whom he married in 1937 will be remembered as an inspirational cello teacher of international standing, and also as someone who, as a Quaker, put her principles into practice. Their children, Francis (G 1954-58), Maeve and Lucy – all gifted musicians, each in turn a member of the National Youth Orchestra – were their pride and joy, as was their grand-daughter Andrea. In the early 1960s they adopted a much-loved young family, Henry, Helen and Irina Zarb, whose parents had died. John and David Gwilt (cellist and pianist/composer respectively) and Bernard Harvey Webb, Jane's nephew, were also part of the household, which was completed by two West Highland terriers, and looked after by Anna the housekeeper from Upper Silesia, who in moments of stress would invoke Polish pagan gods, and whose cry 'Essen!' to announce each meal could be heard down the length of the street. More often than not there would be a guest at the round table; conversation might range from admiration of the Frühlingsgold rose in the garden to the migration of birds or the wonders of the Abbey of St. Benoît in the heart of France.

When Christopher retired, he and Jane moved up to his beloved Edrom House in Berwickshire, which now became the headquarters of the International Cello Centre. He continued to be an Associated Board examiner, revelling in the extended foreign tours, particularly those in New Zealand (where his brother lived), the West Indies and the Far East. His passion for pho-

tography was given full rein, and his collection of slides numbered more than 16,000. He taught the piano and organ to local pupils, and played the organ for services at Edrom Church twice a month, taking special delight in performing the theme from Miss Marple for Harvest Festival (because Bill Benham who was staying had played Violin 2 in the original television recording!).

Life was not kind to Christopher in his later years: in 1996 Jane died after a long illness during which he looked after her with gentle devotion; shortly afterwards their son Francis died in a car accident. The courage with which Christopher weathered these blows gave great strength to the rest of his family.

Throughout his life Christopher kept in close touch with many old friends and pupils. He was a keen correspondent, and it was always a delight to receive one of those meticulously written envelopes with the excitements inside. To mark Christopher's ninetieth birthday last November, a celebration concert-party was given in his honour by Win. Coll. in Music School. This was attended by a large gathering of former pupils, friends and family, and gave him great joy. A few days later he gave what had become his annual organ recital, with Lucy playing the violin, in a packed Ludgershall Parish Church – an occasion he particularly enjoyed as it entailed a few days' stay with the family of an old friend from nursery school days in Edinburgh – Elisabeth, Lady Moyne – at Biddesden House.

In John Thorn's words 'Christopher never bullied, outwardly he never seemed even to get cross. (Lucy adds 'Every so often, though, he would erupt in a terrifying display of fury – usually at flat sopranos!'). He never sulked, or took revenges, or thrived on the making of enemies. He achieved that strange miracle of getting people to perform great music because they loved it, and because they loved him.' ■

Fiona Smith