

FRANK STILES

by Dr David C F Wright

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Frank Stiles has devoted his life to music and music-making, and his love for the viola, sometimes called the Cinderella of the orchestra, has been an inspiration. He has been a practical musician all his life having been an excellent violist both as a soloist and playing in several famous orchestras. Like another very fine violist, the late Harry Danks, Frank has successfully promoted the viola, a most worthy crusade which probably began with Lionel Tertis.

Lionel Tertis was born in West Hartlepool in 1876. His father was Russian and his mother was Polish but both became naturalized Britons. Lionel studied at Trinity College, London, the Leipzig Conservatoire and the Royal Academy of Music in London. He was the principal viola in the Queen's Hall Orchestra from 1900 to 1904. Later he was to play in the Beecham Orchestra. Because he was such a superb player many composers wrote works for him. He designed the Tertis Model viola at sixteen and three quarter inches in length. He was made a CBE in 1950 and had many distinguished pupils including Winifred Copperwheat with whom Frank Stiles studied.

Frank was born on 2 April 1924 in Chiswick, West London. His father, Ernest, was a radio engineer who played the violin, piano and classical guitar and was a keen cyclist. He died in 1961.

Frank's mother, Maud, played the piano and was a keen reader. She died in 1969.

Frank was the youngest of six children and the only other survivor is Edward. There was also Charles, George, Phyllis and Marjorie.

At school Frank won prizes for science and music.

Frank took up the violin at an early age and in 1939 played Mozart's Violin Concerto no. 3 with the Hanwell Orchestra. It was after the 1939-1945 war that he took up the viola. He was studying to be an engineer at Imperial College but, as the Royal College of Music College was nearby, he spent a lot of time there and decided on a career in music. He went on to study at the Guildhall School and with Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

His interest in the viola was enhanced by the violist Winifred Copperwheat (1905- 1976) who also lived in Ealing. She was said to be one of Lionel Tertis' most accomplished pupils. She was a member of the Zorian String Quartet and she premiered Frank's Viola Concerto no. 1 with Sir Adrian Boult in 1960. Frank studied with her from the late 1950s and visited her regularly until she died. Walter Trampler gave the first American performance in 1973. Frank went to Ealing Grammar School and then to Acton Technical College. He joined the RAF and learned to fly in Arbroath becoming a pilot for the Fleet Air Arm in 1942 supporting the forces in the Far East and the Pacific. He often flew as protection for convoys carrying essential supplies. He flew a single seater 2000 horse power Sikorski armed with four Browning guns on each wing. He could fly at 400mph and the only problem was landing on aircraft carriers because of the size of the engines..

In 1970 Frank formed an orchestral group in Acton and within a short time this developed in the Priory Concertante Orchestra, a Beethoven- size orchestra. He put on baroque music and many contemporary works and concerts were given on the South Bank and well reviewed. He employed assistant conductors including the young Adrian Leaper. Frank was with this orchestra for about ten years.

He has been married twice but both his wives died. His first wife, Estelle Lewis, born 1926 was a Jew of Polish extraction, a sculptress, a fine singer and pianist. They were married in 1969 having met at a Promenade Concert. She developed cancer and Frank took her to a specialist in America and another in Harley Street but she died on 13 January 1987. They had moved out of London to Boston in Lincolnshire as the London air was not good for her. His second wife, Elizabeth Ludmar, born 1924, was a GI bride and had a daughter Sarah. Elizabeth's second marriage was to a Mr Ludmar and three daughters were born to them, Benita, Karen and Tayna. Frank married Elizabeth in September 1988 but she died

on 11 December 2001. She had been a competent musician. She had been a member of a choir conducted by Alan Bush.

Frank has played in many orchestras. In Germany he played in the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra in the days before the legendary Karl Munchinger took over. He has played in the LSO, the LPO and the Philharmonia before going to America at the invitation of Walter Trampler, a “lovely man and a superb violist.” Frank had made many friends in Boston and Philadelphia during the war and so had no problems with where to stay when in the USA.

Trampler wanted Frank to take part as the additional viola in many string quintets and other works.

To return to orchestral matters, Stiles found Adrian Boult to be a splendid conductor and a real gentleman and has opined that Sargent was very good at Tchaikovsky and Vaughan Williams. He explains that Sargent was everything the public expected a conductor to be having celebrity status. Frank has also spoken of dreadful conductors who will not be named here such as one who would not allow members of the orchestra to speak to him but, if they had something to say, it had to be said through the leader of the orchestra or the principal of the relevant orchestral section. This awful conductor, famous in Manchester, would also tell the soloists how to play cadenzas in concertos and would say that every performance conducted by him was the best and he alone was the finest conductor in the world. While Frank has not said this, these facts have been testified by very many musicians.

Stiles was an executive on the Composers Guild for many years. The Guild had meetings with the BBC in the days of Robert Ponsonby and John Drummond. Drummond was an exceptionally difficult man and always wanted his own way. He would chair the meetings and never stop talking and no one else was given the opportunity to speak. However, on one occasion he implied that he was to redress this and announced that everyone present could have a ‘place in the sun.’ At this, Frank said, “You lot on that side of the table may be in the sun but no one on this side is sunburnt.”

As Chairman of the Association of British Music, Stiles instituted the ABM-Guild concerts which gave Guild members a chance to introduce their music to distinguished musicians with a strong possibility of a public performance. He has been a tireless worker for the rights of composers.

Frank has been the soloist in concertos by Walton and Rubbra and in Berlioz’s Harold in Italy. At the Groningen Festival in Holland in 1956 he played the Telemann G major concerto.

He enjoys the music of Handel, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Brahms as well as Gershwin and Elgar but his favourites are Bach and Beethoven. He also enjoyed reading the works of Dickens, J B Priestly, G B Shaw, H G Wells, Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde.

His first works were conventional and tonal but he realised that all music are sounds in themselves such as the breaking of a twig, the tearing of paper and, from both a musical and historical point of view, this constitutes music and, as a result, musicians have investigated modern technology to produce such sounds and weave them into their compositions. Perhaps tonal music has been exhausted and it may be impossible today to write an obvious original tonal piece. Frank’s music may have initially been a mixture of Bartok, Hindemith and Tippett with touches of Vaughan Williams but he has developed his own style.

He dismisses electronic music as not music at all, and abhors the definition of sonic music explaining that there is no such thing. He subscribes to the view that all music should be clearly notated throughout. He is bemused at the absurd use of terms such as sonic or acoustic music.

Frank is neither a drinker nor smoker. He is politically a Socialist but does not approve of all the Tony Blair has done, but feels the Labour Party may have achieved what the Tories have not achieved or could achieve. He may not believe in God as Creator but believes in a Higher Force. He enjoyed swimming and cycling in his younger days and has a passion for reading history. He believes that a composer should write what he pleases and not be trammelled by fashion or academia.

His first work was the Elegy for violin and piano and his first success was the Interlude for string orchestra premiered by the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra. He retains affection for his Trio for two violins and viola of 1951 and two works from 1952, the Prelude and Fuga Concertante for string orchestra and the Suite for string quartet.

There is no doubt that his writing for string instruments is exemplary and the other great attribute is that it is not music in the stuffy English or Edwardian tradition.

His most admired work may be his Clarinet Concerto of 1972. He rightly prizes his viola music. It was in 1957 that Winifred Copperwheat began to rehearse Frank's Viola Concerto no. 1 which led to a 'wonderful' performance by her and Boult. As already said, the distinguished violist, Walter Trampler, took it up and gave the first American performance. The Australian violinist, Carmel Hakendorf commissioned Frank's Violin Concerto and gave the premiere in Adelaide. For several years the Myerscough brothers, Clarence and Henry, performed the violin and viola sonatas. In 1982 Harry Danks gave the first broadcast performance of the Four Pieces for solo viola. This work has been performed many times both in the UK and the USA, in Japan, Australia and New Zealand and throughout Europe. The premiere of the Four Pieces was given by Winifred Copperwheat in 1959. The work was written for her.

Harry Danks came from the Midlands and a musical and coal-mining family. He was born in 1912 spending the first four years of his life in a small village near Stourbridge. The family moved to Tipton in Staffordshire where he attended St Martin's Church of England School. In 1926 he was put in charge of a machine shop in a factory working from 6.30 am to 5.30pm for ten and eight pence a week. His brothers played music for silent films. Harry had lessons on the violin with the leader of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Paul Beard, before changing to the viola. When he heard Tertis play the viola Danks had lessons with him who was strict and not always diplomatic. Harry joined the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra but very soon thereafter there was vacancy with the BBC Symphony Orchestra which he accepted. Then World War II broke out. He was drafted into the Royal Artillery. For two years Gunner Danks was stationed in Hereford forming first a dance band and then a brass band. He travelled to Chester where he was the leader with the Western Command Orchestra and played the Mendelssohn and Bruch Violin Concertos. He rejoined the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1946 and, within a year, was the principal viola which position he held until his retirement in 1978. His daughter, Ysobel, was in the violin section from 1961 to 1965. He played many first performances of viola concertos including those by Hilding Rosenberg, Hank Hekemans, Mario Zafred and Graham Whettham. He became the expert on the viola d'amore and wrote a book about it.

Harry was in the Army during World War II. Later he started viola ensembles and performed concertos and concert works by Vaughan Williams, Bartok, Gordon Jacob, Hindemith and the Mario Zafred concerto. He was a down to earth man. You might find him up a ladder clearing his guttering an hour before a concert. He became the principal viola in the BBC Symphony Orchestra, spoke his mind, was never ruffled being a tough and remarkable character. He had a son who sadly died and a daughter named Isabel after the variation of that name in Elgar's Enigma Variations.

I have been able to look at a few scores of Frank Stiles' music..

The String Quartet no. 1 dates from 1970 and is dedicated to the composer's mother. It is in three movements Lento con passione leading to an allegro, the second movement is marked adagio mesto and the finale allegro molto. The music has an enviable clarity which some might mistakenly regard as facile and it is well written and eschews all pomp and virtuosity. It was premiered at the Wigmore hall in 1972 by the Delme Quartet and later that year premiered in America by the Yale Quartet

The Sonata for viola and piano no. 1 was also completed in 1985 and is in two movements, amabile leading to allegro molto and adagio moving to poco allegretto and a brief allegro con brio.

The Sonata for viola and piano no. 2 was also completed in 1985. The opening movement is an allegro con brio leading to an andante. The second movement is a scherzo marked allegro con brio with an adagio section. The finale begins adagio con espressione with allegro interjections and a finale presto section.

The Sonata for violin and piano no. 1 dates from January 1993. It opens allegro amabile, a passionate and decisive movement. The second movement is a scherzo marked allegro molto with an extended adagio section. The third movement is adagio molto with nine bars of allegro just before the end.

Stiles's style is evident in these works. The piano parts are often one note in each hand as opposed to heavy chords. But these works have movements which are episodic which, in common parlance is stop and start music. However the

clarity and excellent counterpoint are to be admired.

He went to China to hear a performance of his String Quartet no. 4 and his Symphony no. 2 flying over the Himalayas and walking on the Great Wall of China.

Frank Stiles, like Humphrey Searle, had a wonderful capacity for friendship even with people who were considered to be mavericks, such as Graham Whettham. In conversation Frank is a fascinating speaker with a wealth of knowledge on many aspects of music. He is outspoken but in a very kind way. He has said that the violist William Primrose was better at reading a score than Tertis. He enthuses about the viola music of Paul Hindemith. He admires Nobuko Imai and Yuri Bashmet but finds Lawrence Power's playing lacking in mellowness although he is technically assured. He speaks about the performers of an older generation and he is right when he says that performers and conductors of the past were more dedicated to playing exactly what the composer wrote, which is not always the case today. He has been involved with the Isle of Man's annual viola festival for many years.

He is annoyed by some announcers on BBC radio and BBC television and highlights the stupid and inaccurate remarks of Charles Hazelwood who, among other ridiculous things, has said that you cannot play Bach unless you understand rock n'roll. How did Bach manage? Frank makes the point that all that is necessary is for an announcer to say the minimum and nothing more.

He is a complete musician and they are comparatively few.

List of works

ORCHESTRA

- American variations (1943)
- Fantasia on British folk songs (1949)
- Suite for the play : the Diary of a scoundrel, for chamber orchestra
- Rhapsody for viola and orchestra (1964)
- Adagio and Allegro for cello and orchestra (1965)
- Fantasia Concertante on a theme of Vivaldi for chamber orchestra (1971)
- Symphony no. 1 (1975)
- Symphony no. 2 (1977)
- Prelude : Masada (1978)
- Masada, a dramatic cantata for four solo singers, choir and large orchestra (1981)
- Symphony no 3 (1983)
- Boston Portraits (1984)
- Symphony no. 4 (1989)
- Symphony no 5 (1997)

STRING ORCHESTRA

- Prelude and Fuga Concertante for string trio and strings (1954)
- Song Cycle for tenor and strings (1956)
- Romance (1960)
- Fantasia Prelude : Othello (1968)
- Interlude for string quartet and strings (1970)
- Variations on a Nursery song (1970), also version for chamber orchestra
- Fantasia Concertante on a theme by William Byrd for string quartet and strings (1971)
- Music in two parts (1976)
- Triptych (1981)

CONCERTOS

- Viola Concerto no. 1 (1962)
- Clarinet Concerto (1972)
- Viola Concerto no. 2 (1974)

Sinfonia Concertante for violin, viola and orchestra (1974)
Cello Concerto (1976)
Guitar Concerto (1985)
Piano Concerto (1987)
Violin Concerto (1990)

CHAMBER MUSIC

Suite for string quartet (1951)
Two Miniature string quartets (1952)
String Quartet no 1 (1970)
String Quartet no 2 (1976)
String Quartet no 3 (1977)
String Quartet no 4 (1978)
String Quartet no 5 (1988)
String Quartet no 6 (1999)

OTHER CHAMBER WORKS

Elegy for violin and piano (1945?)
Duo for flute and clarinet (1949)
Duo for violin and viola (1949)
Adagio for violin and piano (1950)
Trio no 1 for two violins and viola (1950)
Variations on a nursery tune for violin and piano, also for viola and piano (1951)
Trio no 2 for two violin and viola (1953)
Prelude and Nocturne for viola and piano (1958)
Duo for flute and guitar (1960)
Trio for two violas and cello (1965)
Duo for two violas (1974)
Clarinet Quartet (1976)
Clarinet Choir (1976)
Piano Trio no. 1 (1978)
Quartet for four violas (1980)
Quartet for flute, oboe, cello and harpsichord (1982)
Quintet for flute, oboe, violin, cello and harpsichord (1982)
Trio for violin, clarinet and piano (1982)

INSTRUMENTAL

Sonatas
Sonata for solo violin no. 1 (1978)
Sonata for oboe and piano (1979)
Sonata for solo violin no. 2 (1990)
Sonata for viola and piano no. 1 (1982 -5)
Sonata for guitar (1982)
Sonata for viola and piano no. 2 (1985)
Sonata for violin and piano no. 1 (1991)
Sonata for violin and piano no. 2 (1992)
Sonata for viola and piano no. 3 (2006)

OTHER

Music for woodwind and brass (1971)
Chorale for three trombones and tuba (1962)
Eclogue for violin and piano (1982)
In Memorium Harry Danks for twelve violas (2003)

SOLO INSTRUMENTS

- Four pieces for solo viola (1975)
- Four Pieces for solo flute (1980)
- Prelude and allegro for solo bassoon (1979)
- Improvisations for solo cello (1982)
- Four Reflections for solo oboe (1989)
- Four miniatures for clarinet (1989)
- Prelude and scherzo for solo viola (2008)

KEYBOARD

- Four Pieces for piano (1948)
- Variations on a theme on Beethoven for piano (1948)
- Caprice for piano (1960)
- Cantilena for piano (1970)
- Minuet for piano (1970)
- Three Improvisations for piano (1980)
- Sonata for piano (1980)
- Sonata for harpsichord (1982)
- Mirage for piano (1986)
- Concord for organ (1990)
- Equinox for piano (1990)

SONGS

- Threnody for bass baritone, guitar and piano (1983)
- Four songs for high voice (1985)
- Song Cycle : Man's Four Seasons for bass baritone and piano (1990)

CHORAL

- Part Song to words by William Blake for mixed voices (1956)
- The Swan for double choir (1961)
- The Piper for mixed voices and flute (1969)
- On the morning of Christ's nativity SATB and organ (1987)
- In Memoriam Alan Bush for choir and piano (1995)

Music score: [*Sonata for Solo Violin \(1978\)*](#)

Frank Stiles died on Friday 8 December 2017. He was 92 and everyone admired him.

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