

EDA KERSEY

by David C F Wright

WARNING Strict copyright applies to this article and all of Dr Wright's articles

It is always sad when a fine musician dies young because, not only are they robbed of life, but we are robbed of the joy their music can bring. This seems to be the case with violinists such as the marvellous Ginette Neveu, the talented Michael Rabin and the British star, Eda Kersey.

Eda Kersey was born in Goodmayes, Essex on 15 May 1904. Her first music teacher was Thomas Behan, ATCL, of Ilford from the age of four, but on her sixth birthday she was presented with a small violin. The piano was now forgotten and she concentrated on the violin. When she was only eight she was awarded a honours certificate from the Trinity College of Music. At the age of seven, in her exams for this College, she was awarded 83 marks. This was on 14 December 1911. Her next exam was on 12 July 1912 in which she was awarded 90 marks and on 11 December 1912 she received 94 marks.

It was when she was ten and half years old that the family moved to Southsea in Hampshire early in 1915. Her father had taken a position with the clerical staff at St James's Hospital, the psychiatric hospital in Milton. One Edgar Moucher had opened a studio in Southsea and she became a pupil of his for a while.

While with Moucher, she took part in a pupils' concert at the Highfield Institute in Southampton playing a movement from Wieniawski's Violin Concerto in D minor which was received with rapturous applause. The report in the Hampshire Chronicle stated, "Eda Kersey, a little girl, created nothing short of a sensation by her electrifying performance." She had a technique years ahead of her time. A singer at the same concert was Herbert Batho who was to become the organist and choirmaster of Eastleigh Parish Church. The proceeds of this concert went to the relief fund for Serbia.

She was inspired by hearing Fritz Kreisler play and admitted that, after this experience, she was even more determined to become a great violinist.

At the age of thirteen, Eda went to live with an uncle and aunt in London to continue her studies with Margaret Holloway who had just returned from Russia having studied there for two years with the celebrated Leopold Auer. Eda worked hard with this teacher.

Her parents continued to live in Southsea and did so for nineteen years up to 1934 and Eda visited them regularly. Her parents home was close to the Royal Marine Barracks and their band was conducted by R P O'Donnell. She often rehearsed with them and gave concerts with them at Portsmouth Town Hall, the first was on 19 March 1922. She was eighteen years old. Two years earlier she had given her first London recital in the Aeolian Hall.

Her first important engagement was a BBC broadcast from Bournemouth in Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. She also played the Beethoven concerto and the Elgar concerto from London and Birmingham BBC studios. Within a few weeks her diary was full of engagements.

There is an account of a hazardous event when she was playing the Mendelssohn concerto in a live broadcast. The conductor was one of those who suffered from self-importance and always throwing his arms all over the place, a conductor who claimed he discovered all the female music talent including Jacqueline DuPre. With his inane conducting, he knocked the violin out of Eda's hands and it crashed down her side to the floor.

Her first performance at the Proms was in 1930 at the old Queens Hall under Sir Henry Wood with the Beethoven concerto.

In April 1931 she undertook a tour of Holland performing in all the major cities. She had a full house everywhere. She was now in command of about 25 concertos as well as sonatas and she was not yet thirty years old. She was a workaholic and practised seven hours every day.

For the Prom of 1931 she chose the Brahms's concerto and in 1932 her Prom performance was of the Bach A minor. That year she joined Gerald Moore (piano) and Cedric Sharp (cello) in a piano trio called The Trio Players. But she continued to be a soloist and people still talk today of her performance of the Beethoven at Winchester Guildhall. She opened up a world of music to thousands.

Grove's contributor, and others, record how elegantly she played the Mozart concertos.



She had a cousin, John Sealey, who was head of the string section at Winchester College and a fine violinist and conductor. At a concert at the Deanery in Winchester in December 1931 Eda played solos and joined John and Mrs G F Alcock (viola) and Sheridan Russell (cello) in quartets by Schubert and Beethoven.

George Frederick Alcock was the brother of Sir Walter Alcock (1861-1947), the celebrated organist at Salisbury cathedral (1916-1947) who had played for the coronations of Edward VII in 1902 and George V in 1911. Sir Walter's younger brother, G F Alcock, was always known as Fred in deference to Handel, and Fred also played the oboe and the cello. He often hosted house parties for his friends and famous musicians such as the renowned violinist Albert Sammons (1889-1957). Eda and Sammons became friends and he encouraged her to play the Elgar again although she did not like it that much. She preferred the violin sonatas of John Ireland which sonatas she played with Kathleen Long (1896-1968) and this association ran thorough out the war years.

Eda made a few 78 records of short pieces by Brahms, Kreisler and Hubay. When she played she was upright. She was very tall and thin with dark hair usually short and in a natural bun. She was not one of our modern day glamorous performers.

Eda was a member of CEMA, the Council for Education in Music and Arts, the precursor of the Arts council, and CEMA was run by three hard working ladies one of whom was Gladys Crook. This trio of gallant ladies organised lunchtime concerts for workers and concerts for the troops and the famous lunchtime concerts at the National Gallery. Kathleen Long was her pianist and when piano trios were performed they were joined by James Westhead.

She also played in a piano trio with Helen Just (cello) and Howard Ferguson (piano).

Sir Arnold Bax completed his Violin Concerto in 1938 and dedicated it to Heifetz who did not like it. It was not showy enough. Bax put it to one side. Four years later, Sir Arthur Bliss, director of music at the BBC, commissioned a new work from Bax and he pulled out the Violin Concerto. It was premiered on St Cecilia's Day, 22 November 1943 with Eda Kersey and the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Henry Wood. Later she was to record it with that orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult at Bedford Corn Exchange on 23 February 1944 and that recording is available on a Dutton CD number CDLX7111. Her performance is quicker than Lydia Mordkovitch's fine reading on Chandos with the London Philharmonic Orchestra under the brilliant Bryden Thomson (CH10154X)

On 24 March 1938 with the violist Bernard Shore, she premiered the Romantic Fantasy for violin, viola and orchestra by Arthur Benjamin at a Royal Philharmonic Society Concert conducted by the composer.

During the war the BBC Symphony Orchestra moved out of London and set up in Bedford for safety reasons.

Eda's association with Yorkshire was shown in the many concerts she gave there. On Sunday 12 March 1944 she gave a recital for the Ilkley Players Concert Club at the Grove Picture House accompanied by Gerald Moore. The programme was:

Sonata in D op 12 no. 1	Beethoven
Sonata	Cesar Franck
Spanish Suite	Joaquin Nin
Slavonic Dance in G	Dvorak arr Kreisler
Rondo and Mazurka	Sibelius

The local press reported that there was a delightful understanding between the artists in a programme that provided plenty of variety. In Nin's Spanish Suite there was ample opportunity for Miss Kersey's sparkling technique. She obviously loved the fire and brilliance of Nin's writing. The Sibelius completed the programme but the audience were not satisfied. Consequently an encore was essential, a presto from a violin sonata by Tartini. Gerald Moore, known for his modesty, announced the item and with a twinkle in his eye said, "Miss Kersey loves to play this because she knows that I can't possibly keep up with her!" Of course he did. Another encore was demanded and a larghetto by Barabella was played.

For the record the next concerts of the Ilkley Club were by the Menges String Quartet, Moura Lympny, Phyllis Sellick and, on 18 June, a recital by Moisewitsch.

Kersey was not a soloist who merely lived in the past. She premiered the violin sonata of E J Moeran and a work of Arthur Benjamin. She also cared for her instrument. Her first major violin was a Nicolo Amati dating from about 1650 but the violin she used for the longest period of time was by J B Vuillame of the French School. In her last year of so she acquired a violin of Joseph Guarneri Del Gesu.

In June 1944 she was playing a concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra in the Albert Hall when a flying bomb exploded over the vicinity of the hall. They kept playing. The following day the police closed the Albert Hall because of the structural damage it had sustained.

She was taken seriously shortly ill after her appearance at the Albert Hall on 29 June. She remained in bed in her London home for three days and then, acting on medical advice, she telephoned Dr Arthur William Gott in Ilkley who was a friend. He was born in 1897 and was a popular and successful GP and died in 1987. His son, Jeremy, who was born in 1929, spent many years visiting schools in Yorkshire teaching music and musical appreciation having been a pupil of James Brown in Leeds.

But to return to Eda and her last days. She travelled to Yorkshire by train where Dr Gott met her and saw how ill she was as soon as she stepped on to the platform and knew instinctively that her condition was terminal. She had stomach or bowel cancer and the tumour was already large and inoperable.

She died at Dr Gott's house on 13 July 1944. She was only forty years of age.

As we have seen, Eda had a strong connection with Yorkshire having played with the Northern Philharmonic Orchestra in Leeds Town Hall many times. The leader of that orchestra, Edward Maude spoke of Miss Kersey's death as a tremendous loss to music.

I suppose her counterpart today might be the brilliant American violinist Hilary Hahn.

Eda was sometimes called the Kathleen Ferrier of the violin. Ferrier (1912 - 1953) died young and was also a victim of cancer which was not helped by her smoking. Comparisons of artistes can be very misleading. It has been opined that Ferrier had a very good voice but she was no Janet Baker, Brigitte Fassbaender or Sybil Michelow.

In 1947 the Eda Kersey memorial exhibition was set up by the Royal Academy of Music to give a prize and sponsorship each year to a talented young violinist. The instigator of this was Eda's younger sister, Rosalie. Eda's memorial plaque reads, "They will maintain the fabric of the world."

Carl Nielsen used to say that music was the only living art and that all other art merely tried to depict life.

The irony of Kersey's life was that war did not take her. Cancer did. Had she lived we may well have had a considerable amount of recordings so that she would be universally admired, something she certainly deserved but was never allowed to achieve.

WARNING Copyright exists on all of Dr David Wright's articles.

They must not be copied in part or the whole without the prior written consent of the author. Neither to be used, stored in any retrieval system or library without prior consent. The article must not be downloaded or reproduced in any way. Failure to comply is theft and contrary to International Copyright Law and will render the offender(s) or anyone acting on their behalf, authorised or not, subject to action at law. However upon written application the author may grant permission.