

## HARRY DANKS

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The year 2012 is the centenary of the birth of the finest British viola player, Harry Danks.

The viola has been called the Cinderella of the orchestra. If that is so, who are the ugly sisters?

Harry Danks came from the Midlands and from a musical and coal-mining family.

He was born on 18 May 1912 spending the first four years of his life in a small village near Stourbridge. The name of that village was Pensnet near Kingswinford. His father was Samuel Henry, an engine winder at a colliery and his mother was Elisabeth who helped in the fish and chip shop they owned during the war. Harry had two brothers: Sid (1915-1990) and Bill (1917-1999).

The family moved to Tipton in Staffordshire when Harry was about four years old where he attended St Martin's Church of England School. When he was about 14, he joined an ensemble playing in cinemas for silent films

In 1926, on leaving school,, 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. When he was 16 or 17 Harry had fortnightly lessons on the violin with the leader of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Paul Beard, at his Birmingham home before changing to the viola. Leslie Heward was the regular conductor of this orchestra at this time.

When Harry heard Tertis play the viola, he had lessons with him. Tertis was strict and not always diplomatic. These lessons were at Tertis' home in Belmont near Sutton in Surrey and occupied the years 1928 to 1932.

Harry married Leonore (Nora) Irene Skimpron in 1936 and they had two children Ysobel and Eugene.

Harry joined the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in 1937 when the conductor was Richard Austin 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 and became a gunnery inspector and was in the Army from 1939 to 1946. 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 Concerto around 1940. 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, who was born in 1938, 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.

At Promenade Concerts he was the soloist in Richard Strauss's Don Quixote about six times including three consecutive years from 1946-1948. He also played Flos Campi by Vaughan Williams and Berlioz's Harold in Italy and, in 1967, Andrej Volkonsky's Les plaintes de Chichaza.



On 22 March 1964 at the City Hall, Hull, Danks performed Don Quixote with the cellist Maurice Gendron, who had the most gorgeous tone, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Antal Dorati. At the end of this article I set out the members of the orchestra at this time... excellent musicians whose names conjure up happy memories.

Harry was fortunate to get to know Paul Hindemith presumably through the BBC and the German composer worked through his own Viola Concerto (Kammermusik no 5) with Danks as well as Der Schwanendreher. Kammermusik no 6 was for viola d'amore.

I remember talking to another violist, Herbert Downes about the viola and how much I liked his playing. Herbert replied kindly, "You should listen to Harry!"

Later, he started a viola ensemble and performed solo concertos and concert works by Vaughan Williams, Bartok, Gordon Jacob, Hindemith and the Mario Zafred concerto at the request of Sir Stuart Wilson, he formed a consort of viols, the London Consort of Viols.

Harry 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 resolute and remarkable character. Harry had a son, Eugene, born at the end of the Second World War who was a chorister at Kings Cambridge, studied violin at RAM and took up conducting. He died at the early age of 52. Harry's daughter was named Ysobel after the variation of that name in Elgar's Enigma Variations. Ysobel's first husband was Alexander Kok whose brother Felix was the leader of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

Alexander was born in the Transvaal in 1926 and was a founder member of the Philharmonia Orchestra, a cellist often known as Bobby. Felix was also born in the Transvaal on 1 August 1924. As the leader of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra he played under their successive conductors Rudolf Schwarz to 1957, Panufnik to 1959, Boult to 1960, Hugo Rignold to 1969, an amazing musician, and Louis Fremaux to 1978. Harry Danks left during the reign of Simon Rattle.

Harry's other hobbies were bookbinding, stamp collecting and gardening as well as his love for the viola d'amore.

He died on 26 April 2001 at Addenbroke Hospital in Cambridge.

He was a complete musician, our finest violist, a lovely man devoid of narcissism and arrogance. I was honoured to have met him. He was everything a person should be.

I wish to thank Ysobel for her help in this article and her very many kindnesses. She is still teaching violin and viola. Long may she continue. With her husband, Richard Latham she shares a love of cricket and regularly visits Lords. They remember Lancashire's great spin bowler Roy Tattersall!

BBC Symphony orchestra list of player in 1964

**First Violins**

Hugh Maguire (Leader)  
Norman Nelson  
(Deputy Leader)  
Felix Kok  
Vivien Dixon  
Patricia Lovell  
Michael Zabłudow  
Cyril English

Richard England  
Kathleen Washbourne  
J. Kitchen  
Breta Graham  
Mary Penney  
Belle Davidson

**Second Violins**

\* Jeffrey Wakefield

\* Trevor Connah  
Raymond Ovens  
Constance Ellingford  
Desmond Fenton  
Joseph Hepton  
Carl Lewis  
Molly Harms  
Vivienne Ratcliffe  
Jillian Elliff

**Second Violins (cont.)**

Celia Mitchell  
Arthur Franks  
Marie Condron

**Violas**

\* Harry Danks  
\* John Coulling  
Joan Wolstencroft  
Norman Kent  
Eric Sargon  
William FT. Jon  
Jasmine Kara  
Sheila Spencer  
Barrio Townsend  
Josephine Cottrol

**Cellos**

\* Alexander Kok  
\* Kenueth Heath  
Alex Nifosi  
Frank Ford  
Douglas Powrie  
Sidney Denbin  
Roger Briggs  
Ruth East

**Basses**

\* Gerald Brinnen  
Robert Norris  
Maurice A. Neal  
Juliet Cuningham  
George Kraus  
Bryan Scott

**Flutes**

\* Douglas Whittaker  
\* David Butt  
Robin Chapman  
Clifford Seville

\* Section Principals

**Piccolo**

Clifford Seville

**Oboes**

\* Terence MacDonagh  
\* Sidney Sutcliffe  
John Wolfe  
Helen Gaskell

**Cor Anglais**

Helen Gaskell  
John Wolfe

**Clarinets**

\* Colin Bradbury  
\* Jack Brymer  
Herbert New  
Anthony Jennings

**E flat Clarinet**

Herbert New

**Bass Clarinet**

Anthony Jennings

**Bassoons**

\* Geoffrey Gambold  
\* William Waterhouse  
Lionel Goring  
Alfred Butler

**Contra Bassoon**

Alfred Butler

**Horns**

\* Douglas Moore  
\* Neill Sanders  
Denzil Floyd  
Derek Taylor  
Harry F. Ottway

**Trumpets**

\* William Overton  
Wesley Woodage  
Ian Mackintosh  
Richard Walton

**Cornet**

Ian Mackintosh  
Richard Walton

**Trombones**

\* William J. Teskey  
J. Pinches

**Bass Trombone**

Geoffrey Lindon

**Tuba and Euphonium**

Charles Brewer

**Timpani**

\* Eric Pritchard  
\* Alan Suttie

**Percussion**

\* Gilbert Webster  
Jack Lees

**Harp**

Sidonie Goosseos