

Jane Cowan

Jane Cowan, née Harvey-Webb, cellist; born June 9, 1915, died May 8, 1996

THE cellist Jane Cowan, who has died after a long battle with Alzheimer's disease, grew up in Edinburgh. She was given her first cello lessons by Dr Ruth Waddell, and played in the excellent string orchestra run by Dr Waddell and her sister, Mamie.

Although well below entrance age, she also attended Professor Donald Tovey's classes at Edinburgh University, which undoubtedly laid the foundations of a musicianship which was to bear such good fruit in later years.

For a short time she attended the Royal College of Music in London, before leaving for Austria at the age of 16, to study with Emmanuel Feuermann.

In 1936 she married Christopher Cowan, from Dalkeith, an organ scholar, who at that time was director of music at Sedbergh school in Yorkshire. They spent 12 happy years there with their three children. She taught the cello there.

From Sedbergh, they moved to Uppingham school, where, on their arrival, they found only six cello pupils. It is testimony to Jane's success that when they left Uppingham three years later, there were more than 40.

The move from Uppingham was occasioned by Christopher's appointment as director of music at Winchester College, a post which carried with it wide-ranging musical activities in the community out with the school itself, and thus ample opportunities for Jane to make a valuable contribution in both the teaching and performing spheres.

The International Cello Centre was founded in 1953 by Maurice Eisenberg in London, as a branch of the parent school founded in Paris after the Second World War by Eisenberg's teacher, the renowned Catalan cellist Pablo Casals.

Eisenberg appointed Jane Cowan to succeed him as director in 1967, and she was

assisted in this position by John Gwilt, who himself had started as a pupil of Jane's during the years at Sedbergh.

However, in 1974, for reasons of convenience, all the activities of the ICC, including full-time postgraduate students, were moved to the family home at Edrom in Berwickshire. The school functioned until 1983.

Many of her students — including Steven Isserlis and the American Steven Doane — have since made their mark very successfully both in the performing and the teaching professions.

Jane Cowan's teaching was enlightening to the mind and stimulating to the imagination. She was a wonderful speaker and it was a performance in itself as she steered students through a long journey from the mysticism of ancient Egypt, medieval church modes with their symbolism, the Renaissance, and the subsequent eras of European culture, never missing a chance to point out how much the Romantic Movement owed to James Macpherson's *Ossian*, right up to the mid-twentieth century.

She was acutely and painfully aware of the lasting damage caused by artistic repression during the Hitler years, including its impact on composers and performers whom she knew personally. She would highlight the music of Shostakovich as expressing the utter despair of life under a Stalinist regime.

Jane Cowan spoke both French and German fluently from an early age, and students will remember going with a fine-toothed comb through Goethe's *Faust* and Racine's *Andromaque*. She held steadfastly to the view that true understanding of a work was of far greater importance than the ritual polishing of an aspect of technique.

Students were taken through a deep and careful study of different cultural aspects — painting, architecture, philosophy, poetry, and literature. But, above all, the sound of the spoken word was for her the key to approach the



many strands of European musical culture, from Gaelic music in the west right through to the eastern edges of Europe. She had no time for the homogenised sound of Hungarian music played in an Italian manner that had been manufactured in London.

This is by no means to say that technique in its proper place — the service of the music — was not important. Her method of teaching the mechanics of cello-playing drew from the natural movements of the body, and was based not only on what she had

learned from Feuermann, but on her own close study of the great cellists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but most especially Jean-Louis Duport (*le cadet*), whose *Essai sur le doigtier du violon-celle et la conduite de l'archet*, édating from the mid-eighteenth century, is such a model of lucidity and clarity of thought.

It was these same qualities of lucidity and clarity that Jane so admired in the tradition of French composers from Couperin to Messiaen. In this context she was fond of quoting Debussy's own preferred

epitaph: "Claude Debussy — musician Français." Jane took particular delight in coaching the chamber music of Debussy and Fauré at Pro Corda — the National Association of Young String-players. She would continually urge students: "Let go! Stop Working! Let the music play *you!*"

Humour and fun were integral to her life, her music, and her teaching. She found insincerity difficult to stomach, and had her own eleventh commandment with regard to musical performance; "Thou shalt not be boring!"