

Jane Cowan

Putting passion into the cello

JANE COWAN, who has died aged 80, was an inspired cello teacher whose passion for music affected all who came into contact with her. As Jane Harvey-Webb, she had been regarded as a highly promising cellist, whose teachers included the great Feuermann.

When she was a girl in Edinburgh, she had had lessons in general musicianship with Donald Tovey, whose musical thinking hugely influenced her. She liked to describe the occasion when, arriving at Tovey's studio, she was told to take out her cello and play through the Beethoven A major cello sonata with a small bald man who was seated at the piano. At the end of the first movement, she turned to the pianist enthusiastically: "Gosh, you are musical!" She was right — the "pianist" was Pablo Casals.

After her marriage to Christopher Cowan, a distinguished head of music at Sedburgh, Uppingham, and latterly Winchester, she devoted herself mostly to teaching and mothering. The Cowans had three

children of their own, Francis, Maeve and Lucy (all now musicians), and adopted three more — Henri, Helen and Irina Zarb.

Her teaching talents were recognised when Casals recommended her to take over the International Cello Centre in London in the late 1960s. Despite the imposing name, this tiny school became Cowan's base for the rest of her active life.

In the mid-1970s she moved north to her husband's family home, Edrom House in Berwickshire; the Cello Centre moved with her. I was with her there between the ages of 10 and 17, and often returned to play to her later. She exuded fervent musical idealism and demanded similar commitment from her students. Her rages could be terrifying, and sometimes unreasonable, but, in the course of a good lesson, a student could suddenly be able to play better than ever before.

Cowan's teaching was a wonderfully organic blend of technical and interpretative insights; violinists, violists



Cowan . . . musical idealism

and pianists could benefit as much as cellists from her views on the use of the body in music-making. She also gave illuminating, if idiosyncratic, classes in music history and theory — and even in French and German. Several of the best-known names in the authentic-instrument movement owe their introduction to early music to her wide knowledge and enthusiasm.

In her last years, tragically, her mind was gradually overtaken by Alzheimer's; the exaggerations, absent-mindedness and abrupt changes of subject that had seemed part of her eccentric genius revealed themselves to have been the start of that sad disease. Her influence will live on.

Stephen Isserlis

Jane Cowan, cello teacher, born June 9, 1915; died May 8, 1996