

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS

WILLIAM PRIMROSE'S LIFE AND CAREER



On June 9, 2004, at the 32nd International Viola Congress, violists will gather from around to world to celebrate the 100th birthday of the renowned William Primrose. This opportunity to commemorate the life and contributions of one of the world's greatest violists promises to be an event of memorable proportions.

By David Dalton

As one of the world's premiere violists, William Primrose left a legacy well worth preserving. His lengthy career included membership in the NBC Symphony, associations with an array of quartets and chamber ensembles, a remarkable solo career, numerous teaching appointments, and important pedagogical publications.

In his engaging memoirs, *Walk on the North Side* (1978), Primrose confesses that in his early years he "resented the differences imposed on [him] by musical chores." The precocious youth found his studies too easy and his playmates' pastimes too alluring. "Some years later," he notes, "I became aware that I did not know as much about my musical trade as puerile conceit had led me to suppose. My dedication to practice did not burgeon fully until I

came under the ponderous, yet benign, influence of my great master, Eugene Ysaÿe."



William Primrose at age 12 on the occasion of his first public concert performing the Mendelssohn violin concerto at St. Andrews Hall, Glasgow, 1916.

Even before his more sedulous studies, Primrose learned much from the musical ambience his father provided for the family. William's father, John Primrose who was, in William's words, "entranced . . . with all that appertained to string playing and pedagogy" taught violin in the family's small Glasgow apartment and played with the Scottish Orchestra. When William was four years old, his father purchased a quarter-sized violin and placed him under the tutelage of Camillo Ritter, an Austrian national who had studied under Joseph Joachim and Tabar Sevcik. While studying under Ritter, young Willie began developing his own musical taste. By age twelve he had made public appearances at the local Congregational Church, at local schools, and at Glasgow's Palette Club. In Glasgow, William observed the Scottish Orchestra conducted by Emil Mlynarsky and Sir Landon Ronald. During summers spent on the Isle of Man in Lancashire, William attended performances by singers Enrico Caruso and Emmy Destinn and by some of the leading violinists of the day - Eugene Ysaÿe, Jan Kubelik, Mischa Elman, Fritz Kreisler, and Josef Szigeti. William heard many of these musicians in performances at Glasgow, where he also listened to the London String Quartet (of which he later became a member) and Glasgow's famous Orpheus Choir.



The London String Quartet. Top to bottom: Warwick Evans, cello; John Pennington, first violin; William Primrose, viola; Thomas Petre, second violin.

In 1919, when William was about fifteen, the family moved to London where he had received a scholarship to attend the Guildhall School of Music and William began to study violin under Max Mossel. Although he received a gold medal, the Guildhall's highest honor, at his 1924 graduation, William later admitted that he hadn't been what the Guildhall considered an ideal student:

I was supposed to take secondary piano, theory, and counterpoint, but I skipped them all. The reason here . . . was my ear. If I had been given something in the way of advanced harmony and counterpoint, I might have been interested. But everything started from the fons et origo . . . (from the beginning).

. . . I was so little inspired by violin instruction at the Guildhall School that I kept in the cloakroom a volume of concertos edited by Joachim, which I would retrieve before my lesson and read in class. And that would be my lesson for the day.

What Primrose's formal musical education in London lacked in interest and personal commitment was compensated for by visits to performances in the city's concert halls. He attended performances by Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifetz, Toscha Seidel, Vása Pírhoda, and Pablo Casals, whose "playing of the lilting middle section [of the second movement of the Lalo Concerto] literally lifted me out of my seat," he later wrote. "I was utterly transported by the ravishing euphoria he induced."

In 1926, after William had been a professional violinist for only two years, his playing began to falter. On the advice of a friend, Ivor Newton, Primrose travelled to Le Zoute on the Belgian coast to study under the aging master of the violin, Eugene Ysaÿe. Ysaÿe provided the formerly desultory student with new motivation and much-needed technical refinement. But Primrose was not wholly given over to the violin. As a young man, William had secretly played his father's viola and had discovered that he preferred its sound to that of

the violin. Nevertheless, perhaps because of the poor esteem in which the viola and viola players were held at that time, William had decided to pursue a career as a violinist. Now, after three years of sporadic study under Ysaÿe, Primrose had not only dramatically improved his playing, but, with his mentor's encouragement, he had also decided to switch to the viola.

Primrose made the move from violin to viola in March, 1930, when he became the violist of the London String Quartet. "Joining the LSQ marked a demarcation line for me," he wrote. "I had become a violist full-fledged. I had burned all my bridges. I had walked the Damascus road, seen the light, repented of past transgressions, and turned to the viola."

Besides providing Primrose with a successful and rewarding beginning to his viola career, Primrose's membership in the London String Quartet benefitted him in a number of other ways, including his



William Primrose during a radio interview, 1959.



The Heifetz-Primrose-Piatigorsky Trio recording at RCA, Circa 1956, Hollywood.

first exposure to international audiences. Perhaps most important for Primrose was his relationship with Warwick Evans - the cellist, founder, and leader of the quartet. "Strictly speaking," wrote Primrose, "Evans was not a learned musician, from the musicologist's point of view, but he was a very pragmatic one. Of the many things I heard later from Toscanini when I was with the NBC Symphony, there were very few that I had not learned first from Warwick Evans. He instinctively knew how things should go, how they should sound, how they should be presented to the listener."

Under Evans's expert guidance, the London String Quartet toured successfully in North and South America until the Depression threatened the quartet with financial disaster. By 1935 the group decided to disband, as Primrose put it, "while we were still on top."

Between the dissolution of the London String Quartet in 1935 and the establishment of the NBC Symphony in 1937, Primrose did, as he himself says, "almost anything and everything that came to hand because my financial cable was broken and my anchor lost." During this time he made many appearances on the Continent, including several appearances at La Scala in Milan and a performance in Berlin. One of Primrose's most memorable performances took place in England. "The night before I gave my first performance of the Walton Concerto with Beecham and the Royal Philharmonic Society, I was in a theater pit playing entr'acte music. When the actors were busy onstage, I practiced the Walton . . . Rehearsals for the concerto were adequate, but Beecham [the conductor of the Royal Philharmonic] attended only the final one." The result was disastrous. Beecham lost his place in the scherzo movement and went into what Primrose called his

"fencing act," waving his baton around in a way that had nothing to do with the music the orchestra was playing. The concertmaster saved the performance, beating out the time with his violin and carrying everyone else along. "It was difficult to subdue a feeling of triumph," said Primrose. "One night I was playing in a theatre pit and the next night I was playing to a distinguished audience in Queens Hall, with a great orchestra and an eminent conductor, and near disaster."

When Primrose learned of the planned formation of the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini's leadership, he was interested in joining for at least two reasons. First, he hadn't yet played in a symphony orchestra, and second, he was "determined to find out whether Toscanini was really the ogre described by so many musicians." He was invited to play viola as a member of the orchestra but was never, contrary to popular opinion, the symphony's principal violist. That position belonged to Carlton Cooley, with whom Primrose sat on the first desk. Primrose quickly discovered that Toscanini's legendary temper was more than myth, yet he enjoyed an amicable relationship with the maestro for the four years he played in the orchestra. During his tenure with NBC, Primrose made several appearances with the symphony as a viola soloist, and in 1939 NBC even invited him to form the Primrose Quartet. Primrose was particularly amenable to the suggestion, for quartet playing was his "first and



William Primrose at Indiana University, Bloomington Indiana, 1969.

greatest love in music." Although his work with the symphony and the quartet sometimes kept him busy twelve hours a day, he wrote home to his father that he was "thankful, very thankful . . . to be busy, and to be happy in my work as I have never been before."

In 1941, it was rumored that Toscanini might resign from the orchestra. Primrose, who had joined the orchestra in part for the chance to work under Toscanini's direction, decided to move on. By chance, Primrose encountered Richard Crooks on a New York City street, and the famous tenor invited Primrose to join him on an upcoming tour. Primrose accepted the offer and did five tours in four years, Crooks giving him equal billing after the end of their first tour. The decision to resign from the NBC Symphony had been a risky one, and Primrose mentions in letters to his parents in London that "things looked very black for a time," but the tours with

Crooks were what he needed to launch his solo career. Arthur Judson, an influential concert manager, sought out Primrose, expressing "his willingness and desire to handle my affairs," and the rising viola star began making solo appearances.

In a letter written to his father in

1944, just a few years after signing with Arthur Judson, Primrose expressed surprise at his own success:

"I . . . am grateful to God that my solo career has gone so well these past three seasons. 1941-42 saw me with some thirty-two concerts, and when I signed up with the Judson office, I was quite prepared to be satisfied with similar seasons for some time to come. You can imagine my surprise when last season turned out to be forty-five concerts, and my amazement when Judson informed me I had sixty-four this season!"

The years that followed brought further success. Besides playing with orchestras throughout Europe, Primrose performed with prestigious American ensembles, including the Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, NBC, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Utah

symphonies. During his years of touring, Primrose performed with many of the most eminent conductors of his day, including Sir John Barbirolli, Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir Adrian Boult, Serge Koussevitsky, Charles Munch, Arturo Toscanini, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Maurice Abravanel, and Sir Malcolm Sargent. Primrose was also able to pursue his profound love for chamber music; in fact, through his chamber music affiliations he was able to perform with some of the great artists he had listened to as a young man in England and Scotland. In addition to the London String Quartet and the Primrose Quartet, he was a member of the Festival Piano Quartet, the Heifetz-Primrose-Feuermann Trio, the Heifetz-Primrose-Piatigorsky Trio (formed fifteen years after Feuermann's untimely death ended Primrose's earlier collaboration with Heifetz), and the Schnabel-Szigeti-Primrose-Fournier piano quartet. In 1953, in recognition of his musical



William Primrose and Aaron Dalton, 1974.

achievements, Primrose was granted the title of Commander of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II.

Besides enjoying a lengthy and successful solo career, Primrose became a noted pedagogue. Early in his career he received an appointment from Efreim Zimbalist to teach at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. From 1961 to 1965 he taught with Heifetz and Piatigorsky at the University of Southern California. Then, from 1965 to 1972, Primrose was on the faculty at Indiana University. In 1971 Primrose was in residence at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music and the Toho School. He taught occasionally at Juilliard and the Eastman School of Music as well as summer sessions in Toronto, Montreal, Geneva, Banff, Santa Barbara, and Aspen. Primrose also wrote or contributed to four important pedagogical publications: *Art and Practice of Scale Playing* (Mills, 1954), *Technique Is Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1960), *Violin and Viola* (with Yehudi Menuhin and Denis Stevens; Schirmer, 1976), and *Playing the Viola* (Oxford University Press, 1988). Primrose was a member of the Brigham Young University music faculty from 1979 to 1982 as a guest lecturer. Unfortunately, by this time his declining health precluded a rigorous schedule. Primrose began developing a hearing problem in 1946 that eventually affected his ability to hear a certain range of the musical scale accurately. His hearing difficulties

and a cancer diagnosed in 1977 ended many of his activities, but he was still able to teach private lessons, coach chamber music, and do a limited amount of performing until his death from cancer on 1 May 1982 in Provo, Utah.

A telling summation of Primrose as artist and person comes from Primrose's own account of a visit he made to a school for retarded children in Kansas.

I met the young man who was in charge of this musical therapy program a nobody in the music profession, as we great ones might have judged him. Whoever had heard of him, and of what importance was he in the music world? But he brought me to a shuddering awakening! He had as one of his many patients that morning a pathetic piece of humanity, a small boy bereft of most of his faculties, bereft of those things which we take for granted every moment of our lives. The little chap filled me with a sort of pity and terror, in that he had no eye sockets to house his blindness. But this young music master was stimulating the mite with specially thought-out rhythms beaten on a drum.

The poor little fellow could feel the pulse of the drum even if he couldn't hear it. The face of the boy gradually and miraculously (or so it seemed to me) showed an apprehension, and awareness of this. And even though one usually looks for awareness and emotion in the eyes, of which he had none, there appeared to suffuse his face some blessing, some benediction, some compensation from God.

That, I exulted in myself, is what it is all about. If ever I might be granted with my gift to achieve what that young man had achieved with this pitiful member of humanity, I felt I might then be able to say with true understanding, "All things come from thee, Oh God, and of thine own have we given thee."

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