

STEVEN ISSERLIS

One of the UK's leading cellists talks to Carenza Hugh-Jones about the teachers who shaped his playing

DESPITE COMING from a talented musical family that includes a composer grandfather, violinist father, pianist mother and two professional string-playing sisters (and Dandy, our dog, who used to sing very beautifully), Steven Isserlis did not show much musical promise in his early cello lessons. 'I constantly used to play on the wrong side of the bridge and make horrible noises which I thought was very funny,' he explains, 'so I was made to stop and then start again when I was more mature, aged six.' And this time round, it was quickly apparent the boy had talent.

Today, Steven Isserlis is one of the world's best-known cellists, having established a distinguished career as soloist, chamber musician and teacher. He's renowned for his purity of musicianship and expressive sensitivity, presented to audiences around the world in a trademark mix of flamboyant, yet soul-searching, performances – a heady combination of qualities he owes to the various teachers who have shaped his playing.

His first teacher was 'a gentle, elderly lady' called Julia Pringle, says Isserlis. 'She lived in East Sheen, just down the road from my school, and once I had started to show some talent, I'd go to her every day after school. She was very enthusiastic about the instrument, so it was thanks to her that I fell in love with the cello.'

At the age of ten, however, Isserlis met Jane Cowan, the teacher who was to make the biggest impact on his musical life. Although he only learned with her formally for seven years, she was – and remains – his biggest musical influence. 'Jane really shaped me, musically, and I still feel her influence today very strongly. Her teaching is just part of me,' he says. 'She was extremely charismatic – and definitely eccentric – but when I played to her, I found myself playing better than I could at any other time, really. She had that sort of effect, that magic – that chemistry – on my playing. Of course there were sometimes bad lessons when she used to lose her temper, and that wasn't great, but mostly I'd just come out on a complete high and feel I could do anything on the cello.'

KEVIN DAVIS

For Isserlis, one of Cowan's lasting legacies was to bring the composers whose music he was playing to life as distinctive people with individual personalities. 'She really made me feel I was friends with the composers,' he recalls. 'She used to laugh a lot at the jokes in the music, and point out when the composers were joking, as well as telling stories about them. It really made the music come alive.' Cowan also encouraged her students to research the composers' lives and to read around the subject: 'For example, and not that I could speak German, she made us listen to Goethe's *Faust*, because she said that was helpful for playing Beethoven. She was always looking for connections between music and the world around us.' It was thanks to these powerful childhood impressions that Isserlis wrote his two acclaimed children's books about the lives of great composers, *Why Beethoven Threw the Stew* and *Why Handel Wagged His Wig*. As he says in his introduction to one, 'I was lucky enough to "meet" all these composers when I was a child, and I wanted you to meet them too, so that you could have these friends-for-life.'

This approach continues to influence the way Isserlis learns new music today. He is known for his championing of composers such as his beloved Robert Schumann, the Russian composer Sergei Taneyev and the often-neglected Austrian composer Carl Frühling, and delights in delving into the stories behind their music. 'I love to read all about composers, the biographies, the letters – although, of course, it's what the composers say about their music, and their attitude to their music, that's really important.'

That is another Cowanism, as, understandably, the central core to her teaching was always that the music was the most important thing. 'She even made technique come alive, because it would always be related back to the music,' says Isserlis. 'There was no technique without knowing why one was learning to do a specific thing, for a specific piece of music. Her image for a great musician was that you are like a hollow bamboo shoot: you have to allow the music to come through you, without you getting in the way, so getting rid of any technical difficulties simply allows the music to flow.' In fact, says Isserlis, for him, 'technique is simply the freedom to listen as you play'. Cowan also emphasised the importance of being relaxed when playing – a trait which is immediately obvious when watching Isserlis perform.

After seven years with Cowan, Isserlis moved on, initially to learn with Gregor Piatigorsky, in the spring of 1976. However, Piatigorsky sadly died later that summer, so

Isserlis instead continued his studies with Richard Kapuczinsky for two years, at Oberlin College in America. 'He was very practical,' recalls Isserlis. 'He was a lovely man, and had lots of ideas, and brought me down to earth a bit, which was probably quite a good thing after Jane.'

And that was that. From then on, Isserlis only took occasional classes with other teachers, starting with Jacqueline du Pré when he returned to England in 1978. 'I only had two lessons with her, but she was very friendly,' he says. 'My second lesson was interesting because it was on a Khachaturian solo sonata that she didn't know at all, but she really got into it, and it was very helpful. She was so generous with her time; I remember I took a friend and we were there for over two hours – it was memorable. Of course, it was musically hugely different from anything I would ever do; it was a completely different style and approach to music and the cello, but that's why it was so interesting.'

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Isserlis would also make occasional visits to Jane Cowan. 'I remember her transforming the way I play Haydn by just making me sort of diminuendo on the longer notes,' he says. 'It made a huge difference, and everything just fell into place. That, and agogic accents. With Jane, it was a lot about agogic accents.'

The next few major influences on Isserlis's playing came about as a result of attending classes at the International Musicians' Seminar, Prussia Cove, where he is now Artistic Director. 'Sándor Végh was a huge influence on me. He was great,' says Isserlis. 'He was horrible to me – he once famously poured a pint of beer over my head in the dining hall – but he was probably the closest thing to Jane Cowan out of all the other teachers with whom I studied. Rehearsals with him would tend to be horrible, because he was always angry, but I learnt a lot from him. With him, it was all about contour; that was his most important thing.'

It was also at IMS Prussia Cove that Isserlis met Ferenc Rados – 'and he's been a big

influence on my playing recently; it's the way he thinks,' he explains. 'I got harmonic analysis from Jane to start with, and that's always the basis of how one plays, but metric stresses are very important for Rados and that has become increasingly important to me.' Being inspired by new people at this stage of his career was deeply welcome. 'It's exciting when I meet somebody who carries me along. Jane felt she was continuing some great tradition, and Végh was part of the same line, as is Rados.'

Indeed, most of Isserlis's regular chamber music partners today are musicians who share this sense of musical lineage, such as the Hungarian pianist Dénes Várjon, with whom Isserlis recently recorded an all-Schumann disc, as well as giving a chamber Prom earlier this summer, together with violinist Joshua Bell. 'When we play together, I can just hear it; we talk the same language,' says Isserlis. 'I suppose what it all comes down to is every note having a life, a purpose – there's no beauty for its own sake. For me, it's not about music from the outside; it's music from the inside. Understanding the meaning, not just making an effect.'

Isserlis's most recent lessons were with Hungarian composer György Kurtág last year, working on the composer's Four Pieces for Solo Cello. 'It was just fascinating,' he says enthusiastically. 'It was really sort of revelatory. The pieces are only about five minutes long but we worked on them for nine hours and I loved it. It was wonderful.'

Isserlis does not give private lessons, but frequently holds masterclasses around the world, primarily at IMS Prussia Cove and regularly in America. He admits it is sometimes challenging to make real changes in only an hour's lesson, but, he says, you can always hope to plant a seed that will take effect later. He also has to be tactful about suggesting change. 'Being a guest teacher can be difficult,' he says. 'I sometimes see students who've been ruined by their teachers and I can't say anything – well, in extreme cases I do, but it's difficult. You can't just step in and suggest the child leaves its parents just because you think they're not being brought up well enough.'

So what's Isserlis's recipe for an ideal teacher? 'There's no such thing,' comes the prompt reply. 'It's a matter of chemistry. It's like saying what makes an ideal man, or husband. Although, having said that, you want to marry a good person – so there are good teachers and bad teachers, but as long as you're looking inside the music, understanding the meaning, looking at what the composer actually meant when they wrote what they wrote, it will be fine.'

