

Anna and her Cello

by Francis Clark-Lowes

It was on Anna's twelfth birthday that her beloved godfather took her to hear Jacqueline du Pré playing Elgar's cello concerto. She was overwhelmed! When it was over and while the applause roared around her, she sat transfixed, unable to move her hands, uncomprehending of what had happened to her. At last she heard her godfather's far-away voice:

'Anna dear, we must go now!'

As they walked out of the concert hall she exclaimed repeatedly:

'Dear Uncle Bruce, that was unbelievable! It was extraordinary, it was wonderful, it was out of this world! How can I thank you enough?'

Incautiously he replied:

'*You* could learn to play like that too!'

A week later a van marked 'Classical Instruments Ltd' drew up outside Anna's house. She knew instantly that Uncle Bruce had sent it and what it would deliver. For weeks she basked in the euphoria of this wonderful thing which had come to pass. Her cello, *her* cello, stood there in its infinitely mysterious black case, a veritable totem whose holiness forbade exposure.

At last her parents found a teacher for her, and against all Anna's protests the child-sized cello *was* uncovered in all its burnished glory. Mr Fisher was a kind but practical man in his sixties. Patiently (for she was very nervous and confused) he showed Anna how to sit, with the instrument between her knees and her left hand at the top of the strings. Then he carefully explained to her how to hold the bow across the strings. Perhaps Anna was trying to delay the moment of truth, for she asked all sorts of irrelevant questions which presently caused Mr Fisher to lose patience.

'I'll answer anything you like another time. Just now I want you to experience making your instrument sound. Try drawing the bow across the bottom string.'

Anna's heart raced. Du Pré's exquisite performance of Elgar flooded back to her. Now she too would enter that ecstatic world where spirit and pleasure are one. The bow descended slowly, shakily, fatefully towards the strings.

Anna's unbounded thoughts were rudely interrupted by a horrible grunt. She turned to see what had caused it, then realising that she had been its unwitting author, she began to sob inconsolably.

Though Mr Fisher came twice more, Anna resolutely refused to start her lessons or even to see him. Hearing of this, Uncle Bruce advised her parents to let the matter rest for a while.

'Allow her to enjoy to the full her possession of the cello in the knowledge that one day she will start to play it,' he suggested.

The years passed, and still there was no sign that Anna was ready. Uncle Bruce had twice exchanged her instrument for a larger one, and now, at the age of seventeen, Anna had a full-sized cello. She dreamt even more passionately of the day when she would transfix an audience as du Pré had her, but the intensity of this wish was matched by an unwillingness to do anything which would bring her nearer its fruition.

And then Anna fell in love with a boy at her school called Matthew. He was learning to play the cello and although she hated the grunting and squeaking noises he made when he was practising, she swooned at the thought that they could now learn together. Just being with him was such joy, so she felt sure that he, of all people, could help her.

But alas, it was not to be. Anna was impatient with their slow progress, and concluding that Matthew was no better than her first teacher, she quickly fell out of love again. All these scales and musical notes and sight-reading exercises! She was not interested in technicalities; she longed for the sublime experience of her twelfth birthday. Matthew's meek acquiescence in her abandonment of him was a tragedy for both of them.

Anna studied accountancy at university and got a job in the City. As more years rolled by she never forgot her ambition, but she believed that she would receive a signal from on high when the time was right for its fulfilment.

It was a great shock when old Uncle Bruce died. Of course she had known that his time was near, but she had not prepared herself. Standing by his graveside, with tears streaming down her cheeks, a terrible sense of failure and indebtedness swept over her. How could she now repay his generosity and understanding? And so it was that a fatal resolution formed itself in her mind. One day, which would not be long delayed, she would join Uncle Bruce in Heaven, and there she would repay him with music of an intensity which only immortal spirits can endure.

Anna spent her thirtieth birthday with her now elderly parents. They worried about her. Although she had been successful in her job, they knew that she had not found happiness. None of her many flirtations had matured into a stable relationship. Nevertheless on that unforgettable day they felt cautiously optimistic. Contrary to what might have been expected on her thirtieth, she seemed unusually peaceful.

Around ten that evening Anna stepped into her Porsche, waved cheerily goodbye, and roared into the night. An hour later she must have been unlocking the door to her luxury Dockland flat. In accordance with a clearly preconceived plan she then took a variety of pills which, according to the consultant, would have ensured certain death had it not been for the IRA.

At midnight a very specific half-hour warning, with a known code word, was received by the BBC in Belfast that a bomb had been planted in Anna's building. The emergency services rushed to evacuate the occupants and that is why Anna is alive today. Forcing open the door of her flat, they found her lying comatose on the floor with her arms lovingly wrapped around her cello. Later, after the bomb scare was over, the police found a suicide note. It read:

My dearest and eternal Mum and Dad,

Thank you for a lovely birthday. I have to go now. Uncle Bruce is waiting for me. Please don't grieve too much. I've found happiness at last.

Lots of love

Anna

Anna hovered for a week on the brink of death. Then suddenly she seemed to discover a passionate will to live and a corresponding terror of death. A frightening intensity appeared in her eyes. She thought the hospital staff were trying to kill her and so made desperate attempts to escape. Several times she tore the tubes out of her arms and throat and made a dash for the door. But reaching the limits of her weakened body's capacity she collapsed and had to be carried back to her bed.

A year on Anna is a picture of health and beauty. She has left her job in the City, together with her luxury flat and her Porsche, and is training to be a teacher. She wants to help children enjoy literature the way she does. Although it irks her to dissect and analyse the great works which she loves so much, she is beginning to understand that true appreciation requires some down-to-earth footwork. Perhaps, she reflects from time to time, this is where she went wrong with the cello. But here she is still dithering. It is as if there were two Annas, each trying to separate from, and gain ascendance over, the other. The one knows that only by getting her hands dirty, as it were, that is by going through the imperfect (but nevertheless exciting) business of learning technique, will she ever enjoy playing her instrument. But the other part of her clings to the idea of a ready-made, God-given, ecstatic perfection in the image of Jacqueline du Pré. I cannot say which Anna will prevail.