



# VIOLA

## Remembering Lionel Tertis

by J. David Arnott

Greetings from Merry Old England! I can personally vouch for the old part but am unsure as to the level of merriment found here these days amongst the general population. What I am able to vouch for is that it is a merry day indeed for violists around these parts. Viola recitals abound and there are new works for viola being presented quite frequently in London and across the UK.

One of the more exciting aspects of this term is that I am currently living on the same tube line (the Wimbledon arm of the District Line) as Lionel Tertis did from 1961 until his death in 1975. (Thomas Hardy lived near here for a time as well.) I know this because of stumbling on his Blue Plaque announcement from this past May and so just 40 years after his death, the place where Tertis lived will be remembered forever. (English Heritage Blue Plaques are actually blue plaques permanently attached to buildings to recognize famous inhabitants. England is very old so you see these things everywhere.) The intention of this article is to encourage you to look more closely at the life and accomplishments of Maestro Tertis and acknowledge his contribution to our viola world. It is not something that can be done in a short story; yet it is indeed an easy assignment.



As 21<sup>st</sup>-century violists, we all owe a debt of gratitude to Lionel Tertis (1876-1975), for it is he who brought the viola into prominence as an instrument worthy of virtuosic recognition. He was a master-

ful performer as both soloist and ensemble musician; in fact it was as an avid and highly successful chamber musician that he demonstrated that the viola was not just the short straw when choosing up quartet parts. As the first true violist soloist (not just a sham violinist impersonating a violist), it was for Tertis that many of the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century concertos were written. A quick peek at the Tertis Wikipedia page shows the impressive list of pieces and concerti written specifically for the man or commissioned by him, the highlights of which are played and studied by every serious student of the viola to this day (specifically the Walton Concerto).

It is not only solo repertoire for which we owe him thanks, it is for the size and shape of the instrument itself that Tertis changed our world. As we all are aware, there is no “full size” viola; they come in a wide variety of sizes (and now shapes as well), and there is no specific size rule quite the same way there is with the full-size violin. How many of us have shopped for violas and seen “Tertis Model” on the label? A viola measuring 16 and 3/4 inches, large enough to enjoy a warm and sonorous C string, yet not so large as to be physically impossible to maneuver in hands smaller than a giant’s. His design influences viola makers to this day.

We also owe to him a debt of gratitude as a chief viola pedagogue. After giving up a solo career in 1936 at the age of 50, Tertis focused his full attention on teaching. Having already taught at a high level for some time—he was appointed as professor of viola at The Royal Academy of Music in 1900 at the age of 24—he taught until his retirement and only performed on rare

occasions (a glorious career sideline by rheumatism). One of his viola students, Rebecca Clarke, followed in his footsteps by creating one of the glorious masterpieces of 20<sup>th</sup>-century music (not just viola music), her *Sonata for Viola and Piano*.

There are many other reminders of the legacy of Lionel Tertis. In addition

to his students and the students of his students, there is also an international viola competition that bears his name. Established in 1980, it is one of very few international events specifically for violists. The first two winners of this competition, Paul Neubauer in 1980 and Cynthia Phelps in 1984 need no introduction. Continually noting a lack of repertoire for solo

viola, Tertis also transcribed and arranged a great deal of music for solo viola. There are published Tertis editions of a wide variety of music not originally written for viola and now still readily available.

There are a variety of recordings of Tertis readily available today as well—all you really need is YouTube. What would it take for you to play a couple minutes of the Brahms *F Minor Sonata* for your students at the start of class or a lesson? It would show them artistry, musicality, history, and would help them to recognize a seminal hero in the great history of the viola. Lionel Tertis: the man who emancipated the viola.

On another viola note, I am pleased to report that The British Viola Society is clearly healthy and strong and spreading all things viola across the United Kingdom. They host a wide variety of events for primary and secondary school students, budding professionals, and adult amateurs in London as well as across the UK. I’m



hoping to attend the 2015 Violarama in late November, which will be held at Cardiff University. Their web site is clearly up to date and may be found here: <http://www.britishviolasociety.co.uk/>. Upon my return to the USA I will once again assist in the promotion of all things viola via our own Minnesota Viola Society.

*J. David Arnott is an Associate Professor of Music at The College of St. Benedict/ St. John's University where he directs the symphony orchestra and teaches viola and violin. He holds degrees in viola from The Philadelphia College of Performing Arts, The Curtis Institute of Music, and The University of Southern Mississippi. Dr. Arnott is the*

*violinist of Trio Benedicta, violist with Trio Pastiche, a violist in the Duluth-Superior Symphony Orchestra, and a member of the Stillwater-based chamber ensemble Music Saint Croix. He is the director of MNSOTA's Upper Midwest String and Chamber Music Conference and has coached the Minnesota All-State viola section for many years. †*