



Memories and Recollections of

Jean Middlemiss

1925 – 2020

Head of Music at South Hampstead High School

1957 – 1972

In her own words.....

MUSIC AT SOUTH HAMPSTEAD 1957-1972

Miss J. Middlemiss's account as published in the *Kindling of the Flame* 1975

For me, personally, these were rich and rewarding years for which I am really grateful and before I try to recall some of the musical life of the school during my time there, I should like to take the opportunity of thanking everyone with whom I was involved during those years, parents, colleagues, and countless girls for all the pleasure they gave me. How did the music emerge and grow? It was rather like "Topsy" and a direct result of the unique ingredients of South Hampstead. The same recipe would not necessarily work elsewhere—so what were the special ingredients? First and foremost, a community of multi-racial, gifted and lively youngsters, many of whose backgrounds were steeped in the mid-European cultural heritage where music is a serious part of everyday life and not a frill or mere social grace. I say this, knowing that the opportunities for music-making today are unique in England and that we have a richer amateur music life than almost anywhere in the world, but despite all this we are still reluctant, I think, to treat music with the seriousness it deserves in the educational balance sheet of time. This was another essential reason that influenced the development of music in its own special way at South Hampstead. Here were highly intelligent and sensitive children bursting with emotion and feeling in all directions—working hard academically, mostly with university orientated goals—but really needing the artistic and creative outlets so badly and perhaps it was because of the intensity and vitality of their work in all directions that they were able to enjoy and respond with such depth and enthusiasm to the musical stimuli. It was necessary to squeeze the music inch by inch into the timetable without anything else being dislodged and thanks to the encouragement of Miss Bodington the situation gradually improved. My main complaint in the early days was the amount of precious time consumed by the Speech Day musical offering, but I hope we managed to give some pleasure on these occasions at Friends Meeting House. Most of the other occasions in the school year tended to be rather more spontaneous and less formal, partly because of the shortage of rehearsal time, but also to give more girls a chance to take part in a relaxed atmosphere. We gradually replaced the biennial Festival of Diction and Music, which had become rather

things were produced in the circumstances. Some high-lights that I remember include a section on animals, incorporating Bartok's "The Flies" and Rossini's "The Cat Duet", also some operatic performances, notably the Letter Duet from the "Marriage of Figaro" and the drunken Osmin excerpt from "Il Seraglio" in which Loretta Hagopian somehow produced a bass voice! The School Birthday was another occasion calling for celebration and this we did several times by a Festival of Folk Song and Dance which evoked a wonderful response from the girls and produced really colourful occasions and genuine offerings from different parts of the world—Israeli dancing, Russian Cossack dancing, Indian, African and many European songs. Gradually as the range of instruments improved, thanks to the generosity of parents in the collections we took at all the concerts, there came a need for more opportunities of orchestral playing and we usually managed to squeeze in an orchestral concert which for many years included a Mozart or Beethoven piano concerto which was rewarding all round especially for the wind players. We acquired a Spinet, Bassoon, Double Bass, Trumpet, Horn, Oboe and Flute and this gave the opportunity for many girls to start these instruments—some of these later went in to the musical profession—Vanessa Poole was the first Bassoon pupil and won a Scholarship to Trinity College. Elizabeth Swinbank was the first Double Bass pupil and was soon a member of the London Schools' Orchestra, and Maria Boxall devoted much time to studying the Harpsichord and is now a Professor at Trinity College. How fortunate we were in acquiring teachers for all these instruments, I realise and appreciate now that I am working in a relatively rural area of Hertfordshire which presents far greater problems. The Music Staff were always a great team to work with and together we had some memorable Recitals which included the Faure G Minor Quartet, the Mozart Oboe Quartet and the final occasion for me was the Schubert Octet. The quality of teaching and the fact that so many were so permanent was a really stabilizing and valuable factor in the development of instrumental playing in the School. Miss Ogg, when I first came, gave great strength to the piano teaching and Miss Noble remains a most wonderful asset to the music of the school. No-one will forget her Voluntaries and her flair for colourful improvisation, always full of originality and spirit, which has enlivened many a Tuesday morning and sent the girls joyfully away from Prayers. Miss Elliott remained with the Music Staff for over 15 years and contributed a wonderful thoroughness and standard to everything she undertook from teaching the



Cello to coaching for Oxbridge entrance. Others of real talent and professional standing (too numerous to mention) have all given liberally of their time and their inspiration, including 'Old Girls' like Melanie Daiken who came fresh from her studies with Messiaen in Paris, to help with 'O' and 'A' level work. It was always slightly sad when it came to Choral work to have no tenors or basses. In the early days this was overcome by invitations to parents to join us and we had a series of informal performances which really only came to fruition on the day and were always slightly hazardous owing to the unknown quantity and quality of boyfriends and male relations taking part. However, they became very valuable family occasions, some even reached high musical standards. They included Handel's "Messiah", Bach's "Magnificat", Vivaldi's "Gloria", Mozart's "Requiem", Monteverdi's "Beatus Vir". Perhaps they can be considered forerunners of the now popular "Instant Messiah" performances at the Albert Hall! Latterly it was exciting to join with University College School under the directorship of Harold Flook, and staff and girls enjoyed, and I know still enjoy, these occasions and the flavour of a different male environment. This list, which could go on endlessly, must conclude with a remembrance and highlight for me

personally of Monteverdi's "Orfeo". For this my special thanks go to Miss Macaulay for all her imagination and skill in producing, to Elizabeth Eatwell for her inspired singing as Orfeo and to the entire cast of singers and musicians. This "vintage group" later developed into an excellent Choir and provided the small Choir in the U.C.S. concerts, also taking part in the concerts given in the Purcell Room at the Festival Hall with Michael Lankester and the Contrapuncti. Even now I have forgotten to mention the Regent Street Carols, for years a 'must' at the end of the Christmas term, and I pay tribute to the spirit of the many girls and staff who supported this event regardless of the physical exhaustion of the end of a Christmas term and the hardship of the sometimes bitter wind. Even though our voices were not exactly King's Choir, we made up for it in enthusiasm and high spirits and were always amazed to count up the collection which I think on one occasion reached a record of £120. We were joined sometimes by tramps and small children who all mingled in to make it a really 24 Christmas Cheer occasion. I wonder whether any Old Girls' spirits haunt Jaeger's on the late-night shopping Thursday before Christmas and hear the ghosts of the past, or are we overshadowed completely by the Salvation Army? Should we perhaps make a special centenary effort this year to prove the spirit remains and unite the past and the present? It is with great pleasure I recall and treasure some of these past memories. A Goldsmith travelling scholarship to Japan resulted in my being whirled away from the Direct Grant orbit into the State System where, at first, I floundered in a morass of administration. I realised how blessed I had been to spend 15 years in the relatively protected world of South Hampstead, rich in so many ways and particularly in the human relationships which it was possible to build, through the years, with staff and pupils alike. I think it is likely that for many years it will remain my spiritual home.

Alumnae Memories

I remember her music lessons fondly. Climbing up the back stairs to her music room, like an eerie, in the old attic rooms of Waterlow House, we sang from the National Song book, listened to Bach, Mozart and Beethoven and learnt about Kodaly and folk music. I remember being encouraged to conduct the Canada house choir in the house competitions. We won singing a part song - Forth let the Cattle Roam - although I can't remember the composer. I remember studying Tchaikovsky Symphony 5 for O-level and singing all the themes. It was Vaughan Williams Sea Symphony and Brahms 4 for A-level and Jean's knowledge and enthusiasm brought real love and understanding of all kinds of music. She was a colourful and ageless character, dressed in a slightly Bohemian way with thick socks under open sandals whatever the weather! Most memorable for me was the production she put on of Monteverdi's Orfeo. She allowed me both to sing as a shepherd in the first act and then play harmonium for the rest of the opera. How ambitious she was at a time when none of the modern technology was available and resources were scarce. Music also featured at prize giving in Friends House. I remember playing my oboe for her and was so proud to get a music prize from her (the only prize I ever won). I left school discouraged by the rather negative advice given by the then Head mistress - "Don't worry about university Joan, you have your music" But Jean kept in touch and suggested that I might like to go to Newton Park College to take a teaching diploma. She was the person who changed my life...I owe my career in music and education to her and I will always be grateful.

Joan Arnold (Class of 1966)

She arrived as a very young teacher when I was at school; we already had a very very excellent music teacher in post so it can't have been easy for her. I recall learning a nursery rhyme suite with a setting of 'Thomas and Annis' - the first time I'd heard that name and some little while later when I had my first child I gave 'Annis' to her as her second name.

Kirsten Cubitt Thorley (Class of 1958)

'She absolutely made music come alive. I sing in a choir and will be forever grateful to her for so wonderfully transmitting her love of music to us'. We were extraordinarily fortunate in being taught by women of such intellect, ability and dedication.

Karolyn Shindler (Class of 1966)

I was in the school from 1964 to 1969, leaving at age 13. 'Miss Middlemiss' had an enormous impact on me. She was my inspiration and, though I went on to do Grade 8 Piano and Viola and resurrected an instrumental performance competition at my new Scottish school that has gone from strength to strength, it was the fun singing together that I remember most: Bastien et Bastienne, put together during voluntary sessions on Friday afternoons. I went on to sing Dido in D&A in Scotland and have found my love in choral singing: Scottish Plainsong Choir, Roseneath Singers, currently Dunblane Cathedral Choir and a group called Scottish Voices. I remember Jean most fondly and celebrate her long and generous life. I am pleased to be coming to join you on 8th March.

Jenni Barr (Class of 1973)

Along with my fellow alumni, I was very sad to hear of the death of Jean Middlemiss, who was an inspiration both personally and as teacher. So much so, that when I left South Hampstead in 1966, my father wrote Jean a letter of appreciation. This was because he felt of all the staff, she had contributed the most to my overall education while at South Hampstead. He didn't tell me at the time but when we discussed it a few years later, I agreed.

Deborah Rossiter nee Harris (Class of 1966)

Jean had enormous influence on me as a keen amateur musician who did not intend to make music my career. The opportunities to play recorder in a trio sonata, via an arranged visiting musician, and of course the wonderful Orfeo, which was an outstanding undertaking in the 1960s, at the start of interest in Monteverdi, will shine on forever. Now, with her gentle nudging, I learned about the Suzuki method. Now in retirement, I trained to be a Suzuki recorder teacher, hopefully passing on my enthusiasm and belief that anyone can learn music to people aged 3 to late adult life'.

Alyson Elliman nee Dembovitz (Class of 1966)

I have a vivid image in my mind of a little cubby hole at the top of the stairs outside the music room where I would sit at break times and flip through her library of LP records and choose one to take home. These borrowed albums that we were trusted to take away (we just wrote our name in a lending book) introduced me to so much lovely classical music - I hope she knew how appreciated they were.

Ros Mitton, nee Hasting (Class of 1966)

I have wonderful memories of Jean Middlemiss from my time at SHHS from 1963 to 1970. She was always so full of enthusiasm and energy and encouraged me with my own piano and clarinet playing. I've always enjoyed playing and listening to a whole variety of music since then. Climbing up to that top floor of what I think was the old Waterlow Hall was rather like entering a magical, rickety world which was her domain! Thank you, Miss Middlemiss, for your giving and warm personality and musical teaching ability.

Miranda Forward (Class of 1970)

I've been privileged to know Jean since 1959, learning from her from the very first class music lesson in U11 23, later deputising for her in 1970 as best I could in the attic class music room of Waterlow House (with wonderful support from Miss Macaulay and Miss Elliott amongst many others), during her Churchill scholarship time in Japan to learn about the Suzuki method, a stay extended from one to two terms as she realised she needed to stay and learn for as long as possible. I didn't realise her influence until the last two decades of our long relationship, but she had, gradually, become my role model much earlier on. A single woman with far-ranging interests and life experiences who cared deeply about those for whom she was responsible, not least including her sister, and her many, many friends, whether or not they were musicians, what amazing energy and stamina she possessed! Her sense of pastoral care combined with a capacity to communicate by whatever means possible, and she had a unique intuitive understanding of, and compassion for, those who were unhappy or floundering, whether or not the circumstances were to do with music, quietly yet a strong and enduring support through personal contact and letters and phone calls and cards and emails and, I'm guessing, a deep faith and conviction in the power of

love. Thank you, Jean, for all you did for so many of us at SHHS as well as elsewhere during your long life.

Marie-Thérèse Pinder (Class of 1966)

I have fond memories of Jean Middlemiss. She taught me violin (she had unlimited patience) and started me on the road to choral singing in the school choir, performing Bach's Peasant Cantata and introduced us to several other works including Vivaldi's Gloria (I will be singing that a concert this weekend and will think of her). I remember her spirited direction of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, rehearsing us for Prize Giving. She certainly made music come alive, broadening my horizons and laying the foundations for a love of music that remained with me well beyond schooldays and into adulthood.

Carmel Byers nee Stiebel (Class of 1966)



We were lucky to be invited to Jean Middlemiss's funeral. It was held in a small church in Barnet, not far from where she lived and where she had played the organ for services. It was full - probably about 80 people, unusual for one so old but demonstrating how significant Jean was both for individual people and for the musical life of schools, churches, local homes and a wide musical community including Suzuki work locally and nationally. We were told about how she attended the summer music camp each year into her 90s. We learnt of her sporting prowess at tennis and later table tennis, her work in care homes, her travels, her habit of collecting everything. We heard extracts from her school reports. We listened to some Mozart (duo for violin and viola K423) and Bach (Allemande from 'cello suite in C major transcribed for viola) and played beautifully by Rachel Solomon, Jean's goddaughter.

Jean's tremendous spirit and enthusiasm was referred to over and over again. So, following her simple white wooden coffin outside to the hearse we waved her off with 3 loud cheers and applause. Somehow that was almost the most moving part of the whole service. There was a get together in the church hall afterwards. There were a handful of ex SHHS pupils who had been very involved with Jean, most of whom we didn't remember as they were new in 1966! Otherwise it was friends, family, Suzuki and camp colleagues and others whose connections we didn't know.

Alyson Elliman and Joan Arnold (Class of 1966)



Following the very sad news of the death of the school's much-loved Head of Music, Jean Middlemiss, we (the class who first met at the Senior School in 1959) have been looking at photos of her, from a party we had in April 2016. We were on board the barge Viod near St Katharine's Dock - a jolly affair and we were so glad Jean could join us. This cheery wave as she left at the end of the party really captures her wonderful spirit and smile.

Griselda Mussett, née Cann (Class of 1966)

