

Still striking a chord

Jacqueline du Pré would have been 60 this month. Jessica Duchen talks to those who knew the cellist about her lasting ability to captivate audiences

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Her recordings still sell in droves; Christopher Nupen's film *Jacqueline du Pré - In Portrait* was the highest-selling classical DVD of 2004, and surely nobody who has seen his film of her performing the Elgar Cello Concerto can hear the work again without remembering her. Yet critics often lambasted her unusual technique, her extravagantly physical style and her relentless intensity; her reputation suffered from Anand Tucker's notorious 1998 feature film *Hilary and Jackie*, which displayed a less salubrious side of her family and personal life.

But despite critics' nit-picking and the public washing of dirty laundry, Du Pré remains an icon, a figure whose talent, radiance, apparently fairy-tale life and tragic death add up to more than the sum of their parts. What exactly was it about her that could, and still can, inspire such devotion? How much of her mystique can be attributed to her extraordinary and terrible life story? Just how accurate were those damning reviews? Why does her memory still burn so brightly?

Du Pré's life is well documented. Born into a middle-class family in Oxford, she heard a cello for the first time aged four and declared that this was the sound

she wanted to make. Soon her family was astonished by the fervour with which she exclaimed, "I love my cello so much!" In competitive music festivals she showed none of the reticence common in other children. An observer at one contest, seeing her skipping down a corridor, said, "I can see you've just played." She hadn't: she was about to go on stage and was thrilled with expectation.

News of her talent travelled fast. She studied with William Pleeth, calling him her "cello daddy", and missed large chunks of school to focus on music; her godmother helped to buy her a Stradivarius; and her Wigmore Hall debut, at 16, launched a career that soon took in an EMI record contract, concertos with the greatest conductors of her day and duo partnerships with some of the finest young pianists, including Stephen Kovacevich (then known as Stephen Bishop) and later Daniel Barenboim - whom she married in Israel in 1967 amid a whirl of public adulation. She and Barenboim were at once an international celebrity couple, a classical Posh and Becks.

But by 1970, Du Pré was suffering from peculiar symptoms, including episodes of numbness, intense fatigue and a sensation of weakness in her limbs. The symptoms came and went; time and again doctors dismissed them as psychosomatic. Convinced that she was heading for a nervous breakdown, Du Pré cancelled her engagements for six months and went to stay with her sister, Hilary, and her family, where allegedly she had an affair with her brother-in-law.

Her marriage to Barenboim had not proved as much of a fairy tale as its image suggested; plagued by a sense of intellectual inferiority and inadequate stamina (Barenboim is still legendarily energetic), she had left him behind, as well as her cello, for those few months, in a trial separation. Afterwards she returned to him and to her concert life - but her attempts at resuming the latter soon foundered on her physical problems. At last she was advised to see a neurologist, who diagnosed multiple sclerosis.

Her performing career ended that year, 1973. Over the 14 years of her slow decline into complete incapacity, Barenboim continued to look after her devotedly in London. Although he never left her, eventually, during her last years, he set up another home in Paris with the Russian pianist Elena Bashkirova, whom he later married.

It was a modern legend of someone blessed yet cursed, like the Kennedy family, Marilyn Monroe or Princess Diana. Since Du Pré's death, has legend overwhelmed reality? Our responses today to her recordings and films are coloured by knowledge of her fate. But there's no doubt, when you talk to those who knew and worked with her, that her blessings were every bit as powerful as her curse.

The cellist Raphael Wallfisch, who is spearheading two days of celebratory events to mark Du Pré's 60th birthday, has never forgotten his childhood experiences of seeing her in action. "My mother, the cellist Anita Lasker, was a member of the English Chamber Orchestra and used to take me with her to rehearsals and recording sessions," he reminisces. "I was present when Du Pré recorded the Haydn C major Cello Concerto with Barenboim conducting, and I remember those sessions as if it were yesterday. The atmosphere was like a

party. Du Pré was full of joy and smiles; everyone was having a good time. You'd never have imagined it was a recording session!"

Stephen Kovacevich, her former duo partner, remembers this feeling too: "When I walked on stage with her, I looked forward to the concert and never felt imprisoned by remembering little details, because the performance would be no-holds barred. She had a joy about her which helped me too. She wasn't religious, but she used to say, 'I have a God-given talent and I feel it's my privilege to share it with my friends.' That was absolutely genuine. When you go on stage with someone like that, it brings out the best in you as well."

The film director Christopher Nupen vividly recalls meeting Du Pré for the first time in 1962. He was sharing a flat with the guitarist John Williams, with whom the teenaged Du Pré was to make a recording. "She came to the flat to rehearse. We greeted her at the door and she was unmistakably shy. But when we walked down to the kitchen, she strode like an Amazon. There was an immense confidence in her being and her movement, but shyness in her personality. That struck me and never left me. I see a parallel with these contradictory images in her music-making. Her depth of perception, both human and musical, was incredible. But she felt inferior because she hadn't had much ordinary education."

Nupen adds, "The conductor Sir John Barbirolli says, in the film, 'Sometimes she's accused of excessive emotions, but I love it. When you're young you should have an excess of everything. If you haven't an excess, what are you going to pare off as the years go by'? She was often told in rehearsals to 'tone it down a bit' and she'd try to do so. But her conviction was so strong that once she got the bit between her teeth, you couldn't stop her. She couldn't stop herself!"

Du Pré's "excessive emotion" was one of many aspects of her playing that provoked the critics. Everything was considered excessive - the tone, the way she "threw herself around" as she played, the *portamenti* (slides between notes) - except for desired qualities that were sometimes absent, such as understanding of form, appropriate style and, occasionally, good intonation. The story goes that Du Pré learned the Delius Cello Concerto without having a clue about the orchestral part, and generally she had scant regard for the minor details in the score, such as dynamics, that supposedly indicated the composer's intentions.

On one hand, as Wallfisch points out, Du Pré's apparent shortcomings were a sign of something more sinister than questionable musical taste. "In retrospect, one understands that a lot of the extra energy she was putting in was simply because she couldn't feel her fingers," he explains. "She was literally feeling her way between the notes."

But also, as Kovacevich recalls, she had something more significant to offer than precision. "Once I raised some pedantic point in a rehearsal - the composer had written *forte* and she was playing something else. She responded, 'Once the composer has finished the piece, it's mine!'" That's not a politically correct comment, but it works! It means you give all your love,

commitment and joy to the music. As for critics, I have the feeling that there is nothing more threatening to them than something that is absolutely wonderful."

He has a point. Charisma as compelling and universally communicative as Du Pré's is an enormous threat, because its force renders academic correctness redundant. And academic correctness is often the only asset that many other praised performers, and critics, actually possess. A Jacqueline Du Pré comes *

* along once in a lifetime - someone with such personal radiance that no human or instrumental defects can interfere with their power over the audience. Among musicians, perhaps only Maria Callas or Vladimir Horowitz also fall into this bracket. None of them would be acceptable to a musical competition jury; measurement against "historically correct" slide-rules would do them no favours. But faced with the charisma of a Jackie, such concerns evaporate. Her sound seems to go straight from her soul to the listener's; nothing else really matters.

Christopher Nupen's films have preserved much of Du Pré's personal magic, shot in an involving, informal manner unprecedented in music documentaries at the time (*A Portrait of Jacqueline du Pré* shows her on a train, gleefully strumming her cello like a guitar). It's tempting to wonder whether they have even helped to create the Du Pré legend. But Nupen insists that if she still strikes such a chord in people who never saw her perform live, that is to her credit and not his. "We knew our craft. We were using film in which we knew she was at her most expressive. But the thing that makes the dynamite is that expressive power that she had. The fact that the DVD is selling in such numbers is concrete evidence that people who never heard her are still able to respond to her in the films. People who've never even heard of her are buying it. That's glorious. And thank God I was there to film her."

He has now prepared a new documentary that will include previously unscreened footage from his much-loved films of Du Pré, Barenboim and their colleagues in Schubert's "Trout" Quintet, Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio and other music. "Film captures our artists in a complete way that not one of the other media can touch," he declares. "Jackie's gone, but she isn't gone in the films. She once said to me, after she was ill, 'You cannot imagine what it feels like to me to know that I am playing for people again in our film.'"

When a very different film, *Hilary and Jackie*, came out in 1998, controversy raged for months. Du Pré's associates were profoundly upset; fans were jolted as a musical idol was condemned for actions far removed from music. "Whether there is any truth in the story or not," Wallfisch comments, "nobody needs to know these things." But now it is film of the real Du Pré that tops the classical bestseller charts, while, as is often the way with feature films, *Hilary and Jackie* is all but forgotten by a public hungry for the next novelty. The indication could hardly be clearer that Du Pré's personal magnetism and joyous playing are able to survive just about anything.

Her legacy lives on in the wide influence she cast over the musical world. Some agents and record companies began to take the cello seriously as a solo instrument for the first time thanks to her. She was a crucial inspiration for most of the finest British cellists working today - Steven Isserlis, Robert Cohen,

Alexander Baillie and more. Wallfisch recalls: "We were all struck by not just her joie de vivre, but the colossal ease of her playing. A lot of people can play well, but not with such compulsive energy that you have to listen whether you like it or not."

Supposing she had not become ill, where would Du Pré have been today? Would she, at 60, have been the world's most revered cellist? Or would she have been content to cut back her engagements, be Mrs Barenboim, raise a family? Elizabeth Wilson's biography of her shows that at first Du Pré had doubts about becoming a cellist; that she had hoped to have children; and that even before her illness, her stamina was not particularly strong. But Wallfisch is convinced that, had multiple sclerosis not intervened, "she would probably have played differently and would have continued to be the most important British cellist of these 50 years". Kovacevich asserts: "I think she would have played and played and played! And for her 60th birthday she might have phoned up 60 friends and we'd all have flocked in and performed 60 pieces"

That was not to be. After the progressive, agonising incapacity of her illness, Du Pré died on 19 October 1987, aged 42. Nupen was with her. "I was holding her right hand, and Bill Pleeth was holding her left hand. Someone put on the Schumann Cello Concerto, and Daniel [Barenboim], who was in a corner, said, 'Turn that off!' And then - silence. Her life ended in unimaginable tragedy. But what she gave to the world in her few best years was a glorious celebration of some of the most wonderful things in human existence. As Kenneth Clark said in his *Civilisation* series, 'Once art touches the soul in that way, it calls that soul back for the rest of its days.'"

Kovacevich agrees. "I think we'd still have known about Jackie if she'd played the snare drums. I remember that Emmy Tillet, her agent, remarked that Jackie had not made more work for other cellists: we'd fallen for her. The cello was simply her instrument. When I think of Jackie, I think of a still from the film when she's smiling as she plays: this person in love with what she's doing, ridiculously gifted and enjoying sharing that gift."

Wallfisch's two days of concerts in London and Birmingham, plus events on TV and BBC radio, are now set to celebrate Du Pré's legacy on what would have been her 60th birthday. On 25 January Wallfisch and the pianist John York perform the complete Beethoven cello sonatas at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. The next day, the Symphony Hall in Birmingham hosts a succession of concerts and discussions, beginning with a lunchtime cello recital by Julian Lloyd Webber; next, Christopher Nupen talks about his long association with Du Pré and introduces extracts from his films; and David Fruwirth (violin), Jamie Walton (cello) and Daniel Grimwood (piano) play Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio. After a pre-concert talk, the evening concert begins with extracts from Nupen's film, after which 60 young cellists from Birmingham schools and Birmingham Conservatoire perform en masse. An orchestral programme then features the Elgar Cello Concerto with Wallfisch as soloist, Elgar's Enigma Variations and the Beethoven Triple Concerto performed by Wallfisch, the violinist Philippe Graffin and the pianist Jeremy Menuhin. The English Symphony Orchestra is conducted by William Boughton. BBC Radio 3 is also devoting the entire evening to a celebration of Du Pré's work.

Wallfisch's concerts will donate all proceeds to the Multiple Sclerosis Society. Now, for the first time, there is a glimmer of hope for those suffering this horrific disease. Recent research has identified a genetic process in the brain that can at least temporarily re-coat the nerves with myelin, the insulating substance damaged by multiple sclerosis. Much more work is needed to transform this discovery into a therapy, but it is the first sign of a breakthrough. Du Pré's high-profile illness had an unprecedented impact on public awareness of the disease. Now the memory of her may help to raise funding that could, one day, result in a treatment. There could be no finer tribute.

Tribute to Jacqueline, Symphony Hall, Birmingham (0121-780 3333; www.necgroup.co.uk/visitor/symphonyhall) 26 January. BBC Radio 3 is devoting an evening to Du Pré on 26 January