

Phyllis Sellick

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The salvaging of her career with that of her stricken husband marked one of the most courageous revivals in the history of British music. It called for technical virtuosity on both their parts, a rearrangement of the conventional polarity between the players and an extensive redrawing of the piano repertoire: 20 major musical works and more than 100 smaller ones were rearranged for them to play in three-handed duet.

Among the composers who wrote works specially for them were Sir Arthur Bliss, Gordon Jacob, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Malcolm Arnold, whose *Concerto For Phyllis And Cyril*, successfully premiered at the 1969 Proms, was acclaimed by *The Daily Telegraph* as a tribute to "their unbounded courage and optimism in the face of adversity".

Following her debut at Harrogate at the age of 22 in Grieg's Piano Concerto, Phyllis Sellick came to specialise in French and English music of the 20th century, and in November 1938 gave the first performance of Michael Tippett's *Fantasy Sonata* for piano at the Queen Mary Hall in Bloomsbury.

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a private recording of the sonata and remembered that at the recording session Tippett "was so kind and helpful and encouraging". When she made a slight mistake at one point, "he came over to me and he said, 'You know, I think I prefer my version', and I said, 'So do I!'"

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Phyllis Doreen Sellick was born on June 16 1911 at Ilford, Essex, the daughter of an electrician who had moved to suburban London from Bideford, Devon. She inherited her artistic streak from her mother, an accomplished amateur painter, and, having shown early promise as a pianist, studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London between 1925 and 1927, and later at the Paris Conservatoire under Isidore Philipp.

She soon became established as a formidable interpreter of contemporary works on the concert platform, as well as carving out a reputation as a teacher. In her mid-twenties she caught the eye of a fellow-pianist, Cyril Smith, one of the greatest keyboard exponents of his generation, who had studied and taught at the Royal College of Music; she regularly partnered him in two-piano



Phyllis Sellick with her husband Cyril Smith at the piano

duets, and the couple married in 1937.

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International Piano Competition, founded by Fanny Waterman, a former pupil of her husband.

Phyllis Sellick was encouraged to play professionally as a duo with Cyril Smith by Sir Henry Wood, founder of the Promenade Concerts, who told her it would mean she would lead a less lonely life. It was at Sir Henry's behest that the pair first played together professionally in the 1941 Proms, relocated to the Albert Hall for the first time.

The couple had a further reason to thank Sir Henry:

he presented them with one of his grand pianos, a Steinway to match another they already owned, and on which the young performers practised together.

During the Second World War the couple toured India, entertaining the troops under the auspices of Ensa, and coping with the extra demands posed by the dearth of pianos of acceptable quality.

Back home in London, their daily practice routine resumed on their two grand pianos in the living room and a third hoisted into a studio above their suburban garage. Having made their duetting debut at the Proms, they also played in the first postwar Promenade concerts, again at the Albert Hall. Their career as duettists throughout the 1940s and early 1950s now extended to the recording studio. In 1945, as a solo artist, Phyllis Sellick recorded William Walton's *Sinfonia Concertante* with the composer as conductor.

One critic was so smitten with the couple's passionate performance of piano music by Rachmaninov, recorded on a compilation disc for EMI in the late 1940s, as to venture that "if the playing here is any indication, Smith and Sellick must have had one heck of a marriage".

In 1956 Cyril Smith faced personal and professional disaster when he lost the use of his left hand. He suffered a thrombosis at the start of a concert tour of the USSR, triggered by faulty pressurisation in the aircraft carrying him and his wife from Kiev to Kharkov.

It took him a year to recover, but the stroke left him permanently paralysed on his left side, and he was

subsequently able to play only with his right hand.

Nevertheless, the couple determined to carry on their careers, and set about relearning the repertoire, redistributing the notes that had formerly been allocated to four hands so that they could be played by three — an astonishingly difficult feat, not least because it was counter-intuitive and required an entirely different technique. Even so, not a single note was lost as a result.

In May 1957 Phyllis Sellick and her husband recorded their first radio recital of three hands playing on two pianos in a BBC studio in Birmingham. Four years later the British composer Lennox Berkeley, who had written his two-piano concerto for the four hands of Smith and Sellick, and which they had premiered in 1948, adapted it for three hands. Sir Arthur Bliss arranged his *Concerto for Two Pianos* for them in the same way.

In 1964 Phyllis Sellick joined the teaching staff of the Royal College of Music as a professor of piano. Following the death of her husband in 1974, she formed a new musical partnership with the pianist Terence Beckles, but concentrated increasingly on teaching, and was still giving lessons until a stroke last year forced her to stop.

Phyllis Sellick contributed a chapter to her husband's autobiography *Duet For Three Hands* (1958). Both she and Cyril Smith were appointed OBE in 1971.

She is survived by her daughter, the photographer Claire Sellick; a son, Graham, died of a stroke in 1988.

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