

Cecil James

By Gareth Morris

(The following article is reprinted from the August, 1992, No. 20, pp. 4-6, issue of the B.D.R.S. "Double Reed News" with kind permission. It is good to remember the wonderful career of this great British bassoonist who died recently. —ED)

Saint Paul says that the Wise suffer fools gladly, but there must be an occasional exception; **Cecil James** certainly finds difficulty in doing so, and probably disagrees with such pious sentiments.

However, subjection to his strictures and caustic wit for most of my career has enabled me to observe this impressive and unusual personage for many years, although he once observed to Dennis Brain and me that his seniority of more than a decade rendered it impossible for us ever to catch up with him. Wonderfully amusing and seriously musical, he is nevertheless a remarkably difficult man who can also be the most delightful of companions; such a brilliant and therefore nervous artist can't be expected to submit to a pulse-setting by Maelzel, so long ago I settled for affection, and respect for the nobility and warmth of his bassoon playing.

My first opportunity to take stock of Cecil James was on his appearance at a rehearsal at the Uxbridge headquarters of the RAF Central Band and Symphony Orchestra, which many of us had already augmented for the duration of the war. He had arrived to be interviewed by the formidable director of music, Wing-Commander R.P. O'Donnell MVO, who promptly demanded to hear him play in the orchestra and produced the Elgar *Wand of Youth Suite* with its tremendous display of bassoon scales; we heard them tossed off with splendid panache by an elegantly suited young man whose reed and crook looked as much part of him as did his cigarette holder.

Mr. James was soon an AC2; he and the Wing-Commander had met their matches, except that one of them had to salute the other.

Cecil Edwin James was born into England's foremost bassoon family, from which he inherited his face, his standards of playing, and indeed his instrument; but his phrasing and sound, and his manner of presenting the music, are his own. His father (Wilfred, 1878-1941) and uncle (Edwin, 1861-1921) were the two leading players in London during the Elgarian era, and the composer thought of them in so many of his orchestral solos, and dedicated the *Romance for Bassoon and Orchestra* to E.F. James (Edwin), who gave the work its first

**Discussing
the
Poulenc
Trio, 1943.**



performance in 1911; on that Hereford occasion the conductor was Dr. G.R. Sinclair, whose dog Dan was the hero of the "G.R.S." *Enigma* Variation.

Cecil's magnificent Buffet instrument descended to him from those peaceful Edwardian days; he has used it throughout his career, but it was originally his father's presented to him by the makers after they had displayed it in the Paris exhibition before the first war. Its immaculate appearance suggests that it retains its own valet, but it certainly indicates the pride of its owner in being the guardian of such an aristocrat: silver keys shine on the handsome wood as it emerges from the polished leather case and is assembled by its unpredictable master; even if we are not in favor that day, the bassoon is invariably given the deference that is its due. This ceremony has always given pleasure to those of us who regard the informal manners of today's symphonic players with distaste, and it reflects the respect he has for his art, and for the professional standards that have prevailed in the James dynasty.

Cecil James studied at the Royal College of Music, and at the outbreak of the Second World War was already established in the musical life of London; he was a member of the London Symphony Orchestra and there was chamber music and the many other engagements that accrue to a player of his calibre, but perhaps the Glyndebourne opera seasons gave him the greatest pleasure. The place was beautiful; Fritz Busch conducted some of the finest opera performances England had known; he loved his much admired bassoon partnership with **Paul Draper**, in spite of Draper's proclivity towards dispensing with conversation for days on end; and the sun shone all day while he shared these delights with his wife **Natalie**, who joined **Evelyn Rothwell** to make an oboe duo that must have been the toast of the ducal picnickers. Then there was war: Cecil joined the RAF with many of his friends, and was still able to accept

**Cecil James, 1951****Natalie James, 1948**

engagements when off duty, so when it was over, he collected his demob sports coat and flannels, confidently answered the valedictory enquiry as to his civilian future, and went home to consult his diary and see what the next day would bring.

The big London orchestras were then at a low ebb, but there was a proliferation of new chamber orchestras and ensembles in which the best players found themselves. Cecil James was first bassoon in many of these, played much chamber music and joined us in the Dennis Brain Wind Quintet, with Dennis's brother **Leonard** playing the oboe, and Stephen Waters the clarinet; we were all old students of the RAM or RMC who knew each other well, and an obvious choice as our regular pianist was the excellent and vastly experienced Wilfrid Parry, who was in his innocence inclined to repeat amusing remarks which were not quite as entertaining at the twentieth time of hearing. Cecil doesn't suffer this sort of thing easily, and is liable to explode when exposed to it, so he has provided splendid material for vignettes of his very interesting character. Poor Mr. Parry gave him several opportunities for indulging his penchant for protesting: during a rehearsal of the Poulenc *Sextet*, in which there is a sudden silent pause after a fortissimo chord, Parry, in the voice of imaginary member of the audience, said "and I was telling my friend Mrs. Witherspoon ..." and we all laughed; but when it happened again one day, Cecil could take it no more. "Nothing is more hopeless than a scheme of merriment" said Dr. Johnson, so Cecil exploded "DON'T SAY IT AGAIN! IT'S NOT FUNNY ANY MORE", and there was another powerful silence.

A very pleasant wind quintet tour of Italy provided the background for one of his most brilliant outbursts. After the concerts there was inevitably a reception given for us by the generous Italians, and each evening the guileless Wilfred became bolder as he thanked them, with a heavily accented "Arovodoochy": at last Cecil could contain himself no longer, and with a furious "Wilfred" he said "DO NOT SAY THAT! How would you like it if Italians toured our country and said "GEEBOO" every night!"

Although he is the least snobbish of men, Cecil

has a powerful way of putting people in their place when it's necessary. Driving in his car during the war we stopped in Marlborough: entering the Castle and Ball Hotel in our RAF uniforms he courteously asked for coffee, and was immediately informed by the waiter that that lounge was reserved for officers. In a trice Cecil was transformed into an Air Marshal. "I SAID COFFEE FOR TWO". "Yes sir, of course sir, I'll get it at once sir, sorry to keep you waiting, gentlemen" could be heard all the way there and back.

After a decade with London's symphony orchestras in the doldrums, Walter Legge founded the Philharmonia Orchestra, to make gramophone records with the great foreign conductors who had not visited this country for so long, and Cecil was soon its principal bassoonist. We were able to play in magnificent performances, with von Karajan, Furtwängler, Toscanini, Klemperer, and indeed most of the finest conductors of the day, whose interpretations are preserved in the hundreds of recordings we made. The greater the music the more suitable is the style of Cecil James, and he can be heard in so many of the great solos, not least at the beginning of *The Rite of Spring*. Markevitch's famous performance allows us to hear the opening solo on the type of French bassoon that was in use when Stravinsky composed it, but with a sound which I venture to suggest is better than any to be heard in Paris. Cecil has sometimes told me of his feelings in some of the most testing bassoon movements in the repertoire. He says he is seldom conscious during the fast staccato passage in the last movement of Beethoven's *Fourth Symphony* ("I switch off at the beginning and then again at the end"), and after playing the solo in the Ravel *Bolero* for the first time, he fainted. Needless to say these are two of his most celebrated tours de force and he remains one of our most admired artists.

Since Glyndebourne days, when she was also the cor anglais player in the London Symphony Orchestra, **Natalie James** has been a very busy London oboist: teaching at the RCM and examining with a sympathetic critical ear, she is one of the most popular and elegant ladies in our profession. As for her virtuosity, one has only to hear the London Baroque Ensemble's recording of the Beethoven oboe trio to be reminded of her remarkably easy technique. It is a pleasure to salute two such distinguished representatives of our English School of woodwind playing. ❖

About the Author

Gareth Morris was a professor of the flute in the Royal Academy of Music from 1945-1985 and principal flautist in the Philharmonia Orchestra from 1948-1972.