

Double Acts

Inside views on relationships in the string world

The father-and-daughter violists consider how their relationship evolved when one took over the other's position in the Edinburgh Quartet

JESSICA BEESTON

I GREW UP SURROUNDED BY MUSIC. I was always interested when there were quartet rehearsals in the house – there were all these mad musicians who would turn up and play this amazing music. I remember once my grandma was looking after me when my dad was playing in the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, in a concert going out live on the radio. I must have been very young, because there was some scary music in the concert and I was convinced something awful was going to happen to him.

I GOT INTO THE GUILDHALL SCHOOL and went to study with David Takeno, who immediately suggested that I try playing the viola. I don't think my dad was so keen on me being a viola player – he thought of me as a violinist, and I think there was an emotional attachment because I was playing on my mum's violin. But I focused on my own feelings and questioned myself as to whether it was the right thing to do. When he heard me play the viola he immediately came round to the idea, and I hope he's quite proud now.

HE HAS ALWAYS GIVEN ME really helpful advice in terms of music and playing. He's often told me to be prepared when entering any situation, which is something I always follow. When I was freelancing in London I tried to take my dad's advice and say yes to everything, but after about a year I realised it was going to kill me – I'm just not the same as my father in that way. He works incredibly hard, and it was a bit of a joke in Scotland that he'd fly from Paris to Edinburgh to London in a single day to perform.

HE MADE THE DECISION TO RETIRE from the Edinburgh Quartet a couple of years ago. I didn't think anything of it, but then I got a text from the first violinist, Tristan Gurney, asking if I'd like to do an audition and a trial. It was a strange situation and I wasn't sure if it was the right thing for me to do. My dad said just to go along and play, so I did. He finally left the quartet in June 2011. Right up to the point when they offered me the job, I was quite unsure if I should join – I didn't want to feel that I couldn't fill my dad's shoes. I was worried that he might not be keen on the idea himself, but when I spoke to him about it, he was proud that they'd offered it to me. Now when we work together in the quartet, it's nothing to do with who my dad is – I'm just myself.

MICHAEL BEESTON

JESSICA STARTED VIOLIN LESSONS at the age of four, but her mother and I both thought that it's difficult to teach your own child, so she went to a series of good teachers. Family life was intertwined with the Edinburgh Quartet for a long time, and from an early age she had a fair bit of awareness of what was happening. I tried to be a responsible father and suggest all sorts of alternative possibilities for her to follow, such as going to a university to study either music or some other subject, but she was determined to become a musician. It's not that I was against her changing to the viola, just that she seemed to be doing very well as a violinist. But she made the decision herself, and there was no standing in her way – not that I would have wanted to.



Jessica was once asked in an interview: 'Have you always had your eye on your father's job?'

MICHAEL BEESTON

I DELIBERATELY HAD NO INPUT into the choosing of my successor. I didn't recommend Jessica, and I didn't even go to any of her trial concerts. I only heard her for the first time with the quartet after they'd invited her to join and she'd accepted. But in fact the outcome has been that I'm more closely involved with the quartet now than I might have been, even just in seeing how she's getting on in concerts.

OF COURSE WE DISCUSSED her joining the quartet

while she was on trial, but it wasn't a case of me giving her hints or tips. She's herself, and she'll be taking her own ideas and experience into the group. It's a slightly strange feeling knowing that she's doing the job I did for 40 years, though. She was once asked in an interview, 'So, Jessica, have you always had your eye on your father's job?' But I don't think that's been the case.

JESSICA TALKS TO ME A LOT about her hopes and ambitions. She's always been keen to come and play pieces through for me, to see what I think, which I really enjoy. She comes to stay with us every few weeks now, and we probably spend too much time talking about music. But we also discuss the administration of the group – who's doing PR, who's in touch with the critics, who's putting in applications for funding. Those things are vital, and I hope that they manage to continue strongly into the future. ■

INTERVIEWS BY DAVID KETTLE