

Natalie Clein: Battle of the hands

The young British cellist Natalie Clein is about to release her own version of the Elgar concerto made famous by Jacqueline du Pré. But can it be bettered?

By Jessica Duchon

Published: 05 September 2007

It's hard to find anything more emotive in the recent history of British music than the Elgar Cello Concerto played by Jacqueline du Pré. Her 1965 account, conducted by Sir John Barbirolli, is one of the best-loved and best-sold classical recordings of the last four decades; and, preserved on film by her friend Christopher Nupen, the charismatic cellist continues to conquer hearts worldwide even today. This year marks the 20th anniversary of her death from multiple sclerosis. The illness forced her to retire from the concert platform in 1973, aged only 28.

Now, though, EMI – the company for which du Pré recorded – is bringing out a new CD of the same concerto performed by another young British female soloist, the 30-year-old Natalie Clein. The company is making quite a fuss about this release, declaring that it could be a defining interpretation that breathes new life into the work.

There's only one obvious similarity between these two cellists: they are both very gifted, beautiful, British women. And it's not remotely fair to judge a CD by its cover, let alone the merits of two performances that, musically, are like chalk and cheese. So can Clein really step into du Pré's shoes and capture a new generation of music-lovers in the way she did?

It's a tall order, because du Pré's fairy-tale history – meteoric stardom, marriage to the equally starry young Daniel Barenboim, and the tragedy of multiple sclerosis that struck her down in her prime – seemed epitomised, almost prophetically encapsulated, in the concerto's musical narrative. Tragedy lurks just under its surface from start to finish. Elgar wrote the concerto in 1918; it was among a number of masterpieces that he produced during and just after the First World War, and the depth of the cello's tone complements the composer's sense of introverted nostalgia to devastating effect.

The work is in four movements: a solemn, declamatory opening is followed by a lyrical first movement based on a consistent, undulating rhythm that seems to reflect the hilly landscapes that the composer loved – the Malvern Hills, where he grew up, but perhaps also the South Downs of Sussex, where he lived from 1917 to 1919. The second movement is an effervescent scherzo, but the third is the work's emotional heart; the atmosphere of loss shines, all-pervasive, through its arching phrases. The final movement returns to a striving poise akin to the first, but recollections of the intervening journey cast a new shade of emotion across the music's inner world.

What could have inspired this phenomenal piece? The emotional impact of the war years was vital: like Lawrence Binyon's poem "The Burning of the Leaves", the concerto constantly evokes a feeling that "the world that was ours is a world that is ours no more". A film released in New Zealand last year, *Elgar's Enigma*, directed by Annie Goldson, suggests that it may have been connected to a more private trauma: the death in action of the son of Elgar's first love, Helen Weaver, who had emigrated to New Zealand after her parents refused permission for the pair to marry.

Yet another film, *Elgar's Tenth Muse* (1996), stars James Fox as the elderly Elgar cherishing an infatuation for the Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Aranyi, who rebuffed his advances; and here Elgar's ghost seems to watch a lovely young cellist – in fact Clein – performing his Cello Concerto in an English cathedral. The enigma remains.

In a kind of spiritual branding, du Pré's image has fused inextricably with the concerto in audiences' imaginations – but critics have often questioned whether her interpretation was really in keeping with Elgar's intentions. Such extrovert passion, such extremity of expression, can seem out of kilter with the work's brooding, inward nature. The 1928 recording by Beatrice Harrison, under the baton of Elgar himself, rather proves the point. And the finest and most faithful contemporary recording is more likely to be the rhapsodic yet subtle performance by Steven Isserlis, probably today's greatest British cellist. Still, du Pré's Elgar casts a long shadow and any British cellist would find it hard to avoid.

How does Clein herself feel about the inevitable comparison? "The shadow is there, and so it should be," she says. "But that's out of my control. All I can control is my approach to the piece and my performance of it. It's impossible not to be influenced by a figure like du Pré and I think much of the criticism that is levelled at her is actually unfair. Her recording with Barbirolli is stunningly beautiful; but it's a moment of history that can't be repeated, and you shouldn't try to copy it."

Clein's performance of the Elgar is notably different. With excellent support from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic conducted by Vernon Handley, she offers a straightforward, touching, direct approach, with no hint of histrionics; if du Pré has influenced her, so have Harrison and Isserlis, probably more so. It's perhaps questionable whether this new CD can stand out from the crowd of existing Elgar recordings strongly enough to provide significant competition

for a personality the size of du Pré's. But Clein herself is the first to agree that going head to head with her towering predecessor isn't among her priorities. She has other aims.

"I'm passionate about reaching new, young audiences," she explains. "Some of my friends, who are very up-to-the-minute about theatre, art and literature, know nothing about classical music and only come to my concerts because they know me – yet when they come, they love it. In schools today, classical music has no role in the curriculum – it's possible to reach music A-level without having heard the word 'Beethoven'. But young people are more than capable of responding to classical music, given the right circumstances. Of course I'll be happy if people compare parts of my CD favourably with great performers of the past. Still, what would mean the most to me is if people say: 'I've never heard this music before and it has moved me beyond anything I could imagine.'"

Clein isn't a new du Pré – but frankly, she doesn't need to be, and nobody ever could be. She does have, though, the talent, image and approachability to reach out to, and grab, the new, young audience that this music desperately needs. If anyone can make a generation that has never seen du Pré fall in love with Elgar for the first time, it is she. More power to her expert elbow.

Natalie Clein's recording of the Elgar Cello Concerto is out on EMI Classics on 17 September

Natalie Clein

Du Pré, a strawberry-blonde sex-bomb, put across the Elgar Cello Concerto with passionate, all-consuming joie de vivre. She made her early recording of it, conducted by Sir John Barbirolli, when she was only 20 and she recorded it again later with her husband, Daniel Barenboim. Du Pré was larger-than-life with unmatched charisma, and her illness and death was a public tragedy

Jacqueline du Pré

Growing up in Bournemouth, Clein began to explore the Elgar Concerto when she was only 12 and performed it for the first time at 15. When she played it with the National Youth Orchestra in the final of the BBC Young Musician of the Year Competition in 1994, she enchanted the audience and won the prize. She has performed the concerto extensively since then, but has waited until now to record it. Clein may not have du Pré's super-charged extroversion, but she possesses a different kind of appeal: she's a combination of supermodel and girl-next-door, with a refreshingly approachable and immediate stage presence