

IN VITO VERITAS

Jessica Duchen examines the distinguished career and many musical partnerships of Gioconda de Vito, who celebrates her 80th birthday on the 22nd of this month

'I do not think I am a very good subject for an interview', Gioconda de Vito told me, 'because to me it is not important to say where I was born, how old I was when I began to play the violin and so on . . .'

The unworly tranquility of the setting of her home is echoed in the passionate yet peaceful expression of her gaze. The cottage, built in the nineteenth century next to a Hertfordshire stream, has belonged to the family of her husband, David Bicknell, for about sixty years. Bicknell, who before his retirement was senior record producer at EMI, recalls that the house was let during the war and that in 1951 he and his wife returned to live there. They were married in 1949, having met while working on recordings in London. At the end of the war recording equipment in Italy was primitive and the Italian artists engaged by EMI had to come to London to record. Before civilian airlines were operating again between England and Italy, he travelled to Rome in a military plane to renew contracts with Italian artists and to survey the new talent which had developed there during the war. He heard many reports filled with praise for Gioconda de Vito and tried unsuccessfully to contact her. Shortly afterwards, however, Gabriella Gatti and Vincenzo Ballezza, on their way to broadcast for Irish radio, stopped in London to record; at the last minute Gioconda de Vito decided to travel with them and on this trip made her first recordings.

De Vito retired completely in 1961 and has not played again since. She had made the decision to retire three years earlier when she felt, playing the Mendelssohn Concerto for Pope Pius XII, that she had reached the highest point of her career. On hearing the last recital of a great pianist she had been deeply upset because he seemed to have carried his career on far past his peak; her resolution was never to let her own end in that way. She does not miss the violin at all, happy to enjoy her retirement without the responsibilities of a performing or teaching career and taking a profound interest in the wildlife close to her home. The garden is plentifully furnished with feeding attractions for the birds, and many ducks pad about the lawn close to the house. David Bicknell mentioned that there has always been a pair of swans on their stream as long as he has lived there. The garden is also the haunt of squirrels, and a herd of deer from some nearby woods sometimes come down to graze there. Madame de Vito regards the animals as her friends and never tires of watching their activities.

The name "de Vito" in translation means the root of the vine. The de Vito family of Martina Franca, a small hillside town in southern Italy, had been associated with wine production for many generations. Gioconda was one of five children in a musical family; her sister became a pianist and her mother's brother was a professional violinist working in Germany. By the age of eight, she had already learned to play the mandoline, and, at her own request, was allowed to learn the violin in her free afternoons after morning school. The nearest to a violin teacher she could find was the leader of the municipal band, who knew nothing of the violin; however, he was a fine musician and gave her a sound background in music theory which she feels was very valuable. So she played the violin virtually untaught, aided by her knowledge of the similarly tuned mandoline, for about six months.

At this point her uncle heard her playing a concerto by de Bériot when he came to visit the family, and was astonished by her talent. He realised that she could not continue without proper tuition and subsequently taught her himself. She rapidly overcame the problems of eliminating the bad style which had resulted from her initial lack of teaching and at the age of eleven she went to the conservatoire at Pesaro to study with Remy Principe. She took the diploma in just two years and then carried on working alone to expand her repertoire. During her teens she performed the Tchaikovsky concerto in Rome, and the Bach double concerto with Remy Principe in Turin as well as concerts in the vicinity of Pesaro. At seventeen she was invited to become Professor of Violin at a newly founded conservatoire in Bari, a post she held for ten years while continuing her solo performing career within Italy.

The first International Violin Competition in Vienna was held in 1932. Gioconda de Vito won first prize, having been persuaded to enter by her sister, and Jan Kubelik came to the platform and kissed her hand after her performance of the Bach Chaconne. The competition was a springboard for the expansion of her career to an international level. Soon afterwards she left the Bari conservatoire to teach first in Palermo and then in Rome where she was appointed to a vacant professorship at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia with the help of Mussolini to whom she had been presented by Princess Caetani and who greatly admired her playing. However this appointment was not an un-mixed blessing. While living in Rome had obvious advantages, the academy allowed on-

ly thirty days per year for concert performances and in this time she was only able to tour Germany. Shortly afterwards war broke out and her career suffered a disastrous setback at what should have been some of the most crucial years of its development.

It was in 1948 that she made her London debut with Victor de Sabata and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, playing the Brahms concerto at the Albert Hall; she was recognized at once by audience and critics alike as one of the greatest artists of the time. The concert led to others in Britain and she remembers particularly concerts in the Edinburgh Festival and in the Festival of the Violin with Yehudi Menuhin and Isaac Stern. She also played with Menuhin in the first Bath Festival which they followed with a recital of violin duos at the Royal Festival Hall. At the Edinburgh Festival she performed the Beethoven Triple Concerto with Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and Enrico Mainardi with Furtwängler conducting and she recalls the differences in approach which erupted during the rehearsals: Mainardi was caught between the opposite extremes of de Vito's deeply warm romanticism and the icy precision of the pianist. The conflicts were settled by a resolution to leave the final decisions to Furtwängler.

Subsequently De Vito performed the Brahms Concerto with Furtwängler; he was very enthusiastic about her performance and persuaded her to perform the Mendelssohn as well, which she had to prepare in about three days. She enjoyed this collaboration very much, feeling a great musical affinity for Furtwängler; both were "classical yet romantic" in their musical approach and their ideas coincided well. She particularly liked to work with him because he did not talk about music but preferred to perform instinctively. 'I always found that the most sensitive musicians were those who did least talking and most playing. Music is an intangible art — no words can tell you how a Mozart concerto sounds . . .'

Each year the Italian Catholic Musicians give a concert for the Pope, enquiring beforehand what he would like to hear. Pope Pius XII made a particular request for Gioconda de Vito to play Brahms. It so happened that Furtwängler, broadcasting the "Ring" cycle, met David Bicknell on business and heard of the requested concert; he asked to play the piano part and they subsequently performed the Brahms G major Sonata at Castel Gandolfo. De Vito regards the meeting with the Pope and the long discussion she had with him about

religious matters as one of the most memorable moments of her life. She recalls that they were given permission to visit the vast private gardens next to the villa, which she greatly enjoyed. The following year she was again requested to play in the papal concert and performed the Mendelssohn Concerto which was broadcast throughout Italy. After this concert she received a letter from a member of the audience: he had come into the concert as an atheist but after hearing her performance of the *Andante* of the Mendelssohn he felt that he had been brought to believe in something superhuman. She felt this was the best recompense she could possibly have.

It was during this performance that she made her decision to retire. When the Pope came to congratulate her at the end she told him of this decision. He invited her to the Vatican a day or two later; during this audience he spoke to her of the duty of man to God, arguing that it was too early for her to end her career because she had no right to abandon the talent which God had given her. She remembers that she spent an entire hour with him discussing the matter and that her brother and sister, waiting for her outside, were afraid that she might have lost her way inside the Vatican. She had, however, made a firm decision and extended her career for only three more years after this.

One of the most extraordinary moments of her career occurred at the York Festival. She was to play the Vitali Chaconne in York Minister with the organist Francis Jackson. It was impossible for them to co-ordinate while she stood in the nave and he was up in the organ loft, and there was no room for her to stand next to the organ manuals; so Francis Jackson suggested that she should stand on top of the organ loft on the stone screen, the only practical solution they could find. They had not realized, however, quite how beautiful the resulting sound would be; the empty choir behind acted as a resonating chamber to the Stradivarius which David Bicknell describes as sounding like "a heavenly voice".

De Vito spoke warmly of several collaborations with pianists at different stages of her career. At first in Italy she had worked with her sister but when their mother became ill it was not possible for them to tour together. Her sister stayed at home, and Miss de Vito formed a rewarding partnership with Tito Aprea, who later became Senior Professor of Piano at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia. He was a fine pianist who she feels should have achieved greater recognition as a soloist; his career was also severely disrupted by the war. They had a very strong musical affinity, finding that in performances they would make spontaneous alterations to musical points together. Edwin Fischer greatly admired Aprea's musicianship. With Fischer she collaborated only once, in a recording of the first and third Brahms sonatas. The recordings were to be made almost without rehearsal but Fischer, anxious because they had not yet worked together, decided to visit her in Rome to rehearse before the recording sessions in London. David Bicknell in London received a postcard from Fischer after these rehearsals which said simply 'What a violinist!' Gioconda de Vito had tremendous



Gioconda de Vito, aged 25

admiration for Fischer as a great musician and a great mind, also possessing a very warm and charming personality. At the time of their recordings he was nearing the end of his career. She remembers that there was a two hour break in the recording session so that he could visit his London doctor. He returned extremely worried, saying that he had received very bad news of his health; indeed he was to die shortly afterwards.

Gioconda de Vito never performed in America; her first opportunity to go there was prevented by the outbreak of war. Later she had many offers of concerts but decided to decline, feeling, with her husband's sup-

port, that it was too late in her career to begin giving concerts in the United States especially when she had all the work she needed in Europe. She was also put off by some aspects of music-making in America; almost all important concerts were performed in duplicate, often on consecutive days, and she felt that this schedule would be too physically exhausting. When she and her husband visited New York, Sol Hurok saw them by chance in Carnegie Hall and tried to persuade her to perform, but she was adamant that she was on holiday.

She did, however, perform outside Europe, achieving much acclaim on a tour of Australia in 1957, giving concerts in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide in the first year of the arts festival in that city. On the way back to Europe she stopped to perform in India for the Bombay Madrigal Society. This organization was founded by Englishmen in the days of the Raj and was later continued and further developed by Indians. The society could not afford to bring artists out to India, so would find out which artists were travelling that way and would invite them to play en route from other tours. Thus they were able to engage the greatest international artists, including Elizabeth Schwarzkopf and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Gioconda de Vito was approached after a concert in the Albert Hall and invited to play for the Society, which had heard of her forthcoming trip to Australia. She performed a recital with an Indian pianist and received a fascinating insight into Indian life. She also played in Moscow and Leningrad where David Oistrakh had invited her to be on the jury of the first Tchaikovsky violin competition. She spoke of the magnificence of the Leningrad concert hall with its splendid col-

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Gioconda de Vito in rehearsal with Raphael Kubelic (ca.1958)

urns and candelabra. The Tsar had used this hall to give audience, while the artists' room had been his resting room which was preserved intact. A tour she remembers with particular pleasure is one of Israel in 1959, where she played the Beethoven concerto in Jerusalem and the Brahms in Tel Aviv. The arrangements there were ideal for artists; in Jerusalem she and the conductor Fernando Previtali (who was principal conductor of the R.A.I.) were each provided with a bungalow to stay in. The first concert was broadcast; David Bicknell was on a Cunard liner setting out for the United States at the time and was able to listen to his wife's performance on the ship's radio which received the broadcast remarkably clearly.

Gioconda de Vito's Stradivarius was the beautiful "Toscana" which she acquired from Hill's after the war. She had hoped to buy the "Alard" from them but this instrument could not be sold; Hill's only agreed to sell her the "Toscana" when she told them that it would be returning to its own country and would remain the property of the Italian government. The Ministry of Fine Arts offered to make an outright gift of the instrument to her but she preferred it to belong to the Accademia di Santa Cecilia where it remains today. The "Toscana" had remained in mint condition, without a single blemish despite its extraordinary history. It was made as one of a set of four violins for the Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1723 and was later bought by an Anglo-Irish aristocrat in whose family home in Ireland it remained for some years, in its original case. The mansion then burned down completely and the violin was one of only two items which were saved. Later it was recognized in London as a treasure and was taken to Vuillaume in Paris where its pedigree was confirmed. Besides this Stradivarius Gioconda de Vito was loaned another by a Hungarian collector named Kiss who admired her tremendously and

begged her to play his instrument; this violin was less beautiful than the "Toscana" but was still an excellent playing instrument. She also owned a Gagliano which she sold to a collector in Milan on her retirement.

Gioconda de Vito's choice of repertoire excluded most modern music as she felt that she did not understand it or love it; she names Bach as her greatest favourite along with the Brahms concerto and also felt the Italian classical repertoire to be very important. She played few pieces of the technically-based showpiece repertoire in the latter part of her career but mentions the Paganini Caprices for their beauty.

De Vito is a deeply religious person who has never allowed herself to be diverted from her high personal standards by ambition or success. Her parents always told her that 'the most important thing in life is to be good,' and she has always upheld this, happiest that in her long teaching she was able to gain influence over the lives as well as the talents of her students and help them to form similarly high standards. She is delighted that many of her students still write to her regularly. Her playing closely reflects her personality, being intensely expressive and romantic but controlled with elegant classical restraint.

There was one single occasion since her retirement when Gioconda de Vito nearly played a violin again. On holiday in the Greek Islands she and her husband quite unexpectedly encountered Yehudi Menuhin on a beach and found themselves whisked back to his villa where he hoped to play a duet with her. But it turned out that he had not brought an extra violin, so they were unable to play after all. She is happy and serene in her exquisite Hertfordshire home and it remains only to congratulate her on her eightieth birthday and to thank her for the joy and inspiration which her playing has brought to all who have heard her concerts and recordings.