

Short article by the 'Agony Aunt Alice'

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by the cellist – writer Alice McVeigh

**"On cello quartets, satanic dances and cricket"
with Classical Music Agony Aunt ALICE McVEIGH**

Dear Alice,

I believe you know David Johnstone, the principal cellist of the Navarra orchestra Pablo Sarasate of Spain. I've heard that he is also a composer. Do you know his compositions at all?

A C, London

Dear A,

Well, to be honest, David and I go way back-back to the early 80s, when, along with the estimable Justin Pearson and the modest Bob Dent, we formed a cello quartet. It was a very amusing cello quartet, for several reasons :

The first was because Justin, David and I all (ever-so-politely!!!) struggled to be awarded the cello 1 part in every piece, while Bob (a genuinely modest fellow, and as capable of leading as the rest of us) kept rushing to be stuck at cello 4.

The second reason was because, in a rash and youthful moment, I dashed off a brochure with our tape and tried to get us background work, like a string quartet. The only really positive response we got was from an agency whose female owner was married to someone who ran a funeral home. She said that (and I paraphrase here) while she could personally imagine nothing more lugubrious than the sonorous tone of four cellos, she was convinced that her husband had a market for it.

The third reason was because David, owner of most of the cello quartet music and the majority of the sheer unbridled enthusiasm, went off to lead the Spanish cello section you mention, leaving us each to paddle our own canoe (though, oddly enough, none of our canoes were to feature cello quartets -- at least, not so far as I am aware).

David, whose exuberant nature is well-known, has never completely lost touch with any of us. Every Christmas we would hear from him: and often his missives mentioned a performance of one of his works for string orchestra, for solo cello or for chamber music. I thought his light, background music string quartets excellent, and told him so, but still never expected to receive, out of nowhere, a handwritten note saying that, in memory of our long and happy association, he proposed to dedicate one of his Virtuoso Concert Pieces for Solo Cello (*JM 22SC*) to me.

Honoured as I was, however, I had to think long and hard about it, because the Virtuoso Concert Piece he proposed to shove my name on was his *Satanic Dance*. Now I am not normally overly fussy about my Christianity, but, of all the titles of all the pieces that I would most like to have bear my name, anything shared with Satan is not one of them. So, in the end, I wrote to David, saying how honoured I felt but that I felt obliged to turn him down, so that my esteemed sister would continue to speak to me, if for no other reason.

David wrote back, promising to dedicate one of his other Virtuoso pieces to me, and I am currently gazing at the 'Scherzo' he has had published, dedicated to myself, and thinking what a cool and clever little piece it is. All of the pieces are playable yet playful (at least, for us Virtuosi!!!!) yet the four beats alternating with three seems peculiarly satisfying to me, along with the clever little accents and brilliantly poised double-stops (that sound so hard, yet feel so easy, so at one with the cello sound is David). I even showed it to my husband, notoriously a hard man to please and a Professor of Music at the University of London, and he said, 'Gosh, that IS really good, isn't it? Well done, that man'.

(Having said which, the *Satanic Dance* DOES look kind of fun ...)
Alice