

# DIANA POULTON

April 18, 1903 - December 15, 1995

## An Appreciation of Her Life

by Donna Curry

The voice on the phone was saying, "Donna, dear, I can't come. The U.S. Consulate refused to give me a visa." Not only had they refused her a visa, but the clerks rejecting Diana Poulton's visa request had also been genuinely rude. Diana related the entire experience she had just had at the U.S. Consulate in London. In shock, I replied that one way or another we would see that she was granted the visa to travel to California for her special reunion with Suzanne Bloch. The event was *The 1974 American Lute Seminar and Master Class* presented by *American Lute Seminars, Inc.* Diana and Suzanne would be together for the first time in 35 or more years. People were due to start arriving in four days time from all over the USA and several other countries to meet and study with these two great women and share in their reunion.

We set about informing the U.S. Government just *who* the Consulate in London was treating so rudely, and of the serious repercussions should Mrs. Poulton not be allowed to fulfill her engagement here. Following initial telegrams I called our two California U.S. Senators plus our Congressman who told me with whom to speak at the State Department. All were impressed and very helpful. Both Senators, the Congressman, and important members of the State Department wired and called the U.S. Consulate in London. Diana received a very polite phone call from the Consulate who asked her kindly to return. The "red carpet" was rolled out. Where her first visit culminated in rude treatment after standing in line two or three hours, this second was the opposite. A receptionist met her, offered her seating, and called upstairs. The Consulate General himself came downstairs, greeted her, escorted her to his office, offered her tea, filled out the forms for her, issued the visa and treated her with the utmost courtesy and respect. When she was home, she called again, related this remarkable turn of events and asked, "Whatever *did* you do?"

The stories of Diana and Suzanne together in 1934/35 and 1974 could fill lots of pages, and I would like to tell them to you at another time. Right now let me focus on Diana.

At the age of 71, this was Diana Poulton's first, and only, visit to the United States. Her major study, *John Dowland*, had been published in 1972. Only two or three months following the 1974 ALS Lute Seminar and Master Class *The Collected Lute Music of John Dowland* (Diana Poulton with Basil Lam) was finally published. Naturally a focus of Diana's teaching that summer was on John Dowland and his works, though students quickly realized there was far more to Diana Poulton than John Dowland.

Diana was born Edith Eleanor Diana Chloe

Kibblewhite, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1903, Storrington, Sussex, England. It was about the age of 15 that Diana first heard the lute. Diana's mother, Mrs. Ethel Kibblewhite, met and became acquainted with Arnold and Mabel Dolmetsch during the First World War. During the time just following the end of the War, Diana and her mother attended Arnold Dolmetsch's concerts at the Hall of the Artworkers' Guild in London, where they heard a variety of instruments and music. Mr. & Mrs. Dolmetsch would sometimes visit Diana's family in London, and Arnold Dolmetsch would occasionally bring his lute. With a little enticement he would play for them. Arnold Dolmetsch was at this time about 60 years of age. He spent an enormous amount of time restoring and making early instruments and reviving music for keyboard instruments, viols, recorders and lutes. It is understandable that he did not have great technical facility upon the lute, but Diana related that when he played pieces



*Diana Poulton and Ian Harwood in 1969 at York University*

within his capabilities he played with an extraordinarily beautiful tone and musical instinct that completely captivated her.

After Diana expressed her desire to learn the lute, it took some time to find an acceptable and affordable lute. Mrs. Kibblewhite, while not actually a player of the lute, had copied a number of pieces from the British Museum and the University Library, Cambridge. She showed Diana how to read tablature. Diana then worked at learning the lute by herself, while attending the Slade School of Fine Art during the period of 1919-23. It was there she met fellow student Thomas Poulton, whom she said greatly encouraged her in learning the lute. Though he also became interested in early music, he entered the profession of commercial art and illustration, keeping music as an avocation. They were married in 1923.

Diana told us that when she felt she had acquired enough facility on the lute, around 1922, she decided to ask to study with Arnold Dolmetsch. About the age of 19 she began visiting Haslemere, Surrey for lessons. Dolmetsch did not possess the natural aptitudes of a good teacher. His notorious impatience and shouting had the very sensitive Diana in tears by the end of nearly every lesson. Around 1925 she could stand it no longer and gave up, not playing at all for perhaps six months. Rudolph Dolmetsch, the oldest of Mabel and Arnold Dolmetsch's children, strongly encouraged her not to give up the lute. He pointed out that his father had learned what he knew about lute technique and playing from reading books in the British Museum and she could do the same. That was Diana's entry into research. There she learned Arnold Dolmetsch had based his technique on that of Thomas Mace. She delved further back and discovered Adrian le Roy, Thomas Robinson, Jean-Baptiste Besard's "Necessary Observations" in *Variete of Lute Lessons*, and others. She made considerable progress and began performing concerts with Rudolph and Millicent, his wife, who played bass viol.

Diana made her first BBC broadcast in 1926 at the invitation of Julian Herbage, BBC Music Department. Eventually Diana performed in around 400 broadcasts, bringing lute music to listeners who otherwise would never have heard the lute. Diana and well-known singer John Goss recorded what is likely the very first recording of lute songs for *His Masters Voice*. Through Goss Diana met Peter Warlock who, though researching and editing lute songs for voice & pianoforte publications, had never heard a lute until Diana played for him. He was so pleased he gave her approximately 300 copies of lute songs, with their tablature, which he and Philip Wilson had copied in pencil at the British Museum. This was a true treasure since hand copying from original sources was the only way to get them.

Gradually, increasing work as a lutenist forced Diana's painting to second place in importance, and eventually performing work took over completely. She performed solo and in ensemble in Shakespeare's plays for radio broadcasts, at Stratford-upon-Avon, the Old Vic, and in the West End of London. Arnold Dolmetsch, upon hearing her play for the first time in five years,

invited her to play in all the Haslemere Festivals, as well as the London concerts. From the moment he accepted her, Diana said he was completely kind and did all he could to help her. Diana has always expressed her gratefulness for the enormous amount Dolmetsch taught her about early music. She told of a particularly touching episode when Dolmetsch gave her a vihuela he had built immediately after she had played it in a Festival concert. Giving her the instrument, he told her that he would never be able to play it as well as she. That was the beginning of her interest in and love for Spanish music. There is not space in this article to tell more of the Haslemere days and the many first performances of lute music in the 20th Century. In this same issue of the *LSA Quarterly*, however, you can read of the adventures of Suzanne Bloch and Diana, together at Haslemere, in Suzanne's own words.

Most today have been unaware of the young Diana's extensive and successful performing career. In addition to Haslemere and her work with the BBC, she was very busy giving a great many concerts and recitals all over Great Britain. Reviews of those performances are glowing. Here is one example from distinguished *Sunday Times* music critic, Hubert Foss, following a recital at the Victoria and Albert Museum:

*What a musician versed in the technique could do ... was beheld in the Fantasia of John Dowland -- a perfect little masterpiece. Miss Poulton's skill quite transcends mere virtuosity. Her lute yielded a quality (or rather several qualities) of tone, as round and full as its native refinement would permit; and out of them she spun the golden music as if newly minted. She accompanied the singer of the occasion delectably.*

During the 1930's Diana seriously began collecting Dowland's lute works, and her interest in him and the period in which he lived increased almost to the point of obsession. Engag-

ing in research was not an easy proposition before microfilm, photocopies, and reference books citing locations of MSS and first editions. Existence and location of music had to be found in library catalogs when obtainable. Copying had to be by hand in pencil. If music abroad were needed, it meant traveling there, ordering expensive photographs, or finding a local friend who would copy it. Diana's hand copied music, books, documents, etc., filled stacks of notebooks. During WWII she, like everyone else, had to do other work, but still she was able to broadcast frequently for the BBC, and pursue her interest in Dowland. She put together programs of Dowland's music and Elizabethan poetry and immersed herself in studies of 16th century life, thought, and Elizabethan literature.

With the end of the War Diana's performing and lecture schedule again became very full. Concerts and recitals, including a lute and voice working partnership with Ren-Soames lasting many years, continued increasing along with the praise of music critics. One highlight, of many, was being asked by well known Shakespearean actor Robert Atkins to play in a masque presented before Queen Elizabeth II. After the performance celebrating the 1956 opening of Gray's Inn Hall, which had been rebuilt after its destruction in the war, Diana was presented to the Queen. This also led to Diana being asked by Robert Atkins to take charge of the music for his summer productions of Shakespeare in the Open Air Theatre in Regent's Park, which she did until his retirement.

Other professional lute players began to appear after WWII: Walter Gerwig in Germany in the late '40s; and in England in the early '50s, Desmond Dupr~ and Julian Bream, both of whom became Diana's valued friends. Ian Harwood came to Diana for lessons. Upon

seeing and hearing the difference between historical instruments and the heavy German lutes then being built, he became interested in building copies of historical lutes. He became the first since Arnold Dolmetsch to return to authentic lute building. Interest in the lute grew at a surprising rate, and in 1956 Ian Harwood suggested to Diana they begin a lute society. The Lute Society was founded that year by Diana Poulton and Ian Harwood with Diana as Chairman; Ian as Secretary; and Richard Newton, a fine scholar of English Lute Music, as Editor of the Journal. The Lute Society is the first of the lute societies and stimulated the founding of many other lute societies around the world. The Lute Society held its first Summer School in 1967 and it was at the third one at York University in 1969 (I was invited to lead the ensemble class) I met Diana. Diana remained personally involved with The Lute Society until advanced age forced her to a more quiet role, but she remained President by the wish of the membership until her recent death.

The importance of research on the lute and its music grew impressively. In 1957 Diana attended the *colloque* in Paris, sponsored by the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*, returning on several occasions to play for Mme. Thibaut de Chambure. Around this time Diana realized that if she were to write a book on Dowland she would have to devote more time to research, which would take away her practice time. The number of students coming to her was also growing, and as research and teaching began to affect her standard of playing she decided to withdraw from performing. Thus began the part of Diana Poulton's life which most lutenists today are familiar with: her life as researcher, writer, teacher.



*The Chorus Line: Gordon Herritt, Suzanne Bloch, Sandro Zanetti (a Swiss luthier), Diana Poulton and Donna Curry 1974, at the American Lute Seminars, Carmel Valley, CA. Photos courtesy Donna Curry.*

The introduction of microfilm made research much easier. It made it possible to procure copies in foreign libraries of important books and MSS. While Diana was working on the book about Dowland and his works, she and Basil Lam were also working on *The Collected Lute Music of John Dowland* which got finished first. Curiously, in the end it was *John Dowland* which got published first. Diana spent years on the research. She had to learn to read the old styles of hand writing in order to go through the endless letters and public, parish, university and court records to trace the facts of Dowland's life, as well as letters and MSS about the music. To become fluent in reading the handwritten documents takes a lot of time. Diana was immersed so deeply in this for so long I remember her laughing and telling me how she caught herself writing dates like "1584" on her own correspondence, etc.

Upon completion of these two books, Faber gave her contracts for other publications. She also was asked to write articles on 50 English lutenist composers, the article on the vihuela, and to collaborate with Ian Harwood on the article about the lute for *The New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Additionally during these years, she continued to research, write and publish journal articles on continental as well as English music, composers, and technique.

In 1968 Diana was appointed the first Professor for the Lute at the Royal College of Music, London. Two years later they conferred on her the degree of Hon. R.C.M. She retired from that position in 1979. She certainly did not retire, however, for materials and MSS that had not been either available or discovered before publication of the Dowland books had made their appearance. Diana prepared second editions of both books. The Second Edition of *The Collected Lute Music of John Dowland* was published in 1978, just prior to her retiring from The Royal College, and the Second Edition of *John Dowland* was published in 1982.

Diana was hoping that in her eighties she would get to retire to her cottage in Heyshott, but her commitments to Faber and Schott kept her in London doing research for publications. She wrote to me, "It is a terrible nuisance being old. I get tired and can't work the long hours that I used to, so it takes me much longer to get through everything." Her eyes were bothering her and she had to have a tumor "cut out of her guts." But, she finished the very important *Tutor for Renaissance Lute*, published in 1991, before finally being forced physically to retire.

There has been no other one person in the 20th century lute world who has reached so many people worldwide through performing, scholarship and teaching. I did not study with Diana in the formal sense of the word, but I learned so much from Diana that I have to consider myself her pupil. I am, indeed, grateful for her friendship, which has been an important part of my life. She continues to be alive in my heart and memory.

Diana wrote in 1975, "Now at the age of 72, what has the lute meant to me all my life? I think at first I regarded it more as a delightful relaxation after the more serious work of the day was done. Gradually this

attitude changed and it became to me a deep spiritual refuge. The grace of its appearance, the quiet beauty of its sound and the intellectual depth of its music seemed to offer an experience in complete contrast to the ever increasing materialism of present day society with the greed, noise and violence which surrounds us on all sides. Although it has been the means by which I have earned my living, I do not think financial gain has ever been the main incentive in my work since a very large amount of it has been done without payment of any kind."

Diana died peacefully at the age of 92, at 2:30am, December 15, 1995, in Heyshott, West Sussex, her home since 1927. Diana spent her last few years at her cottage and with her daughter and son-in-law, Celia and Douglas Clayton, in Heyshott. Mr. and Mrs. Clayton plan a commemoration service of Diana's life and work on or near her birthday, April 18, 1996 in Heyshott.

NOTE: While writing this *Appreciation* I referred to correspondence, personal notes, tape recordings, memories, photographs, American Lute Seminars records, and an unpublished memoir by Diana Poulton which her daughter, Celia Clayton, supplied to me along with other biographical information. An edited and less complete version of this memoir was printed in *The Journal of the Lute Society*, Vol. XXXIII, 1993.