

The Cellist

CHOREOGRAPHY CATHY MARSTON

SCENARIO CATHY MARSTON AND EDWARD KEMP

MUSIC PHILIP FEENEY

AFTER EDWARD ELGAR, LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN,
GABRIEL FAURÉ, FELIX MENDELSSOHN, ALFREDO PIATTI,
SERGE RACHMANINOFF AND FRANZ SCHUBERT

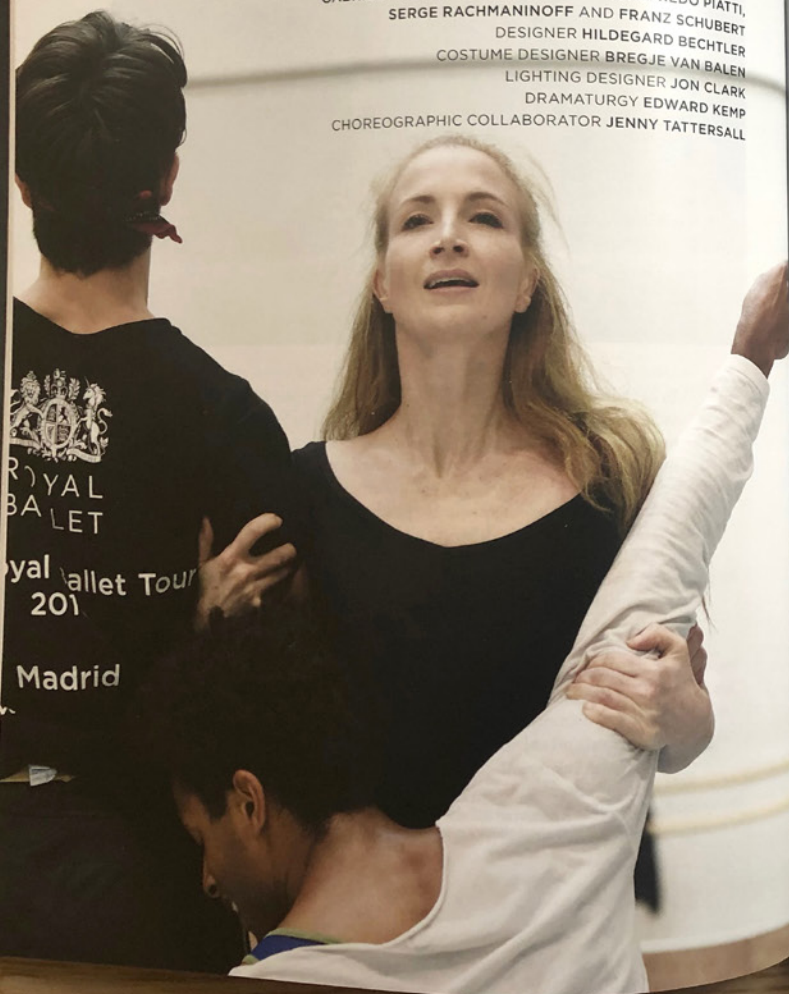
DESIGNER HILDEGARD BECHTLER

COSTUME DESIGNER BREGJE VAN BALEN

LIGHTING DESIGNER JON CLARK

DRAMATURGY EDWARD KEMP

CHOREOGRAPHIC COLLABORATOR JENNY TATTERSALL



The instrument lies unplayed.

Awoken by echoes of past performances,
the instrument is inspired to tell the story of a great player.

How a little girl heard the sound of the cello and fell in love
with it.

How her mother started to teach her, until her abundant talent far
outgrew her mother's teaching.

How a new teacher opened the way to a community of peerless
music-makers,

where she met a conductor,
who became her colleague and soulmate: their love impelled by
music.

How they became celebrities, their fame amplified by many
recordings.

How they married and embarked upon a whirlwind circuit of
touring and concerts.

Until the cellist found herself beginning to flag, unable to keep up
and the couple's relationship started to unravel.

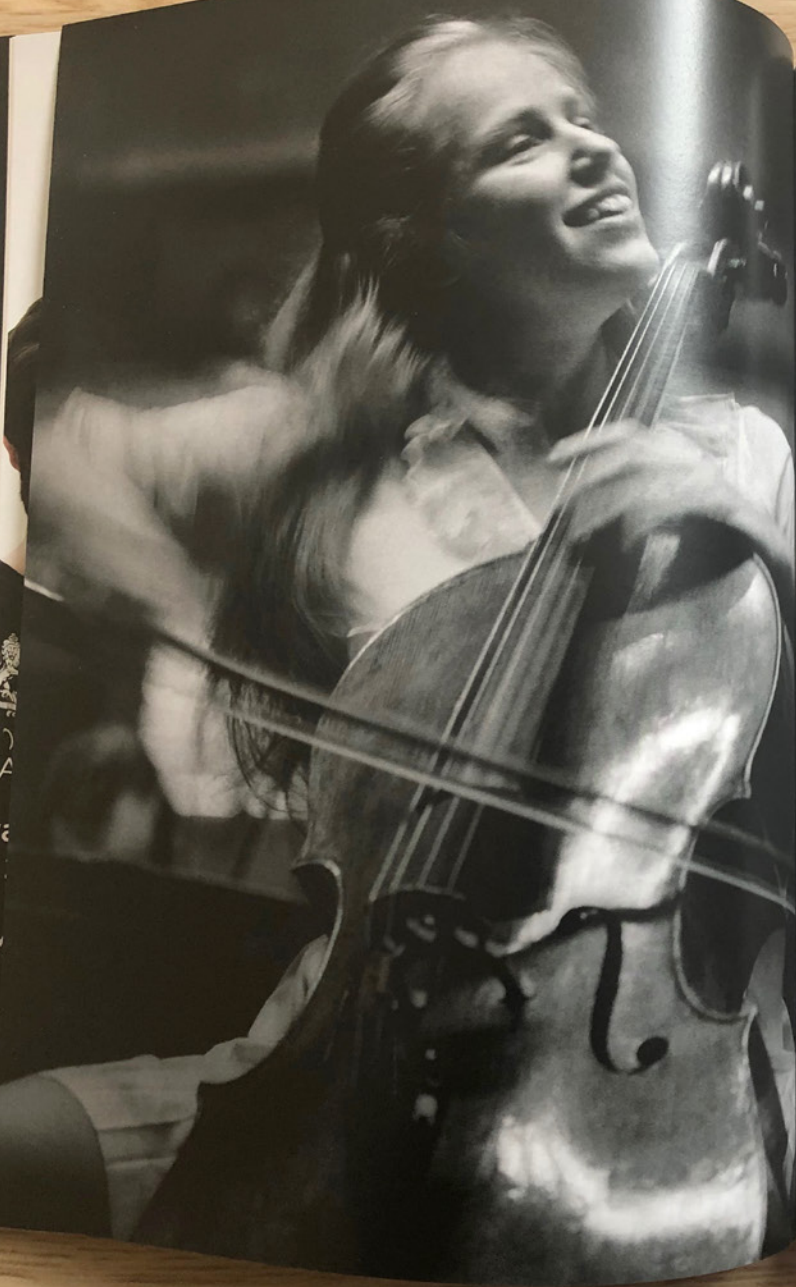
Because the cellist was battling more than tiredness: she was sick,
an illness that would destroy her nerves, cut short her career and
in the end her life.

How then the cellist fought to keep playing
and when she could fight no more, shut away the instrument and
fell silent.

How she lost her voice, but inspires still: the music she made
resonating onward,
etched in the memories of those who heard her and the
recordings she left behind.

Edward Kemp

Matthew Ball, Lauren Cuthbertson and Marcelino Sambé in
rehearsal for *The Cellist* ©2020 ROH. Photographed by Clare Park



'O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?'

William Butler Yeats, 'Among School Children'

Jacqueline du Pré at Abbey Road Studios, 1967
©Godfrey MacDominic/Bridgeman Images

Memory and Resonance

Judith Mackrell

Cathy Marston has been fearlessly imaginative in the sources she has chosen for her ballets. Her preferred literary texts – Ibsen's *Ghosts* or Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* – explore stories and characters more confrontational than the usual tried and trusted classics, her heroines tend to be exceptional women – Queen Victoria, Clara Schumann or Anna Goldi, the last person in Europe to be tried and executed for being a witch. But there have been moments when Marston has wondered if her latest subject, Jacqueline du Pré might be 'a little left field' even for her. It's testing enough to condense the messy complicated reality of somebody's life into a one-act ballet, even more so when that reality revolves around a woman's relationship with her cello.

Yet it was the challenge of giving choreographic form to a cello that directly interested Marston. 'The cello is the most human of all the instruments; it looks like a person, it sounds like one and you hold it like one', and she first realized its potential when she was creating a version of *Dangerous Liaisons* for the Royal Danish Ballet two years ago. One short scene revolved around a music lesson and, keen to avoid a clutter of unnecessary props, Marston experimented with having the cello actually embodied by a male dancer. 'It happened really easily', she recalls. 'As soon as I'd established what was happening I could shift the choreography into something more poetic. In fact it worked so well that I kept the idea of a cello ballet lodged in my head.'

That idea moved to the forefront when Marston's sister, a drama teacher with whom she frequently discusses her work, suggested Du Pré as a possible subject. The trajectory of the cellist's career has a naturally dramatic shape: the prodigiousness of her early success coupled with the glamour of her marriage to conductor Daniel Barenboim combined to make Du Pré a celebrity. Yet by the age of 28, when the onset of multiple sclerosis stole her genius away, her life became the stuff of tragedy. 'Jackie's story is so full of emotion, so full of love and loss', Marston muses; and what fascinates her is that the focus of that love and loss was principally a wooden instrument, her Stradivarius cello. 'I thought that would be such an interesting relationship to imagine.'

Marston has long preferred to avoid the obvious in her story telling. The six years she spent as artistic director with Bern Ballett brought her into contact with the German tradition of *Regietheater* – an anti-naturalistic approach to theatre-making in which 'the director, rather than the playwright, is god'. Although she has diligently researched the detail of Du Pré's life, reading all three biographies and interviewing those who knew her, Marston was not interested in making a 'historical bio ballet'. Rather she wanted to slant her material towards fantasy, distilling the facts of Du Pré's story down to imaginative essentials, and even more radically casting her cello as the protagonist through whom the story is told.

'Once I'd imagined the cello as human, performed by a dancer, it was natural to give it emotions. Jackie's Stradivarius was very old, very beautiful and I imagined how he must have felt about all those who had played him. The ballet is as much about how the cello



Marcelino Sambé and Lauren Cuthbertson
©2020 ROH. Photographed by Asya Verzhbinsky

remembers Jackie as it is about her. There is only one *pas de deux* in which he doesn't feature, and that's just after Jackie and Daniel are married – their big love duet. Otherwise he's not just the instrument she plays, he's the spirit of her music and the embodiment of her gift. He's also the character who feels the loss of her gift most acutely when her fingers are becoming too numb to play and she rejects him.'

With music so crucial a part of the ballet, Marston felt it was more than usually imperative to get her score exactly right. The Elgar Cello Concerto, so closely associated with Du Pré, was never an option. 'I couldn't have fitted a narrative into it', she says, and for a while she considered commissioning a new score 'with bits of the Elgar seeded into it'. But Marston then realized how important it was for the audience to hear Du Pré's repertory directly so she approached the composer Philip Feeney to weave together extracts of Rachmaninoff, Fauré, Mendelssohn, Beethoven and Elgar into an arrangement with his own music.

Marston worked with Feeney to identify which sections of the repertory would serve her narrative best. From her set designer, Hildegard Bechtler, she says she asked for a 'memory space' in which each location would help serve the narrative, whether it be a concert hall, dressing room or hospital ward – this could be evoked without the need for a cumbersomely literal set. Bechtler found her inspiration in a photograph that was taken of the inside of a cello. 'It was really beautiful', says Marston, 'with these rough curves and light coming through the f-holes', and Bechtler's resulting set, with three curving walls that could be pivoted to suggest different rooms, feels perfect to her – 'very feminine, very full of echoes and resonances.'

Marston's early decision to aim for poetic essence rather than naturalism proved to be liberating, too, when it came to casting. She had initially imagined Du Pré's Stradivarius as an elegant, mature, rather melancholic character – 'my image was the actor Jeremy Irons', she laughs, 'who does weathered nobility so well'. Yet a 'research rehearsal' with Marcelino Sambé, in which the two of them experimented with some vocabulary made Marston realise that Sambé was her perfect dancer. Whilst a rubber ball of energy – more effervescent than elegiac – Sambé moved with exactly the lyricism, musicality and



Matthew Ball, Lauren Cuthbertson and Marcelino Sambé ©2020 ROH. Photographed by Gavin Smart

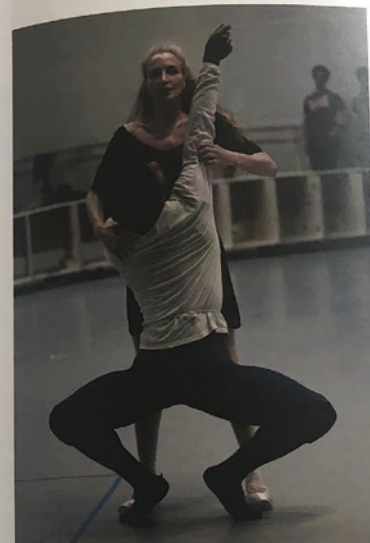
the roles was obviously Du Pré, as the cellist evolves from prodigy to invalid. It was a gift, Marston says, to choreograph her actual playing. 'Jackie's style was so free and expansive: there's that line from Yeats – "Oh body swaying, oh brightening glance" – that is absolutely her.' The gawkiness of Du Pré's offstage presence was more testing though: 'It's hard to do heavy-footed in pointe shoes.' Marston says that she and Cuthbertson played around with some tap dance moves in their attempt to introduce an off-kilter quirkiness into the movement – 'little playful rhythmic things, a shuffle into a *posé* turn that helped to give us our Jackie'.

Hardest of all was finding a language adequate to the expression of Du Pré's illness, one that would articulate a state of physical dysfunction, without veering into caricature. It helped Marston to create links to the way Du Pré had moved before she developed MS. 'I thought the trembling in her hand was very like her vibrato, and her loss of physical control towards the end, when she had to be supported to be fed her meals, was very like the way she used to sway when she played.' Marston also had to layer emotional

fluidity she needed. 'The music just comes out of his dancing, it's unstoppable' she says, 'and yet his instincts for the dramatic layering of this part are also spot on'.

By the same logic, she also cast Du Pré and Barenboim against physical type. 'Jackie was a tall woman, Amazonian, a bit gawky and heavy footed, and I'd always thought that it was very specific to her relationship with Daniel that he was much shorter than her.' Yet Marston had an inkling that Lauren Cuthbertson, although a slip of a dancer, would be dramatically perfect for Du Pré – 'She is so English, so musical and such a beautiful actress'. When she put Cuthbertson together with Matthew Ball in the studio, it was just as clear to her that despite Ball being too tall for Barenboim, the chemistry between the dancers was too wonderful to squander. It came to her, too, that everything she had seen of the conductor suggested a man of enormous presence. 'Daniel's talent, his personality, his charisma and his drive were huge.'

Although Marston always creates a very structured story board for each work, she evolves the detail of her dance language with her dancers. The most challenging of



Lauren Cuthbertson and Marcelino Sambé ©2020 ROH. Photographed by Asya Verzhbinsky

symptoms into her choreographing of the MS scenes – the initial, tormenting uncertainty when Du Pré had no idea why her body was betraying her. She drew on her own mother's experience of living with the illness, imagining Du Pré's struggle through the roller coaster periods of despair and optimism as the disease oscillated between periods of 'relapse and remission'.

Marston is acutely aware of the sensitivity of her material especially since so many of those who knew and cared for Du Pré are still alive. 'I think there are people who will want to love this ballet but are also nervous about it', she admits, and while Barenboim gave his blessing, there are others she knows, who are suspending judgement until they've seen the finished work. But Marston adds, 'I've learned to dare and to trust my instincts. If I've got a good reason for telling a story, I think there's a good chance it will work.' She also regards the Royal Ballet commission as exactly the right context to tell this particular story. It is a kind of homecoming for the choreographer herself, for although she has worked with some of the world's major classical

companies, this is her first creation for the Royal Opera House Main Stage: 'It's been over twenty-five years since I left The Royal Ballet School', she says 'and over twenty-five years since I've wanted to make a work here.' But Marston also likes to think it is a homecoming of sorts for Du Pré: 'Jackie had a history with this house, she came here when she was ill. Most of the audience in this building know all about her.' Marston hopes too that she will be reaching others less familiar with Du Pré. 'Jackie was an inspiration in her lifetime, and her music and her legacy are still so important to the world. I think her story will have a real resonance.'

Judith Mackrell was chief dance critic of *The Guardian* until June 2018 but continues to write occasional pieces for the paper. She also broadcasts widely on the arts and is author of several critically acclaimed biographies.



Opposite, artists of The Royal Ballet; above, Lauren Cuthbertson and Matthew Ball ©2020 ROH.
 Photographed by Asya Verzhbinsky; overleaf, clockwise from top left, Calvin Richardson and Beatriz
 Stix-Brunell; Christina Arestis and Thomas Whitehead; Gary Avis, Calvin Richardson and Beatriz
 Stix-Brunell; Anna Rose O'Sullivan, Kristen McNally and Lauren Cuthbertson ©2020 ROH.
 Photographed by Clare Park





Calvin Richardson, Cesar Corrales and
Beatriz Stix-Brunell ©2020 ROH. Photographed
by Rachel Hollings

Cathy Marston

Maggie Foyer

Cathy Marston, choreographer, artistic director and Clore Cultural Leadership Fellow, is in many respects a very British product. She grew up in Cambridge with English-teacher parents and trained at The Royal Ballet Upper School where she was awarded the coveted Ursula Moreton Choreographic prize. Her choreographic signature is narrative, a genre that has never lost its popularity in Britain. In today's world, where women choreographers are promoted, she might well have been taken into the Company to be nurtured as a choreographer, but this was 1994 and Marston had to take a more circuitous route.



©Clore Park

Her works are now in the repertoire of major companies including American Ballet Theatre, Royal Danish Ballet and San Francisco Ballet, bringing her to world attention, but those who followed Deborah Bull's ROH2 programme will already know her work well. Between 2000 and 2006 she was Associate Artist of the Royal Opera House and produced 13 short works at the Clore and Linbury Theatre, including the critically acclaimed *Ghosts* (2005), from Ibsen's play and *before the tempest... after the storm* (2004) after Shakespeare. In addition, she created ballets for vocational schools and site-specific projects, subsequently launching her own charitable company, The Cathy Marston Project, which continues to nurture her work and professional development.

Marston started her professional career as a dancer in Zürich Ballet under director Bernd Bienert, who had noted her choreographic talents. Here she came into contact with dancers who had worked throughout Europe and with major choreographers whose works were little known in Britain.

Later, renewing her connection with Switzerland, she directed Bern Ballett from 2007 to 2013, which proved a seminal period. Here she faced an audience who felt stories were old fashioned, but Marston sensed that it was time for a revival of narrative and continued to pursue this line. Through open rehearsals, where she invited audiences to watch the company at work and see the choreographic process, she achieved a transformation. There were other factors in play. Over this period, she was in contact with German theatre and dramaturgs and noted how directors treated text as creative material rather than something cast in stone. This influenced her to become bolder in dealing with texts and musical choices.



Victoria Sibson as Bertha Mason and Javier Torres as Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (Northern Ballet) ©Emma Kauldhar

What distinguishes Marston style is the way she reshapes stories to the postmodern era. Her presentation of the subject is open-ended rather than bordered, multi-focal rather than traditionally centred, for instance in *Victoria* (2019, Northern Ballet). The form in which she chooses to represent a character emerges from within and is at times only loosely tethered to the sequential plot. She has found unique ways to express the gist of the story in expressionistic language, for example the theme of coal in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, (2018, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens) or the snowy landscape portrayed by dancers in *Snowblind*, based on Edith Wharton's novella, (2018, San Francisco Ballet).

Working with Ballet Black's small ensemble of seven dancers, the company's limited resources required further innovation. Her preference for simple sets, flexible spaces and dispensing with props saw the dancers imaginatively creating domesticity by representing a wash basin, a mirror and even an alarm clock. It worked and *The Suit* won the National Dance Award for Best Classical Choreography in 2018.

The stories may be classics – for example *Jane Eyre* (2016, Northern Ballet/ABT/Joffrey Ballet), *Dangerous Liaisons* (2017, Royal Danish Ballet) or a 20th-century African voice as in Can Themba's *The Suit* (2018, Ballet Black) – but in each she pinpoints the heart of the narrative and expresses this in movement shaped by emotional intention. With a strong background in both ballet and contemporary techniques, she has a rich vocabulary to draw on, moving with confidence between pointe or floor work, strength-based lifts or counterbalance in partnering.



Isabela Coracy and Mthuthuzeli November in *The Suit* (Ballet Black) ©Bill Cooper

Choreographers, uniquely among creative artists, work with living material. Marston's creative process is inherently collaborative, from preparation with dramaturgs, composers and designers to choreographing with performers in the studio. She has a chosen list of long-term collaborators including Jenny Tattersall, Edward Kemp and Philip Feeney who are part of the team behind *The Cellist*, but she also seeks new stimulation by regularly inviting unfamiliar artists to work with her.

The Cellist is a significant moment for Marston. 'Main Stage at The Royal Opera House is what I wanted 25 years ago! On the other hand, I feel very prepared now, I am established in my own style and I know who I am as an artist.' She is a choreographer who is a consummate master of her craft, able to deliver a full-length narrative for a large company including coping effectively with the complex scheduling of an opera house.

It's been a long journey but a fruitful one. Her work features in companies across Europe, North America, Australia and Asia, in films and on television and finally this English choreographer realizes her Covent Garden Main Stage premiere.

Maggie Foyer, former dancer and dance teacher, contributes to various magazines including *The Dancing Times*, *Danza & Danza* and *Dance Icons*, and programme notes for ballet companies in Europe and the USA. She has lectured for the Open University and Trinity Laban Conservatoire.