Tribute – Michael Maxwell Steer

Jane Clark Dodgson funeral

Mortlake crematorium, 11.20pm, 20th October 2026

In 1963 I'd run away from school, aged 15, and become an organist, aged 16. Then I had a hunch to learn the harpsichord. The only place with one outside a music college was Morley College. I duly paid for a term and presented myself to the tutor – Jane Clark as she was professionally known. Jane would later recount how I played an interminable fugue in B minor and became fiercely argumentative when she tried to correct my fingering.

When I returned the following week, she said "You don't need a harpsichord lesson, you need a square meal. I'm taking you home to supper." So I trotted like a dog behind her to Waterloo and we got into a train to Barnes with no idea what to say to each other. When we reached 13 Beverley Gardens. Stephen had a simple supper on the table in a beautiful salad bowl.

And at that moment my life went from black and white into colour. I went home that night with an instruction to return in the morning to practise on her second harpsichord. I duly presented myself, worked from 10am–11pm, ate lunch with them, then Jane gave me a lesson in the afternoon; I practised some more and went home.

That was the pattern for the next couple of months, and then it got more intense. I was utterly impossible. Nobody (least of all my parents) knew what to do with me. Sometimes we had furious arguments when I wanted to do something my way; but I soon learnt that Jane had a laser-like sense of truth in music, and life. It was utterly ego-free, and she never once bullied me with threats. The sign that an argument was over was when she said "but of course, do it your way if you want." That was analogous to Jane's ultimate condemnation of an individual: "oh but he may be alright really."

So. Over two years Jane refused to let go of me no matter how priggish I was. Together the Dodgsons wrestled me from a self-conflicted semi-psychotic teenager into a relatively capable musician – and human being. Sending me to their friends for conducting and organ lessons since I refused to do college after my experiences of school.

Everything, everything I am I owe to her. And to Stephen who suffered this invasion of a cuckoo into their nest gave me the template of a senior musician, in which guise I appear before you today.

When they bought their Scarth Rd mansion I ended up moving in, and we all redecorated those vast rooms ourselves. We became family, complete with scurrilous nicknames for the musical grandees of the day: I, 'the boy', an onlooker at their dinner parties. They took me to Ireland visiting Jane's brother at Trinity and introduced me to the silent towers at Glendalough. They gave me a Grand Tour of Europe in their Ford Cortina, visiting art galleries all the way to Verona, and returning via Napoléon's Trophée des Alpes. Stephen had inherited an encyclopædic knowledge of art from his father, which Jane amplified by tying in references to period composers. It was a unique privilege that introduced me to the beating heart of Western culture in its varying iterations. We lived together for 8 years … memories I wouldn't exchange for a kingdom.

Well. I broke her heart. At the end of it I didn't want to be a harpsichordist. I've had students I've nurtured do it to me. I know how it feels.

But as they waved me goodbye nothing changed in our love for each other, or in my gratitude for how Jane and Stephen gave me a way of relating to the world which I would probably otherwise never have found. Our own youngs are here in tribute to 'J&S Bodger & co' [how they signed birthday cards]. They were generous godparents and delighted to meet grand- children. The many meals we all shared in Scarth Rd made it a true home for our entire family.

But perhaps Jane's most profoundly consequential act was to buy a harp for our daughter Serafina to take to music college, when we couldn't afford it. You will hear her play it in the church. Naturally, Jane insisted on anonymity. But Clancy's response to such exceptional generosity was to found Cherubim Music Trust in 2001 to 'pay forward' the gift to other families in similar situations to our own. So, in the past 25 years we have bought or been lent 80+ instruments (including, now, 5 concert harps) which have helped over 400 young musicians gain access to a professional quality instrument at the start of their career.

You have heard of Jane's devotion to Stephen's music. The harpsichord world is familiar with her scholarship & performance. Those in Barnes know of her unfailing support of the Festival. But very few will know of the personal sacrifice Jane made to rescue a drowning kid, and the consequences that has had for the art to which she devoted her life.

Jane was an uncompromising rationalist, a philosophe in fact, not anti-religious but dismissive of she called bunkum, anything that wasn't rooted in duty and hard work. Yet to me she was a living embodiment of the Holy Spirit at work in the world: building up initiatives, tirelessly creating unity, smoothing pathways and preferring invisibility. God, how she'dve hated me saying that!