GORDONSTOUN
Plus Est En Vous

Susanne Lachmann

Founding Fellow

Recognised for her pioneering role in establishing music at Gordonstoun, her support to students in and out of the classroom and her lifelong dedication to musical distinction.

Susanne (Susi) Lachmann was a highly-trained and well renowned German musician who established music at Gordonstoun.

Susi was born in Germany, in 1888, the second of three very musical sisters. She was educated in Frankfurt before training at Hoch's Music Konservatorium with Adolf Rebner to become a professional musician.She primarily played the violin and viola - studying bowing techniques with Hans Sitt - but was also an accomplished pianist.

At the start of World War 1, Susi moved to Vienna to study with Arnold Rose and take up a full time post of 2nd violin with the Alberdingk String Quartet, playing chamber music for troops under challenging wartime conditions. In the 1920s, she moved to a role with the Bandler Quartet based in Hamburg and then to Alexander Schneider's String Quartet. During this time, she married talented violinist Jeremias Waschitz, had a baby daughter and supplemented her income with some private teaching.

When Hitler came to power, Susi found herself expelled from her post due to her Jewish roots and, recognising the threats of the Nazi regime, emigrated with her daughter to London in 1935. She was offered refuge by Kurt Hahn at Gordonstoun, thanks to Hans Oppenheimer - a fellow Jewish German who had similarly fled the country and put the two in contact.

She arrived at Gordonstoun in the autumn of 1936, her Steinway grand piano and her daughter Ruth with her, where they were given a small room under the guise of an "au pair helping a little with music".

Yet from 1937, Susi transformed musical education at Gordonstoun, paving the way for future generations. She established programmes at Aberlour House, Wester Elchies and, during wartime evacuation, in Plas Dinam. She taught herself how to play wind and brass instruments in order to teach the boys, she encouraged and conducted choral singing and staged ambitious concerts.

For over 30 years, Susi gave her all to Gordonstoun - a formidable force in the music department but a warm and compassionate support to the boys, the staff and the wider community. Known for her high standards and strong personality, she became a central figure in the school's history. She died in Elgin, in 1967 but her name lives on in The Susanne Lachmann Prize - an annual music award given to pupils at school.

Marjorie Downward, a former member of Gordonstoun's music department, has researched Susi's life.

Her achievements in building a music department at Gordonstoun were immense.

She literally started from nothing, established a school orchestra and a choir, and performed and conducted a wide repertoire of music from JS Bach to the 20th century sounds of Paul Hindemith. One of the unique factors in how she grew the department was by involving children and adults from the surrounding villages and towns. Her ambition and stringent standards meant that within months, she was able to stage a production of JS Bach's Easter Cantata 'Christ Lay in Death's Dark Prison'. She never went back to being a professional musician herself but her outlet was at Gordonstoun and what she had built there.

She arrived bringing skills, not just as a consummate musician, but a devoted mother.

As an instrumental music teacher, Frau Lachmann was a strict disciplinarian and thorough. She had little patience with the slack or the conceited. An intelligent, well-read lady, she was respected and liked by all for her no-nonsense way, but with a sensitive and perceptive compassion towards the children.Being a refugee herself meant Susi knew only too well what many of the pupils were going through and she understood that many would have been confused and homesick. She offered support when there was an absence of parental comfort and reassurance.

Her own life was one of significant hardship - which makes her legacy at Gordonstoun all the more extraordinary.

She and her daughter were refugees who lost most of their family during the Holocaust. She came to Scotland with nothing and worked for board and lodging only for years. It was only thanks to Kurt Hahn writing tirelessly to the Home Office to secure her employment that she was eventually able to become financially independent - by this time, the school was her family and she never left.

Susi gave herself totally to the vision and purpose of Gordonstoun. She instilled in so many, compassion and the value of having music in one's life. Many pupils who left to study music, write reviews or play professionally all remember her influence.The music department at Gordonstoun continues to maintain an enduring legacy - honouring Susi and enriching every student who passes through it.