

# Introducing the Richard Seager Annual Arts Award

How one man's passion for making is helping to shape the future by Derek Jones

The chances are that as you walk down the corridor in your local museum or hospital there will be galleries or wards that proudly bear the names of someremarkable human beings. On occasion, and when time and resources permit, I'm always interested to find out a little more about them. Generally I've felt it necessary to seek out the person without whose patronage I might otherwise have found myself in less fortunate circumstances. Other times I'll nod at the plaque on the wall and enjoy the moment where I discovered a kindred spirit. I blame a good upbringing where there were strict codes about minding your Ps and Qs and endless thank you notes, which in itself is a legacy of a different kind.

The foundation of the arts is built almost entirely on patronage of one sort or another; the purpose being to encourage, inspire and motivate people to find creative ways of expressing what makes us human. In celebration of that tradition the eponymously titled Richard Seager Annual Arts Award is launching in 2017.

Richard's wife, Valerie Seager, came to the decision during a house renovation project. "I commissioned various items, including a textile wall hanging, metal sculptures and a glass sculpture. It was a privilege to meet the highly skilled individuals who created these items. They were all passionate about their work, and readily explained the techniques they would be using in language which I, as a non-creative person, could understand," she said.

However, she became aware that running their own business was something that they all found challenging. Many had received little or no training in basic business skills, and had learned by trial and error. Those who were just starting their careers had difficulty in finding suitable and affordable studio/workshop space and equipment. To raise their profile, they entered competitions and exhibited at trade fairs, which often had up-front costs that might not be recovered immediately.

To try to address these issues Valerie has set up and funded two new schemes to nurture qualities that her late husband held dear.

## The Richard Seager Bursary Scheme

This is a bursary of £500 per year for five years for a graduating student of the Arts and Humanities Faculty at Brighton University who is either continuing their studies or starting their own business.

## The Richard Seager Annual Arts Award

This competition is open to current students of specialist schools, further education colleges and universities, or to those who have completed a further education course or graduated (up to Master's level) within

the last three years. Each year the winner will be invited to design and make a piece of art or craft to a given brief, and offered the opportunity of receiving business skills mentoring throughout the making process. For 2017, the commission will be to make a music cabinet. However, from 2018 onwards,

*Richard Seager* **RS**  
ANNUAL ARTS AWARD

Applications are invited from students and recent graduates for the 2017 Award

Win a commission to design and make a sheet music storage cabinet and receive business skills mentoring

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the client will be a charity or not-for-profit organisation. The financial component of the Award will be flexible, depending on the brief, but will be a minimum of £1500. It is anticipated that the Award will run for 20 years.



Bronze head created by Jamie McCartney and Vicki Ball

## Richard Seager

Following his father into the timber trade, Richard started his varied career in the technical drawing office of Bath Cabinet Makers before being conscripted into the army in 1939. After five years as a prisoner of war in Eastern Europe, he returned to the UK, and qualified as a structural engineer. He then worked in the exhibition sector, for an architect, and as an engineer for Shell and Constructors John Brown. He became one of the country's leading corrosion engineers through his work on power stations, oil rigs and defence installations. He was a member of several quangos reporting on the safety of North Sea Structures and was also a Company Director. He was a practical and forward-thinking man, who enjoyed working at the cutting edge of design and technology, and he jointly held several technical patents for his corrosion work.

His hobbies were typically wide-ranging: he was a talented musician and conductor; he designed, built and raced model yachts in national competitions; played chess for Somerset; won national competitions for rifle shooting at Bisley; and his chosen sports were fencing, cricket and bowls.

This Award has been established as a fitting tribute to an exceptional man who lived life to the full. He was always positive about the future, believing that difficult design problems could be solved creatively by using existing and new materials in an innovative way. He was interested in people and ideas, and committed to giving the next generation the opportunity of achieving the personal and professional success which he enjoyed.

## Accomplished maker

Richard came from a musical family, and was able to read music before being able to read a book. He learned the luthier's craft from members of his family and made violins when he was younger, but they were all destroyed when the family home in Bath was blitzed during World War II. Only a viola and cello are known to have survived.

In 1980, soon after he met his future wife, Valerie, Richard bought the timber to make a Stradivari-style cello. The timber for the top and back were rough-sawn and wedge-shaped, and the sides were in planks. The back and sides were to be made from European maple (*Acer pseudoplatanus*), with a strong and uniform flame, and the spruce (*Picea* spp.) top was closely grained. A piece of rough-sawn timber for the neck, and good ebony (*Diospyros* spp.) pegs were also bought at the same time. The resulting

instrument was to be aesthetically beautiful and capable of producing a characterful 'English' sound, and based on a Stradivari model made in the early 18th century.

Richard referred to books written by H S Wake for additional technical guidance during the construction process, and annotated the drawings they contained with adjustments which he planned to make. The wedges of timber for the top and back were carefully sawn in half lengthways before being glued together with animal glue. The planks for the sides were thinned down and bent using steam, and fixed on to a mould, which he made. He incorporated hard wood blocks in to the corners, which make the finished instrument heavier than normal. He then started creating the shape for the top and back of the cello, using chisels, gouges, homemade planes and scrapers. He used



Richard chose this wood for the cello because of its beautiful 'flaming'



A foul-smelling animal glue was used to tack the front and back onto the mould to check for alignment



The photos on this and the following page show the work Richard completed on the cello



The central join on the cello after it had been cut from the wedge-shaped piece of wood

a manual gauge to check the thickness of the wood, which needed to be thinner in the middle than at the edges, as this would give the instrument its distinctive tone and sound. The top and back were then tacked on to the mould with water-soluble animal glue to check that all the dimensions matched up. He carved the scroll, fashioned the peg box and the neck.

In 1990, Richard decided to make a viola to resolve some of the technical difficulties that would arise during the next stage of construction. Having completed the viola to his satisfaction, he taught himself to play it, and joined a local amateur symphony orchestra.

Progress on the cello slowed, as he became more interested in scratch building competitive radio-controlled model yachts and gliders, and scale model railway stock for a garden railway. Failing eyesight finally prevented him from completing the cello.

After Richard's death, at the age of 95, Valerie contacted Charles Collis, a violin maker and restorer working in Salisbury, to enquire whether he would be willing to finish the cello. She met Charles in his workshop, taking the various pieces of cello, Richard's viola and his annotated drawings. As an experienced instrument restorer, Charles knew how to repair instruments sympathetically while retaining the aesthetic and tonal qualities of the instrument.

Charles agreed to complete the cello in the way which he felt Richard would have wished, using the viola and drawings as a reference source. He also wanted to retain the patina which the timber had acquired through being exposed to the air while 'in the white' for many years.

Valerie felt that it was important that the maker's label inside the instrument should give recognition to both Richard and Charles for the work they had undertaken. It was Charles' suggestion that the inscription should include a statement that the cello was made for his wife. As it was not possible for Richard to write the inscription in person, Valerie asked Charles to include a facsimile of his signature as a 'watermark' on the label, with a black border around the text to show that the cello was completed posthumously.

Finally, after 35 years, Valerie could play this very special cello. Because Richard had sung under Vaughan Williams at the Leith Hill Festival for many years and greatly admired his music, she decided to play the *Larghetto* from his *Six Studies in English Folksong*, because it encompassed the lower, middle and upper registers of the instrument. The cello's 'character' bore an uncanny resemblance to the viola which Richard had made: the lower register has clarity and warmth, and the instrument responds quickly and easily to the player's touch. This cello's personality is perfectly suited to English and Baroque music, and especially to chamber music – the type of music which Richard loved. On 14 November 2015, the cello was first heard in public, when Valerie played it at



The hardwood blocks in the 'C' bouts



Richard's own design of cello mould



The sides or 'ribs' fitted to the mould



The cello's neck, pegbox and scroll



Richard's pencil marks for the peg holes



The cello linings, bass bar, bridges and pegs

a concert which she organised especially for this purpose. The programme included music by composers whom Richard admired – Vaughan Williams, Handel, Debussy, Elgar and Tchaikovsky. Charles and his two daughters were in the audience on this happy and memorable occasion. "I am indebted to Charles for his willingness to be involved in this unusual project, and look forward to playing this cello for many years to

come," said Valerie.

In the coming months *F&C* will be showcasing the shortlist of entrants for both Awards and announcing the winners in a gallery style feature. The successful candidate will also be given a commission to write their project up as an article to be published later in the year. For more information, see:

[www.artscraftanddesignaward.co.uk](http://www.artscraftanddesignaward.co.uk)