

REMEMBERING ROGER BULLIVANT

23 March 1921

20 November 2004

The introductory Address prior to the Conferral of the Doctorate of Music, *honoris causa*, in the University of Sheffield on Dr Roger Francis Taylor Bullivant

Vice Chancellor

It is not unknown for parents to discourage their children from seeking a career in Music. That was Roger Bullivant's experience, despite the fact that his father played the organ in Rugby Parish Church. He was directed to a much more useful field of study, Classics.

At Rugby School, he became known as both a performer and a composer: he wrote sonatas for solo piano and for a clarinet trio. Fortunately for us, the interference continued, and the study and practice of music became his life's work.

He went up to New College, Oxford, but, as with so many of his contemporaries, his studies were interrupted by war service, in his case as a radar mechanic in the Royal Air Force. This involved mastering the Morse code, and there are those who still believe that the rapidly repeated A on the harpsichord at the start of a Bach Society concert contains a coded message.

In Oxford, he made his mark on the musical life of the University. He was for a year Organist of Hertford College and one of his sonata movements was performed during a Balliol concert season. When he returned from the War, he studied advanced counterpoint and composition, and wrote songs, incidental music for a College production and an extended string quartet in three movements which formed his exercise for the degree of Bachelor of Music.

His work on Bach's fugal technique, particularly in the wonderfully varied pieces in the 48 Preludes and Fugues, not only earned him his Doctorate of Philosophy but led to his major study of Fugue that remains the standard work in English on the subject. In his article on Fugue in the *New Grove Dictionary* he wrote of 'the dismal history of fugue theory' devoted to the product of the 'examination fugue'. He praises writes like Ebenezer Prout who stood out against this tradition, to which his own work is a most refreshing antidote.

He joined the staff of the Music Department of the University of Sheffield exactly fifty years ago. He brought with him a bicycle, even then of an old-fashioned design, and became a familiar figure in a city the terrain of which offers a hostile environment to cyclists. Sometimes the environment won: there are stories of unsuccessful attempts to negotiate an earlier generation of tramlines, and of an absent-minded journey into the unfenced pool which was once a decorative feature at the foot of the Arts Tower.

Transport of another sort has been a constant source of interest. He has been a train enthusiast throughout his life; the lyrical prose that some might reserve for a Bach cantata he might well apply to the bell sounds made in earlier times as part of railway signalling practice.

Roger Bullivant's first public performance at the keyboard was a Beethoven piano concerto at the age of fifteen but he moved on to the organ and, especially, the harpsichord. He has become well-known as an inventive and stylish *continuo* player to audiences across the North of England, and in a couple of *Deutsche Grammophon* recordings.

A year after Roger Bullivant's arrival in Sheffield, the commemorations of Bach's death, and in particular a programme of lectures in this University, prompted the establishment of Sheffield Bach Society. Roger Bullivant became Honorary Accompanist to the Sheffield Bach Choir and in 1962 succeeded Norman Barnes as its conductor. With the help of a grant from the Arts Council, the Society arranged a series of concerts featuring Bach Cantatas, a major undertaking the success of which owed a great deal to Roger Bullivant's specialist knowledge. His view of Bach can be seen in a paper he wrote forty years ago: 'With Bach, words and music are his servants rather than his masters: it is the music that matters.'

It was under his leadership that there were established the traditional performances, usually in the Cathedral, of *Messiah* and in Passiontide of one of Bach's great choral works, the *St Passion*, the *St Matthew Passion* or the Mass in B minor. In these familiar works he brings a freshness of interpretation that catches the enthusiasm of performers and audiences alike and some of the choir's most recent concerts have been amongst their best. Under his leadership the choir has performed not only in many parts of South Yorkshire but at a royal occasion at Blenheim Palace and in Sheffield's twin city of Bochum. He has broadened its repertoire, introducing a good deal of twentieth-century music and works by contemporary English composers.

We seldom hear in Sheffield of the tension between town and gown. The City well recognises the contribution the University has made to its economy, its industry and, especially, to its cultural life. Roger Bullivant is a remarkable example. Rooted in the life of the University, a resident for over forty years at Stephenson Hall, he is one of the best-known and best-loved citizens of Sheffield and there was much delight when, in 1984, he was appointed as a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for his services to music in this City.

Keep the theme to the last quaver is a familiar Bullivantine instruction.

Vice-Chancellor, I present Roger Francis Taylor Bullivant as eminently worthy to receive the degree of Doctor of Music *honoris causa*.

