

ADDRESS AT DR ROGER BULLIVANT'S MEMORIAL SERVICE – SHEFFIELD CATHEDRAL

by Simon Lindley

Thursday 3 February 2005

Roger's was, truly, a very special capacity for friendship.

He made friends, often instantly, all over the place.

Here in Sheffield, of course – as a particular bridge between town and gown – and in Doncaster and the whole of the region. But his concert schedule involved frequent excursions rather farther afield.

On one memorable occasion, I encountered at first hand proof positive of his great enthusiasm for public transport systems. We once spent an unforgettable day together – yes a whole day, between Taunton and Birmingham – putting the world and the transportation infrastructure to rights during the course of what seemed an interminable train journey.

Major flooding had knocked out the electric signalling system and involved the guard getting down off the train at each track segment end and walking to the nearest farm or house to telephone for permission to proceed further. We had met by chance at 6.30 am on the station at Taunton, both intent on returning to Yorkshire fairly promptly for a day's teaching – but it was not to be.

That day cemented the bond of friendship between us. I certainly learnt far more about the vagaries of what was then British Rail than one could have deemed possible.

Roger's connection with music in Leeds extends back half a century to his first collaborations on the then new edition of Handel's *Messiah* by Bradford-born Dr Watkins Shaw.

By the time I settled in Yorkshire exactly thirty years ago, Roger was established as the natural first choice for continuo at any *Messiah* or *Passion*, indeed any Baroque masterwork, that was worth its salt.

Together, he and I were regulars with Halifax Choral and with Leeds Phil among others.

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A number of small, but significant, Bullivant-isms characterised his wonderful accompaniments – these were always inventive, often visionary and occasionally hilarious. The Choirs knew when to expect them – the starts of choruses such as *And He shall purify* and *His yoke is easy* were never complete without those life-enhancing melodic turns – what choristers young and old referred to as “Roger’s twiddly bits”.

He knew how to project the wonderful pathos of *He was despised* with some highly individual key *extempore* shifts where Handel had left no figured bass indications of harmony and his interpretations of *I know that my Redeemer liveth* simply shone with the assurance of Resurrection. He knew – and knew instinctively – when to step on the gas to come to the aid of a soloist who was about to come unstuck – even if the singer probably didn’t realise anything was about to go awry – but Roger knew and was there as ever present help in time of trouble.

He gave wonderful support to music making here in this Cathedral, but was just as much appreciated for his visits to Worcester’s Three Choirs Festival and to so many occasions for St Peter’s Singers, whose regular and esteemed harpsichordist he was. Only occasional illness kept him away. He joined in all our regular curricular occasions with zest and also in some of our rather more hairbrained schemes too – I think Roger loved risk!

Roger’s background was in church music – an uncle was the organist of St Mary le Bow in the City of London and his father an organist in his home town of Rugby.

It is rumoured that his parents tried to dissuade him from substantive involvement in music. We must today be so relieved by their failure to do so.

As a person, Roger was by turns intensely private and astonishingly gregarious. His knowledge of Leeds’s Italian restaurants was almost without equal and he became a member of the Leeds Club where he was a great favourite with the staff who were much impressed by his unique combination of the randomly Bohemian and sartorially elegant. It was, probably, those colourful scarves and superior carrier bags that did it.

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Successive Club Stewards were wont to refer to him as Dr Boolayvon – lending him a slightly continental and exotic air. This was not a mystique he seemed particularly keen to dispel and one that proved invariably appealing to generations of boy choristers at Leeds Parish Church and at Worcester Cathedral.

Roger was in many ways a combination of the consummate professional and the most enthusiastic of amateurs – someone who never lost his wonderment of music and its workings and who was possessed of an almost missionary zeal to share this with others. With his students, of course, particularly – but those, too, of less focus or commitment who were just as important to him as individuals I think.

He was profligately generous in sharing his time and talent with others, yet perhaps only rarely did his colleagues and friends discern the real Roger.

His great love of tradition combined with an intense dislike of convention for its own sake, an independence of spirit that bordered at times on obstinacy – but, above all, his deep understanding of the power of music to invoke a spiritual response from its hearers – all these were parts of Roger that we still have with us and that we treasure.

It is clear that he inspired great devotion as well as respect and those of us who are left have so much for which to give thanks.

Let us think particularly today with gratitude of so many of Roger's friends whose invaluable support was so integral a part of the Bullivant experience – to Kenneth and Margaret Sleaford, widely known throughout the land as "Roger's roadies" – and to all those, especially those in Sheffield through a life-time of involvement with the Bach Choir, as well as the University Music Department and Doncaster – where he was Conductor of the town's Choral Society, whose unselfish commitment enabled him to remain so active throughout a long and distinguished career.

The lives of us all are so much the richer for having known him and loved him.