

LLEWELLYN, THOMAS REDVERS (1901-1976), singer and teacher of singing

Name: Thomas Redvers Llewellyn
Date of birth: 1901
Date of death: 1976
Spouse: Louise Llewellyn (née Webb)
Parent: Catherine Llewellyn
Parent: John Llewellyn
Gender: Male
Occupation: singer and teacher of singing
Area of activity: Education; Music; Performing Arts
Author: Trevor Herbert

Redvers Llewellyn was born at 8 Hunter St, Britton Ferry on 4 December 1901, the son of John Llewellyn (1875-1960), a tin worker, and his wife Catherine (1878-1943). He had an elder brother William (1899-1919) and a younger sister, Annie (1908-1990). He used the name Redvers Llewellyn professionally, but was known to family and friends as Tom.

Both his parents were musical and they encouraged him to sing even as a very young child: he is said to have made his first public performance as a boy soprano in Rehobeth Baptist Chapel, Britton Ferry when he was just three. He had singing lessons from Tom Thomas in Wales, with Francis Toye in London and Oscar Daniel in Italy. He had a brilliant high baritone voice and in 1929 joined the Carl Rosa Opera Company before moving to Sadlers Wells in 1934. It was there that his career took off. In 1939 he first appeared as Rigoletto, a performance that received popular and critical acclaim and ensured his status as one of the major British operatic soloists of his generation.

During the Second World War he served as a Flight Lieutenant in the RAF in England and also South Africa. After the war his career in opera continued, but he also diversified his repertoire. At the request of Sir Thomas Beecham he appeared in the 1946-47 Delius Festival as the main soloist in *Sea Drift* and *The Mass of Life*. This brought him before a different type of audience. His performances were tasteful, and demonstrated a close understanding of Delius's writing. Recordings of this repertoire reveal his sophistication, and many thought that he played an important part in defining the vocal style for what was still regarded as relatively modern English music.

He retired from singing in 1956 and returned to Wales to spend thirteen years teaching singing at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. Among the many aspiring performers who beat a path to his door were the young **Delme Bryn Jones** and the soprano Rita Hunter. On retirement from Aberystwyth he moved to Eastbourne to live in an apartment at 17 Southfields Road. When his relative proximity to London became known he was persuaded to take a position as professor of singing at the Royal College of Music, an appointment almost certainly made at the personal behest of Sir Keith Falkner, the Director of the College, who was himself a noted singer of the same generation. He was appointed a Fellow of the Royal College of Music (FRCM), the College's highest honorary award, in 1973.

Redvers Llewellyn did not acquire the lasting celebrity of some other great Welsh singers, but he should be counted among their number. Many Welsh singers have been criticized for allowing emotional excess to overshadow their musical intelligence - a flaw often characterized as 'too much heart, too little head'. This was not the case with Llewellyn, whose performances were powerful but finely nuanced, perhaps most obviously in his reading of Delius. This stylistic understatement, a characteristic more typical of the English singing tradition, may well have contributed significantly to his effectiveness as a teacher.

He married Louise Webb in 1935; there were no children. He was extremely popular and many, especially those he taught and worked with, spoke of his generosity and good nature. He was a keen sportsman with an abiding love of cricket and golf.

He died at the Princess Alice Hospital, Eastbourne on 24 May 1975 after a brief illness. A cremation at Eastbourne was followed by interment of his ashes in the family plot in Britton Ferry. There was a memorial service in Wales and at St Sepulchre's Church, London (the Musicians' Church) where the funeral oration was given by Falkner.

Author

Trevor Herbert

Sources

Official records and census returns

Archive material at the Royal College of Music Library

Information supplied by Eastbourne Public Library

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