

THOMAS, MANSEL TREHARNE (1909-1986), composer, conductor, BBC Wales Head of Music

Name: Mansel Treharne Thomas
Date of birth: 1909
Date of death: 1986
Gender: Male
Occupation: composer, conductor, BBC Wales Head of Music
Area of activity: Music; Performing Arts
Author: Terence Gilmore-James

Mansel Thomas was born in Llewelyn Street, Pontygwaith, near Tylorstown in the Rhondda Fach, Glamorgan, 12 June 1909, the son of Theophilus and Edith Treharne Thomas. He had an older brother, Wilfred, who died in infancy, and a younger sister, Elizabeth. His father, a keen amateur musician and the precentor at Hermon Welsh Baptist Chapel, Pontygwaith, was well-known locally as a choral conductor. He encouraged his son's music studies, especially when the young boy's remarkable talents became increasingly evident.

These outstanding musical gifts were recognized further when, as a pupil at Porth County School, Mansel Thomas was awarded the Rhondda Scholarship which he took up at the Royal Academy of Music in London at the early age of 16. Under the wing of composer Benjamin Dale he enjoyed a brilliant studentship, winning a number of prestigious awards and prizes, and graduating in 1930 with an external Durham B.Mus degree.

He then spent 5 years as a freelance musician in London, notably as a composer, conductor and répétiteur. In 1934 he conducted the London Symphony Orchestra in his "Theme and Variations" at the Neath National Eisteddfod, and this gift for orchestration was to become a considerable aspect of his prowess during his years at the BBC, as was his remarkable inclination for song writing and choral composition not only in this early period but throughout his composing career.

Mansel Thomas joined the BBC in Cardiff in 1936 as music assistant and deputy conductor of the newly-formed BBC Welsh Orchestra. Following war service in the Royal Army Service Corps, 1943-46, he resumed his BBC duties, but as Principal Conductor of the orchestra, and in 1950 he was appointed Head of Music, BBC Wales. These were formative years and broadcasts of Welsh music increased in frequency and quality under his professional scrutiny.

Though he himself never ceased to find some time to compose and arrange, nevertheless the increasing scale of his BBC commitments - and the onset of television introduced yet another dimension - did not allow him the amount of time for composition which he always wanted. Consequently, in 1965 he decided to take early retirement in order to devote himself to composition. He and his wife, Megan, moved to a 16th century cottage in rural north Gwent where he produced what is probably the most important corpus of his work, especially in both vocal and choral spheres. He was able to compose freely and also respond to commissions, including a choral suite "Rhapsody for a Prince" for the Royal Investiture of 1969.

Mansel Thomas was one of the most important and influential musicians of his generation in Wales. Famous throughout the Principality (and far beyond it) as composer, conductor and adjudicator, he was for many years the BBC's principal music representative for Wales and was able to encourage and promote, with characteristic generosity, the early career of many composers and performers who have since become celebrities. He himself wrote a large and varied range of music - solo vocal, choral (mixed, female, male, and children's voices), instrumental (solo and chamber), band and orchestral. He was equally at home in sacred and secular fields, but expressed himself more naturally and spontaneously in works of short and medium duration than in extended forms, such as oratorio, opera and symphony. His composing career spanned almost 60 years and fell approximately into 3 periods - up to and including World War II; 1946 to his early retirement in 1965; and 1965 to 1979.

His first notable composition - "Daffodils"/"Cennin Aur" - was written in the mid/late 1920s specially for the newly-formed Pendyrus Male Choir which rehearsed next to his home in Tylorstown. The partsong became so well known that W. S. Gwynn Williams (Gwynn Publishers) requested a mixed choir version of it for publication in 1939, and that soon surpassed in popularity its TTBB original. Songs and choral music are significant in all the periods and are perhaps the elements by which he is chiefly known to performers and audiences today. There are over 150 original songs and traditional-melody arrangements for solo voice; notable songs include "Y Bardd", "Coeden afalau", "A Hymn to God the Father", "Eifionydd" and the 2 sets of 12 songs "Caneuon Grace a Siân" and "Caneuon y Misoedd". The choral works involve various groups - male, mixed, female and youth/children. In addition to "Daffodils" (TTBB & SATB), there are TTBB settings of Welsh hymn tunes and Welsh airs (such as "Llanfair", "Llef" and "Fantasia on Welsh Airs") and the fine original works "Psalm 135" and "Anthem of Challenge and Comfort". Also a wide range of inspired works for SATB - partsongs and Welsh traditional melody arrangements (such as "Ar lan y môr" and "Ar hyd y nos"), motets and anthems (including those for St David's Day and the weddings of his two daughters), and larger-scale works such as his "Requiem" and the cantata "In Praise of Wisdom". The compositions for female and youth/children's choirs engage the singers in varied groupings - Unison/SS/SA/SSA/SSAA/ etc - and include the "3 Songs of Enchantment", "6 Elizabethan Partsongs" and traditional "Songs of Britain".

All his compositions reveal the consummate skill and care in his writing for amateur as well as professional performers and notably for children and young people in instrumental as well as vocal repertoire. His chamber works explore varied ensembles and are crowned by his Piano Quintet (a commission); the arrangements of Welsh traditional melodies enjoyed popularity during their 1950's BBC broadcasts by the Tâf Players. Audiences were also drawn to the attractive "Six Welsh Dances" and "Breton Suite" (composed for and performed by the BBC Welsh Orchestra), and also to the "Mini Variations on a Welsh Theme" written for Harry Mortimer and his Fairey Brass Band. These works and the "Theme and Variations" are now re-gaining their recognition, not least by younger ensembles, including the Welsh National Youth Orchestra / Brass Band.

Mansel Thomas's stature as a Welsh composer has remained undiminished, and for his services to British music he was awarded the FRAM (1951), OBE (1970), a Professorial Fellowship at Aberystwyth University (1972) and the John Edwards Memorial Award by The Guild for the Promotion of Welsh Music (1983). It was indeed a tragedy when he suffered major illness from September 1979 and he wrote little else of significance thereafter. He married Megan Lloyd, the Welsh cellist, in 1939 and they had two daughters, Grace and Siân. He died at Glaslyn Court Nursing Home, Gilwern, near Abergavenny on 8 January 1986 aged 76, and was buried at St Mary the Virgin Church, Magor, Monmouthshire on 11 January.

Mansel Thomas left an enormous and invaluable legacy of compositions and almost all of those not previously published are now being brought into print by the Mansel Thomas Trust, which was established in 1987 with its main aim being the publication of the composer's enormous corpus of manuscript works. The Trust was granted charitable status the following year and its publications project is still on-going. The recent increase in the availability of his works in publication has done much to regenerate interest and inspire performances not only in Wales but more widely in the UK and internationally in Europe, USA, Canada and Australia. The Mansel Thomas Trust was delighted by the enormous national and international response to the 2009 celebrations for the composer's centenary and is grateful for the increasing appearance of his music on excellent CD recordings. There is so much still for performers to discover in the high craftsmanship and attractive style of this fine composer as more and more of his enormous corpus of compositions appear in print. To assist this, the Mansel Thomas Trust has produced a series of eight catalogues listing his entire music publications, which can be viewed on the Trust website. Sheet music inspection copies are also available on request from the Trust's printers - Banks Music Publications.

Author

Terence Gilmore-James

Sources

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John Hywel, 'Mansel Thomas, A Profile', *Welsh Music, the journal of the Guild for the Promotion of Welsh Music*, Vol 5, No 1 (1975 -76)

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Further Reading

Mansel Thomas (1909-1986), Discover Welsh Music website, viewed 7 March 2018

Wikipedia Article: [Mansel Thomas](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Mansel Thomas Music Manuscripts](#)

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