

OBITUARY / MARWOLAETH

The Hon. (William Herbert) Mervyn Roberts (1906-1990)

by Eiluned Davies

I was very sad to learn of the death, on July 12th, 1990, of the composer Mervyn Roberts. Mansel Thomas introduced me to his piano music as long ago as the late 1940s, when he asked me to include some of it in a BBC Welsh Home Service recital at Cardiff.

As the composer lived at Abergele and I lived in London, after I had prepared the pieces I wrote and asked him if he would listen to me playing them – over the telephone – and make any criticisms and suggestions he wished. This he kindly did. My mother held the receiver so that it faced the piano, and he said he could hear the music reasonably clearly. This procedure was repeated on other similar occasions, much to my benefit.

Although I only met him in person once, his music and correspondence revealed him as a composer with a conscience, an idealist, a perfectionist in all he undertook.

His stern self-criticism made him revise, in 1942, his work for two pianos *Variations on an Original Theme*, composed in 1932, and to revise, in 1949, his *Sonata for Solo Piano*, composed in 1934. This latter work was awarded the Edwin Evans Prize in 1950 and was first performed by Helen Perkin at an LCMC concert in March of that year.

The 40s and 50s were altogether successful and happy years in his professional and private life, as, during those years, a number of his works, including those mentioned above, were published by Novello; also his marriage to the accomplished pianist Eileen Easom took place in 1947.

During the War he lived in Wales and worked in the Civil Service (Preservation of Ancient Monuments). At that time he had founded a music group at Abergele, assisted by musical friends, among whom was his future wife who performed two-piano works with him, including his own. No doubt practising the music together had played an important role in the revisions he undertook.

Testimony to the stability and happiness of their marriage is contained in a sentence from Mrs. Eileen Roberts's letter to me, dated 9.8.90: "I feel privileged to have spent forty-three happy years in his stimulating company."

This "quiet and modest person" as she has described him in a letter of 11th November, 1990, had received a fine education (Gresham's School, Holt, Trinity College, Cambridge, and the RCM). Although the central activity of his life was composition, he also worked in other fields, reviewing new music in *Music in Education* and, at certain periods, teaching at Clarendon School, Bodelwyddan and Christ's Hospital, Horsham.

In May, 1952, he wrote "for the past two years I have served on the Welsh Advisory Council of the BBC. I watch with great interest any developments that

seem to have a bearing on the right development of music in Wales, and have felt for a long time that the outstanding need is of some institution of the conservatoire type which would concentrate on training native talent by skilled means up to the highest standards.”

Right up to the end of his life he took a keen interest in the music of the twentieth century.

Two of his letters, relating to the composer Bernard van Dieren, gave me special pleasure, since I have profound sympathy with that composer's music.

In the earlier one, of 22 December, 1977, he wrote, “I was interested to have more news about Robert Williams and to learn that he is doing some research on Van Dieren. I hope the results will be published, as Van Dieren is one of the undeservedly neglected major figures in the English musical renaissance . He is not even mentioned in Frank Howes's book on the subject.”

In the later letter, of 14.3.88, he wrote, “This is just a line to say *how* much we enjoyed your playing of Van Dieren's Toccata in the second broadcast on BBC [Radio] 3. This, we felt, was most expertly performed. Unfortunately we were not able to hear the Studies after the Quartet, which was also admirably played.

“I must confess that I haven't hitherto felt myself particularly drawn to this composer's music but this broadcast has definitely alerted me to its significance. The Toccata is less immediately appealing than the Quartet, but we found both compositions most worthwhile to listen to.”

In the 70s he received a blow, of the kind which many composers in the later decades of this century have had to bear, due to the difficulties which face music publishers through the invention of photocopying machines and the frequent take-overs of one company by another. I was very impressed by the philosophical way in which he accepted the blow. In a letter, dated 23rd November, 1877, he wrote, “I am sorry to say that about a year ago, Novello's, with only a fortnight's warning, took out of print everything they handle of mine. I just managed to salvage, at a price, I might say, some copies of the solo songs and instrumental items, i.e. those on which royalties were paid, but none of those things, like unison and partsongs, which were purchased outright. All of which is rather unfortunate but cannot be helped. Meanwhile I continue as best I can, regardless.” However, his songs, *My Soul there is a Country*, and *The Rose Bush* are still in the ‘Music for Mixed Voices’ catalogue of the Gwynn Publishing Co., of Caernarfon.

Mervyn Roberts has a significant place in the history of Welsh Music. The first two decades of the twentieth century saw the birth of David Wynne (1900), Grace Williams (1906), Mervyn Roberts (1906), Daniel Jones (1912) and Denis ApIvor (1916), five dedicated Welsh composers of integrity. During their long lives* I watched their creative powers develop and came to regard them as ‘Y Pump Cymreig’ (The Welsh Five).** Together, with the support of such organisations as the BBC, the Arts Council, the Performing Right Society and the Guild for the Promotion of Welsh Music, they produced a corpus of *instrumental*

music which has ensured that Wales be regarded henceforward as more than the 'Land of Song'.

It augurs well that, at the present time, there are many more two-piano duos in existence than there were when Mervyn Roberts composed his magnificent *Variations on an Original Theme*, and *Two Chorales* for that medium. I am looking forward greatly to hearing in the near future these works performed by some of the new duos.

Footnotes [from original obituary]

* Daniel Jones and Denis ApIvor are still living and composing.

** They have been followed by a line of instrumental composers of stature, including Alun Hoddinott and William Mathias.