

THE NATIONAL YOUTH ORCHESTRA OF WALES

Its influence on the development of orchestral and instrumental music in Wales

by GRAHAM THOMAS

It is appropriate, in the year that the National Youth Orchestra of Wales is to receive the John Edwards Memorial Award, to reflect upon its influence during the past thirty years upon the musical life of Wales and, in particular, on orchestral and instrumental work in the schools. There is no need to attempt a detailed history of the orchestra, nor is there any intention here to make any kind of assessment of its standard of performance. The fact that the orchestra is now readily accepted throughout Wales as a regular annual feature, not only at the National Eisteddfod, but in the main concert halls in the larger towns, is adequate proof of the high standard of its orchestral playing. As a nation we have long since learned that the orchestra asks for no concessions on account of the youth of its members, and audiences expect and receive professional performances during its annual appearances.

In this situation, it is easy to forget the early years when the orchestra, under Clarence Raybould, was struggling to establish itself in the musical life of Wales. We have come a long way from the time when the first citizen of a large industrial town in South Wales introduced the orchestra as 'Mr. Clarence Newbould and his band'. That such a *faux pas* is now unthinkable is due to the determined efforts of the pioneers, both performers and administrators, in those early days, and it is appropriate at this time that tribute should be paid to them. The orchestra was created by a vice-president of the Guild, Irwyn R. Walters, O.B.E., who was then H.M. Inspector of Schools in Wales with overall responsibility for music. During the war years, Irwyn Walters had been impressed by the number of competent instrumentalists emerging from the secondary schools in Wales and, in order to give them orchestral experience, he made arrangements for some of them to attend orchestral courses in England. By 1945 he had come to the conclusion that Wales had enough talent to sustain its own orchestral course for young people, and he set about creating the machinery to set up such a course. While H.M. Inspectors may have some influence on work in schools, they do not have access to funds which would enable them to set up courses attended by school pupils or college students. These can only be financed by Local Education Authorities, and it was the former county of Monmouth, whose Chief Education Officer at the time was the late Professor Charles Gittins, which provided the necessary administrative assistance and the financial guarantees which enabled the founder of the orchestra to set up the first exclusively Welsh orchestral course in Monmouth School for Girls in July 1946. All education authorities in Wales agreed to subsidise with grant-aid any students from their respective areas selected to attend the course, and the conductor from the outset was Clarence Raybould.

This first course ended with one public concert given in the hall of Monmouth School for Girls, where the orchestra occupied the main body of the hall and the public were accommodated on the stage and the gallery. Among the performers at that concert were Alun Hoddinott, Osian Ellis and his wife Renee, and Haydn Wyn Davies, now H.M.I. for music in Wales. Perhaps the ultimate success of the orchestra, and the speed with which it established

itself, was due to the very high quality of the tutorial staff on those early courses. They included internationally known instrumentalists like Archie Camden and James Whitehead, while one of the early clarinet tutors was a bright young man named Colin Davies, a fine instrumentalist already showing some expertise as a conductor. The orchestra made its first appearance at the Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales in 1948 and it seems strange nowadays to think that it took some persuasive powers to convince those responsible for the Eisteddfod that to allow the orchestra to appear in one of the concerts was a risk worth taking. Monmouthshire, with the expert guidance of Irwyn Walters, continued to organise and administer the annual courses until 1952, when the W.J.E.C. agreed to be responsible for it. The demand for public concerts by the orchestra grew, and by the early 1950s a programme of some six concerts following a rehearsal period of ten days or so had been established. In July 1953 the orchestra broadcast to the Commonwealth a special Coronation Year Concert in the overseas service of the B.B.C., and in the same year made its first television appearance. It performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1955 and has made tours in Europe on several occasions.

The National Youth Orchestra of Wales is unique in a number of ways. It was the first of its kind in Europe, and it is the only national youth orchestra in this country to be maintained from public fund. Its membership includes the finest young instrumental talent in Wales today, and an outsider might be forgiven if he assumed that the orchestra was the result of all the instrumental work to be seen in the schools of Wales today. In fact, the reverse is the case, for the healthy state of instrumental work in our schools is a direct result of the impact of the National Youth Orchestra upon the musical life of the country. When the orchestra was brought into existence and an examination of the list of students who attended the first course in Monmouth would reveal that the majority of them came from the larger centres of population where private instrumental tuition was available. In the years immediately following the war, there were very few music advisers in Wales, and although appointments were made fairly rapidly by the early 1950s, there were still five authorities in 1953 without a music adviser, and more without peripatetic instrumental teachers in the schools.

It has already been stated that the large majority of the students attending the first National Youth Orchestral Course came from the more populous areas where private instrumental tuition was available, but closer examination reveals that many of the students owed their interest and success to individual teachers, whose enthusiasm and perseverance against great odds had led to the growth of successful orchestras in their own schools. Pwllheli, Llanelli and Gowerton Grammar Schools were three such schools, and there were others here and there which worked quietly in their own areas. Some of the Direct Grant schools, too, like Monmouth School for Girls, Dr. Williams School, Dolgellau, and Howell's School, Denbigh, enjoyed favourable staffing ratios which enabled them to maintain a school orchestra and provide the necessary tuition on the spot. This accounted for the preponderance of students from the areas of these schools in the early courses. In the case of Pwllheli and Gowerton, the music teachers in the Grammar schools were themselves instrumentalists, and gave freely of their spare time to pass on their own expertise to promising pupils. In other cases, like Llanelli, there were enthusiastic teachers in the town who often ran their own private orchestras, sometimes associated with a particular chapel or church.

The main purpose behind founding the National Youth Orchestra of Wales was to provide young Welsh instrumentalists with orchestral experience, because at the time there was no other way of providing this experience. In a very short time, however, the standard of the

playing and the team-spirit engendered on the courses were responsible for the development of a feeling, among the students, of belonging to an orchestra, and the National Youth Orchestra was born. Its reputation spread rapidly, and among early visitors was Ruth Railton, who was anxious to set up a similar course in England. The orchestra went from strength to strength, and competition to gain a place became more fierce every year. The more sparsely-populated areas of Wales had little or no representation, as the few instrumentalists living in these areas could not compete with the increasingly high standard demanded. By the early 1950s, Monmouthshire, Glamorgan and Carmarthenshire were already endeavouring to give orchestral experience to more of their instrumentalists by running their own orchestral courses, and Pembrokeshire, Cardiff and Swansea followed suit. In the rest of Wales the sparse population and the absence of instrumental teachers in the schools meant that such courses could not be sustained on a county basis. Five counties in North Wales co-operated to organise an orchestral course which soon developed into the North Wales Youth Orchestra, while a few years later the Borough of Merthyr joined Cardiganshire and the three mid-Wales counties to provide a similar course. By the mid-1950s all pupils in Wales had an opportunity to qualify for a local or regional as well as a national orchestral course.

These regional courses grew in popularity and musical stature in the same way that the National Youth Orchestra itself had grown. The standard of playing improved rapidly, and the end of course concerts became public occasions which captured the enthusiasm of audiences and players. Demand for tuition grew, more peripatetic teachers were appointed, and by the mid-1960s secondary schools not offering instrumental tuition were the exception. The result was that even before local government reorganisation every county in Wales was able to organise its own youth orchestra, and Glamorgan, Monmouthshire and Carmarthenshire were obliged to run several orchestras, either on a regional basis or on seniority lines. Residential courses have become a feature in all those areas where long-distance travelling is involved, and under the new county patterns regular rehearsal programmes have been established.

The benefit of all this intensive training has, of course, percolated through to the schools. Many of the new comprehensive schools have two, or even three, orchestras, and membership of the senior orchestra is regarded by pupils in the same light as membership of the First XV, or the first cricket, hockey or netball teams. Interest in the school orchestra is not confined to those pupils actually playing, and it is quite normal to find, in many schools, an audience of interested pupils attending the weekly rehearsal of the senior school orchestra. Chamber music, too, has gained in popularity because of the increased interest in instrumental music, and in many schools it is now usual to find the better instrumentalists coming together to play string quartets, wind ensembles and other permutations of these instruments. One advantage of such a highly organised pattern of instrumental tuition is that pupils who show musical promise can be encouraged at an early age to take up a particular instrument, and most areas include the primary schools in their provision of tuition on stringed instruments. With generous lending schemes for instruments, pupils who take to recorder playing at an early age can be encouraged to try their hand on other wind instruments, even expensive ones like bassoons or French horns. Small wonder, then, that the leading orchestras in this country have a large number of Welsh men and women among their members. The scale of this provision in Wales is unique, as there is no other area within the United Kingdom, if, indeed, in Europe, which provides this tuition on such a scale. Certain Education Authorities in England and Scotland offer facilities which compare very favourably with those in Wales, but there are

authorities in both countries which have no such provision. It is a matter of pride that we have no blank spots in Wales, and it is to be hoped that cuts in education expenditure due to the present financial stringencies will not lead to a deterioration in the service.

The late Professor Thurston Dart used to say that this generation was the only one he knew of that preferred the music of dead musicians and showed scant enthusiasm for its living composers. Those responsible for the administration, not only of the National Youth Orchestra, but also the regional orchestras, are doing their utmost to remedy this state of affairs and to educate players and audiences so that they can enjoy performing and listening to contemporary music. A particularly happy feature of the National Youth Orchestra of Wales has been its close association with living Welsh composers, and its programmes always include at least one work by a well-known Welsh composer. Grace Williams, Alun Hoddinott, William Mathias, Ian Parrott, David Wynne and David Harries have all contributed to the orchestra's programmes, and they have shown great interest in the orchestra and have always been ready to write for it. Works originally written for the orchestra, like Grace Williams's *Penillion* and Hoddinott's *Welsh Dances*, have since become very well-known and have entered the repertoire of the professional orchestra. The National Youth Orchestra itself has by now performed some of these works for the second and even the third time.

The regional orchestra, meanwhile, also make it a point to include works by modern Welsh composers in their repertoire. The North Wales Youth Orchestra celebrated its 21st birthday in 1971 by inviting Alun Hoddinott to conduct its course and by commissioning a new work by him, when it gave the first performance of his *Concertino for Horn, Trumpet and Orchestra*. In 1975, at the 25th anniversary concert, it performed *Penillion*, by Grace Williams, and this year *Invocation and Dance* by William Mathias was included in the programme. The Mid-Wales Youth Orchestra, too, always includes a work by a living Welsh composer in its programmes, and this practice is followed by most of the County Youth Orchestras. Composers, for their part, have shown great interest in the progress of youth orchestras in Wales, and have often attended rehearsals of their works. This close relationship between youth orchestras and composers in Wales will shortly become evident to everyone when the next recording by the National Youth Orchestra of Wales comes on the market. This record, sponsored by the Welsh Arts Council, will consist of a number of works by Welsh composers.

Another practice established by the National Youth Orchestra which has been followed by the regional and some of the county youth orchestras is that of inviting a professional conductor to direct the courses. Clarence Raybould directed and conducted the National Youth Orchestra until he retired from the musical scene on attaining his 80th year. He was succeeded by Arthur Davison, whose work with youth orchestras in Croydon was already well-known, and who has maintained the high standard of performance established by his predecessor. The North Wales Youth Orchestra was conducted for many years by Clifford Knowles, senior violin tutor at the Royal Manchester College of Music and conductor of the Burnley Symphony Orchestra, while the Mid-Wales Youth Orchestra was conducted by Rae Jenkins. Other conductors associated with both orchestras and with county youth orchestras are Owain Arwel Hughes and Malcolm Binney.

This account of the training of youth orchestras in Wales would be incomplete without mentioning the Youth Brass Band courses held in most areas. While they are a separate activity, often associated with well-known brass bands, they have made a significant contribution to the

orchestral scene in Wales. A feature of all our youth orchestral courses has been the high quality of the brass section at all time, and this is almost always due to the early training brass players have received through the brass band movement in their respective areas. Music advisers have built upon these resources in their areas, and most counties now organise their own brass band courses.

There is no doubt that the youth orchestral movement in Wales has become firmly established, and the quality of the work alone throughout the country is the envy of educationists in less favoured areas. The National Youth Orchestra is our national showpiece of which we can be proud and its influence on the musical life of young people in Wales is far-reaching and profound. We can all take pride in this very healthy state of affairs and in so doing remember with gratitude those people who, in those early years immediately following the war, had the vision, the expertise and the energy to translate ideas into practice and initiated an educational movement which has possibly even yet to achieve its ultimate realisation.