

DAVID MERLYN SMITH was born in Swansea in 1910. He was educated at Swansea Grammar School and the University of Swansea, where he graduated with a BA degree in English and History in 1933. After taking a teacher training course, and qualifying in Music by taking the teaching diplomas of LRAM and ARCM, he moved to Barnes and taught English and other subjects at the Central School there from 1934 to 1939. Just before the start of World War II in 1939, he changed to a school in Isleworth, but he continued to live in Barnes and retained his post as Choirmaster at the nearby Parish Church of St Mary.



He met Wynne Griffiths at a concert given by the Royal Choral Society in Central Hall, Westminster. They had both been booked to sing and had both been delayed by transport problems, which meant that they had to wait for a suitable gap in the rehearsal before joining their fellow choral society members. This chance meeting eventually led to their marriage at Barnes Parish Church in 1940, and they set up house in Argyle Road, Ealing, where they remained until his retirement. When they went to open a joint bank account the manager asked

them to consider the difficulty that there were already five other accounts held in the name of David Smith at that bank. They did so, and cleverly changed their surname to include his rather unusual middle name, thereby decisively avoiding any further confusion with anyone else.

He was called up for military service in 1941 and was posted to Egypt in the following year. Later in 1942 he was promoted to Education Officer for the whole of the Sudan, which involved regular visits to each camp in the area. It became possible for him to attend services in Khartoum Cathedral, and it was here that his extraordinary ability to organise people into choirs started to develop. He established a choral society of some 58-80 voices from service personnel and British civilians. In 1943

he directed the first ever performance in the Sudan of Handel's "Messiah" and introduced the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols in the Cathedral, following the long established tradition at King's College, Cambridge, from where live broadcasts have been made on the afternoon of Christmas Eve every year except one since 1929. At the end of the war he was posted back to England and was stationed at various camps before ending up at West Drayton. Following his 'demob' in 1947 he returned to the Isleworth school for one term before applying for, and being offered, the post Head of the Music Department at Kilburn Grammar School.

There was no music tradition at his new school and it had been decided that all boys should be timetabled to receive two music lessons per week during each of their first three years. That in itself was an enormous task for it involved about 300 of the School's 530 pupils and it meant that, within four years, everyone would have had first hand experience of his teaching methods. Clearly, some were influenced more than others but there was an increasing number of boys who wanted to continue to study music after the third year. This created more work and, for many years, he must surely have been the most heavily burdened master. But this was not enough and he set about building a choir, starting a tradition which continued and was strengthened throughout his period in Kilburn. Most of the rehearsals were held in lunch breaks and after school in the music room 10, behind the stage. He established the annual Church Service, based on the familiar service of Nine Lessons and Carols. This was held for the first time in December 1949 in Christ Church, Brondesbury, and was transferred many years later to St Anne's, in Salusbury Road and next door to the School. It also became customary to hold End-of-Term services, so that there would be another reason for training the choir to perform. He created musical evenings, called "Soirées, where pupils would show off their skills on various instruments as taught by visiting staff or private teachers, and the choir would perform some notable work, such as Mendelssohn's "Hymn of Praise" or Parry's "Blest Pair of Sirens".

His main interest in music was choral singing, but he was anxious to develop a school orchestra. It was never generally known that he learned to play the 'cello especially so that he could more easily understand the problems of playing stringed instruments. Musical evenings became more elaborate as the standard of the orchestra improved.

He introduced the Inter-House Music Competitions, using external adjudicators, often encouraging the boys to practise when they would not otherwise have considered themselves sufficiently proficient, and still further promoting the cause of music within the School.

There was a very small pipe organ in the gallery at the back of Creighton Hall, and this was used mainly for assemblies. In 1954, with generous assistance from the Old Boys' Association, the School was able to purchase a Hammond organ from the then Camden High School for Girls, and this immediately made it possible to present performances of more major works at the musical evenings. At about the same time, the unbelievable happened and a hitherto discouraged activity, namely associating with the girls' School across the road, was finally permitted. As a result, he was able to expand the style of the concerts in yet another direction.

But the major concerts were always given by the boys. The works performed included Haydn's "Nelson Mass" and "Creation", Bach's "St John Passion" and "Christmas Oratorio", Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's "Hiawatha's Wedding Feast", and culminated in Mendelssohn's "Elijah", which is an enormous undertaking for any choral establishment. It became customary in these performances, now called School Concerts, to use professional soloists. Choral accompaniment was done using piano and organ, and he was always assisted in this respect by people he had encouraged during their school lives, such as Kenneth Waller, Gerald Barnes, David Green, myself and latterly Jonathan Rees-Williams, who went on to establish himself in the music profession and was at one time Organist and Master of the Choristers at Lichfield Cathedral. In 1960 it was very fortunate that Mr Brian Cole was appointed to teach

mathematics and physics. Being an accomplished pianist, he was a great asset as an accompanist, but he was tragically killed in a car crash some years later.

Looking back over these years I think that there was never any doubt about who was in control. Once Merlyn, the “Great Magician”, had decided to do something, we all knew that there would be no more speculation, and the performance of any work would be as professional as he could produce. He certainly lived up to his name and, coaxing and cajoling where necessary, he was to leave a profound and lasting impression on a great many people during this period of 23 years.

He retired in 1970, on the same day as Mr A J W James and Mr A E E Minchin, and the musical era came to an end. It was not surprising that he wanted to move back to Wales for the latter part of his life. In fact, he and Wynne settled near Swansea, at a house close to Llangland Bay. They went there in 1971 and were destined to enjoy their retirement for ten years before the onset of failing circulation problems, which impaired his mobility and led to progressively failing health. A further matter of concern at this time was that Wynne lost the sight of one eye and was experiencing difficulty in seeing with the other. However, she was able to continue to nurse him, even during the first weeks of 1987 when he was almost paralysed. He suffered a massive heart attack on February 15th, and did not recover.

I visited Wynne on April 4th and conveyed to her the best wishes of all who knew and respected her devoted husband and have reasons, in varying degrees, for offering their thanks to him. There can be few masters of the School who enjoyed such popularity and will be remembered by so many different people as our Man of Music, Mr David Merlyn Smith.

Alan Parish
[KGS 1949-1957]

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