

John Derek Sanders

[26 November 1933 - 23 December 2003]

John Sanders was part of a long line of organists and 'masters of the choristers' at Gloucester Cathedral, whose work richly influenced the musical life of the county and during which time (1967-94), he was also a key contributor to the famous 'Three Choirs Festival'; one of the oldest festivals of choral music in existence.

John was born in Wanstead, Essex and his passion for music was kindled during his early years as a pupil at Felsted school, where he learned to play the organ. From his mid-teens, he spent two years at the Royal College of Music, where he came under the influence of John Dykes-Bower [organist at St Paul's Cathedral]. He then became organ scholar at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, where he read music, under the mentorship of Patrick Hadley, a contemporary of Peter Warlock and EJ Moeran.

During his period of 'national service' in the Royal Artillery, John further developed his musical skills; as an orchestral conductor but it was his first move to Gloucester [a county that gave much of his inspiration as a composer] in 1958, as assistant organist under Herbert Sumsion, that he began to develop his craft. He later took over the leadership of the St Cecilia Singers [a chamber choir, with which he retained a close relationship until his death]. As director of music at the King's school, Gloucester - where the cathedral choristers are still educated - his talent for combining control, care and inspiration of young people began to emerge in his fine teaching.

At the age of 30, he was appointed organist and 'master of the choristers' at Chester Cathedral, where he spent the next four years further developing his talents, which were to prove essential to his continuing development as a musician. As well as his work with the cathedral choir, he also revived the Chester Music Festival, which remains a successful influence in the cultural life of that city but significantly, he met and married his wife Janet.

On Herbert Sumsion's retirement in 1967, John returned to Gloucester Cathedral as organist and 'master of the choristers'. He was committed not only to the cathedral and 'Three Choirs Festival', but also to all aspects of music in the local community, demonstrated by his becoming conductor of the Gloucester Choral Society, and of the developing Gloucestershire Symphony Orchestra. He was also appointed director of music at Cheltenham Ladies' College.

Throughout his career at Gloucester, John's energy and industry were supported by Janet, and their generosity and kindness became a hallmark of all music-making in and around the cathedral.

A confident and painstaking organisational competence complemented his musical life. He developed firm friendships with his colleagues in the cathedrals of Hereford and Worcester, and he was able to bring to the 'Three Choirs Festivals' all the benefits of skilful administration, fine musicianship and absolute integrity. In 1977, he directed the celebrations in Gloucester for the event's 250th anniversary.

On his retirement in 1994, John's talent for composing came to the fore; his works revealing a deftness of touch, underpinned by a clear grasp of the needs and potential of the musicians for whom he wrote. His music is refreshing, approachable and good to sing; he showed a particular sympathy with the demands of cathedral singers and, like Herbert Howells before him, seemed always to have an acoustic setting in mind. His fine sense of harmonic opportunity, sonority and poignant dissonance are revealed in all his choral writing, notably the Reproaches, the Requiem and the cantata *Urbs Beata* for brass, double choir and soloists commissioned for the 2001 Three Choirs Festival. He also composed a considerable quantity of secular music, including four song cycles.

He was a passionate and eloquent president of the Campaign for the Defence of the Traditional Cathedral Choir and he also immersed himself in local affairs as treasurer of the local parochial church council and village organist.

In 1990, John received a Lambeth doctorate of music, and, in 1991, was made honorary fellow of the Royal School of Church Music. He was appointed OBE in 1994 and just a few weeks before his death, was honoured by the Guild of Church Musicians at a service in Westminster Cathedral. John is survived by his wife Janet and their children, Jonathan and Anna.