

A Tribute to Kenneth Bowen

Given by David Abrahams, Chair of the London Welsh Chorale, at the
Kenneth Bowen Memorial Concert on Saturday, 6 July 2019

I joined the Chorale in 1996, so my memories of Kenneth Bowen are of the last twelve years of his tenure as Musical Director.

Of many, many happy memories over those twelve years, one stands out for me. It was the spring of 1998. We performed Bach's *St John Passion* at Southwark Cathedral, with Huw Rhys-Evans singing the role of the Evangelist. After the concert, as occasionally happens, the Chorale went to the pub, and Ken conducted us in *Yr Arglwydd yw fy mugail* – a setting of Psalm 23, *The Lord is my Shepherd* – by Caradog Roberts. My memory of that evening is that it was a great privilege to sing the *St John Passion*, one of the pinnacles of the Western Choral tradition, in such magnificent surroundings. But singing that very simple Welsh anthem in the pub afterwards with this choir, with Ken conducting, touched me very deeply – and in a way that I will never forget.

Looking back on that evening twenty-one years ago and reading all the many tributes to Ken that have been given since his death last year, what strikes me is his extraordinary humility. This was a man who had sung to great acclaim in the greatest opera houses and concert halls of the world, and gone on to have an extremely distinguished career as a singing teacher, yet was willing to share his love of music and the joy of music with a non-auditioned choir every Tuesday evening in the London Welsh Centre. That was a truly generous gift. What we are celebrating this evening is the wonderful gift of music that Ken shared with us Tuesday by Tuesday, with unflinching, grace, charm and good humour for twenty-five years. Ken loved the Chorale and the Chorale loved him in return.

Ken understood the power of music to touch people's lives. But I think he also understood that there are no barriers in music. The power of music can be experienced in the opera house, and the concert hall, but it can also be experienced in church and in chapel, in the pub and even rehearsing on a cold, wet November night in the Gray's Inn Road.

The London Welsh Chorale maintains today the tradition that Ken established of a choir open to everyone, whatever their level of singing experience, but that strives to perform choral music – and particularly Welsh choral music – to the highest standards. I believe that maintaining that tradition is the best tribute we can offer Ken.

I want to thank every single member of the Chorale for being part of that continuing tradition, and in particular the committee members and other members of the Chorale who have worked so hard, as they always do, to make tonight's concert possible. Most of all, I want to thank our conductor, Edward, without whom this evening could not have happened – and, in particular, for his new work, *The Spring of Vision*, which we have so enjoyed learning and performing, both here and at the International Musical Eisteddfod in Llangollen on Wednesday evening.

Thank you also to our wonderful soloists, Ruairi, Helen and Jennifer, and the musicians of the British Sinfonietta and the New London Children's Choir. It is a pleasure to be making music with you this evening. Finally, I would like to thank Ken's sister Eileen, Angela and his grandson, Ruairi, for being with us today. It means a great deal to us that you are here to share this celebration of Ken's legacy. But, most of all, a final thank you to Ken – for all that you gave us; every time we sing we remember you and are grateful to you. Diolch yn fawr iawn, Ken.