

Tribute to Kenneth Bowen

Martin Thomas – President: Friends of the Chorale.

I first met Ken when I arrived in Cambridge in late 1955. I knew of him from my brother as a leading member of the Cymdeithas Y Mabinogi and I joined the Cambridge University Opera Group under his wing. The Group had an ambitious programme to revive Ralph Vaughan Williams opera based on Falstaff, “Sir John in Love” and I was fortunate to secure the part of Master Ford in the production, truthfully a part beyond my 18 year old capabilities. Ken of course was the romantic lead, Fenton, and sang gloriously with a freedom I envied. Vaughan Williams and his wife Ursula attended some late rehearsals and the opening night.

Some present today may recall that in the concert at St John’s Waterloo the night before Joan and I were married in 2005, Ken conducted the Chorale and the South Bank Sinfonia in a very memorable performance of the marriage procession from VW’s Opera, “See the Chariot of Love here at hand wherein my Lady rideth.” It was very moving for me – and I expect for Ken since he had been the dashing young bridegroom in our original production.

The year after “Sir John”, the Group maintained its ambition and gave the first UK performance of Stravinsky’s “The Rake’s Progress” – with Ken of course as the Rake. It was not exactly type-casting but he carried, the part with aplomb. We formed a special company, “The New Opera Company”, and took it, for a number of performances, to Sadler’s Wells. Ken received many plaudits for his singing. The sheer confidence of our mainly undergraduate group seems astonishing to me now, but many of the cast went on to achieve important positions in the opera world, not just in the UK but in Australia and America. Meanwhile, Ken developed his career as a thrilling soloist, notably in his performance under Malcolm Sargeant of the “Dream of Gerontius”. He gave a copy of the recording to Joan and me as a wedding present.

Some years passed. In 1995, there was a 40 year reunion of the original “Sir John” cast in Cambridge. I was disconcerted, not so much that I did not recognise anybody – including my ‘wife’ Mistress Ford - but they did not recognise me. Ken was the exception. He invited me to join the London Welsh Chorale and there followed a number of delightful and memorable years of concerts in London, in Wales and on tour abroad - whether it was singing in the early hours on Parisian streets accompanied by my trusty Kazoo, the surprise concert in the Stockholm archipelago, or the trip to Switzerland where we clashed disastrously with the National Yodelling Championships. Throughout these adventures, Ken retained a good humoured detachment which required a strong phalanx of Myrmidons to make sure he got to the concert venue on time – and back to the hotel.

His huge musicality and experience made making music with him a real pleasure and I will cherish the memory of a friend and companion who achieved the heights both as a performer and a teacher and he widened the musical experiences of us all.

Martin Thomas