



BERNARD STEVENS (1916–1983)

Ronald Stevenson

BERNARD STEVENS died on 3 January 1983 at 66. Born in London on 2 March 1916, he was encouraged as a boy by Harold Samuel. Later he studied with Cyril Rootham and Prof. E. J. Dent. At Cambridge he read Music and English, a duality that fostered his work in the English choral tradition. At the RCM his mentors were R. O. Morris, Arthur Benjamin, Gordon Jacob, and Constant Lambert. Later he was a distinguished member of the RCM staff (many composition students remember him with affection and gratitude for opening their ears), an FRCM, and a Vice-President of the Workers' Music Association. He eschewed public honours. Those that he won were earned: an Hon. Liveryman of the City of London Musicians' Guild and a Mus.D.Cantab.

After 6 years in the British Army during the war, his *Symphony of Liberation* caught the post-war mood. His last work was a chamber opera to a libretto based on J. M. Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*. Between, he wrote much well-crafted and deeply humanistic chamber and orchestral music, a body of some of the finest English piano music of our time, and two song-cycles to texts by Donne and Randall Swingler, his friend.

Bernard was a delightful companion. His occasional abrasiveness was balanced and always covered up by his humour. He was an amusing mimic and captivating raconteur. His radiant smile will be remembered in those of his friends, when they recall him. His best memorial will not be a season of performances that will do its duty, as if that were enough, but the *continued* performances his music so clamantly merits.

A few cameos of memory: Bernard's studio, 'The Forge' in his Essex village, was a converted blacksmith's shop. Many are the hours—but now too few—I've spent there. I recall score-reading—to whoops of laughter—the Scherzo of his Second Symphony with him as an *ad hoc* piano duet. It's one of the most vibrant scherzi in any British symphony.

On the walls of the forge were a few photos, among them an old sepia one of the original blacksmith who worked there; and one of Messiaen. They were unlikely company but they symbolized the fused polarities of Bernard's music, or rather its motivations: concern for common humanity (he was a serious student of Marxism) and a deep interest in Oriental mysticism. Perhaps Bernard was the first of a new type of composer on the British scene: one corresponding to Ernesto Cardenale, the Nicaraguan Trappist monk and major poet of Latin America, who describes himself as 'a spiritual Marxist'.

Bernard was always a loyal supporter of concerts programming music by his fellow composers. Many will miss his warm handshake in the greenroom and his generous encouragement. He is survived by his wife Bertha Stevens, the violinist, and by his daughter Cathy, who has a growing reputation as a violist.

