

Tell me dear Reader, have you ever heard Messiaen's *Oiseaux Exotiques*, composed in 1956? I'd wager your reply is "No". Messiaen - apart from being a great composer - was also an obsessive ornithologist. No other composer (in fact, probably no other ornithologist), was ever so completely dedicated to the painstaking study of birdsong. His *Oiseaux Exotiques* is comprised of nothing else but the songs of eighteen different species of birds from India, China, Malaysia and the Americas. So not something you'd whistle in the bath!!

Sad news this week that Ennio Morricone has passed away. I was a huge fan. It started me thinking - do you know that there's a rich vein of talented musicians with links to Swansea that you might not know about? Many prolific composers amongst them - but not necessarily of classical music.

First of all there's Mark Thomas who is a good friend of the Festival. He hails from Penclawdd and is a prolific composer for TV and Film. What is it about Penclawdd, eh? Is there something in the water - apart from cockles? You may well have heard the music Mark has written for *Benidorm*, *Episodes*, *Shaun the Sheep*, *Under Milk Wood* and many more. He is the busiest film composer in Wales.

I wonder if you recognise the composer Llewellyn Williams. Well, probably not, although you'd have undoubtedly heard his music. He was born on 17th September 1880, in Oxford St., Swansea. Between 1900 and 1953 he wrote over 900 songs. He changed his name early on and called himself Fred Godfrey - but I doubt you're any the wiser from knowing that. His well known hits included *Meet me Jenny when the sun goes down*, *Who were you with last night?*, *Take me back to dear old Blighty*, and *When father papered the parlour*.

Now when I was in school there was a good School Orchestra in which I played (and so did Gordon Back - he played the viola!). We gave lots of concerts and one of the pieces we performed many many times featured our bassoon players - and as it turns out both of them went on to win considerable professional acclaim. The piece was called *Lucy Long* and was an 'Air and variations'. It's really strange that having played the piece so many times it's only recently that I realised it was written by Fred Godfrey aka Llewellyn Williams - a Swansea boy.

In November 1940, the famous George Formby released a recording of a song Fred had written called *Bless 'Em All*. It became a kind of unofficial anthem of the RAF. Soon after

its release, it was an immediate success. Formby recorded a second version in early 1941, with new lyrics by Godfrey. It was one of the most popular songs of WW2.

Godfrey spent his last years living with his eldest daughter in the North London suburb of Pinner. He died in 1953, still writing new song ideas. His will contained the princely sum of £202.

Then there's Harry Parr Davies who is buried in Oystermouth. He was a Neath boy actually - just like Gordon Back. At 17, the young Harry took the train to London determined to see Gracie Fields who was appearing in a show at the Winter Garden Theatre. He wanted to show her his work and so ended up at the stage door clutching a song he'd written especially for her. His persistence with the stage doorman paid off when Gracie Fields agreed to see him. Arriving at her dressing room she asked him to play her his song. That song was *I Hate You* which she immediately liked and recognised his significant talent.

That led to Harry becoming Gracie Fields' regular accompanist, playing the piano for her on her UK and world tours, in the recording studio and for her regular appearances at the London Palladium. Besides from working with Gracie, Harry also wrote songs for many other big stars of the day. He also provided the songs for many of Gracie Fields' popular film soundtracks such as *Sing As We Go* and *Wish Me Luck (As You Wave Me Goodbye)*.

Harry wrote very successful musical operettas. On June 17th 1943 *The Lisbon Story* opened at the London Hippodrome, with music by Harry. This was later made into a film. The musical featured the songs *We Must Never Say Goodbye* and *Pedro the Fisherman* sung in the film by Richard Tauber. All written by the Neath boy!

One of my favourite Swansea composers is Eric Gaukroger. Know the name? He probably wisely changed it to Eric Rogers. Actually, claiming him to be a Swansea boy is a bit of a cheat as he was born in Halifax and the family moved to Ynystawe when he was two - I think I can get away with that!

Eric Rogers (as he became) was a Spitfire pilot during the war and on being demobbed he used his gratuity to set up a small orchestra playing at the Orchid Room in London's Trocadero. He was also the musical director for a number of variety artistes such as Norman Wisdom. A friend of Lionel Bart, it was Eric who transcribed and orchestrated the score for *Oliver* and he was appointed musical director when the show transferred to

Broadway. He became musical director of Decca Records accompanying such singers as Max Bygraves, Julie Andrews and Anthony Newley. He adapted some music he'd written for a ballet and it was used for one of the most popular television shows of all time. He called the tune 'Startime' and it's the theme for 'Sunday Night at the London Palladium' Eric Rogers became the musical director of that theatre as well.

Now, I am a MASSIVE fan of the 'Carry On' films and so Eric Rogers' greatest achievement in my eyes is that he composed and conducted the music for 23 of the 'Carry Ons' The scores have their own humour such as the playing of *Greensleeves* in *Carry On Henry* or the warning note sounded by "Do Not Trust Him Gentle Maiden" when Lady Ponsonby (Angela Douglas) is willingly abducted by Abdul Abulbul (Bernard Bresslaw) in *Carry On Follow That Camel*. Some jokes were from popular TV programmes such as the theme music from both *Z Cars* and *Steptoe and Son* is echoed in *Carry On Screaming* and the same joke is used in *Carry On Doctor* when Wilfred Bramble makes a cameo appearance as one of the patient's - a dirty old man! Some of the jokes are a bit more obscure, *The Unhatched Chicks* from Moussorgsky's *Pictures From An Exhibition* is used in *Carry On Doctor* when Mrs Barron comes to collect her husband (Charles Hawtrey) who has been suffering from a sympathetic pregnancy. There is a Scott Joplin type rag - composed around the initial letters of one of the characters - Betty Evelyn Box (the notes BEB) in *Carry On Girls*. There are many others such as the quotes from Verdi's *Aida* in *Carry On Cleo* and the brilliant use of *The Elephant* from Saint Seans' *Carnival of the Animals* whenever Hattie Jaques appeared - usually as the matronly character in whatever *Carry On* she was featured. Brilliant stuff!!

Eric Rogers is credited as the composer/arranger/conductor on no end of stuff but whilst researching this 'Mumble' I came across a clip in which he's credited as the accompanist. He doesn't do much - but it's a new one to me and I think it's funny. Have a look:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=RDZ6FyQZD6VIQ&v=Z6FyQZD6VIQ&feature=emb_rel_end

Now, in my last mumbling, I wrote about different composers being short or tall. I didn't mention Ravel - who was 5'1". He was fascinated with small objects. His house, which is now a museum, resembles an over-sized doll's house. It's a tiny cottage that was made to accommodate his small stature with smaller than average doorways and unusually low ceilings and even a miniature ornamental garden out the back. Ravel filled his tiny house with mechanical toys and was convinced that mechanical objects had a musical soul. (yes - OK - we'll nod and smile and move swiftly on!). Ravel was renowned for being a snappy dresser. Once on tour, he delayed a concert for half an hour while the soprano soloist dashed to his hotel to collect the correct evening shoes that the composer had left behind. The show must go on but only with the appropriate footwear.

More Mumbblings soon

Mumbling Maestro of Mumbles