

Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 6, No. 2 November, 1997

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

OBITUARY

Ruth Dyson

I EXPECT THAT you will have read one of the obituaries from the *Independent*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian* or *Times* by the time that this is published, and that in itself says quite a lot about this most loved and respected harpsichordist, but in case you missed the daily papers, Ruth Dyson was born on 28th March 1917 and died on 16th August 1997. She was the daughter of a GP who spent most of his working life in Dorking and lived, as I had hoped *she* would, into his mid-nineties. Amongst her many early friendships were composers, Vaughan Williams, Gerald Finzi, and Constant Lambert. During the war, after training at the RCM with pianist Kathleen Long, she gave service as an auxiliary nurse with the Red Cross. Other musician friends were Herbert Howells, whose clavichord pieces she recorded, and Alan Ridout who wrote many solo pieces for her. It was touching to see dedications on her scores from so many of the composers she championed who were writing for the harpsichord after the war.

As a student Ruth discovered antique collections of keyboard instruments both at the RCM and in the private collections of those such as Susie Jeans and the Mirreys. She was a keen and active member of the Galpin Society and not only gave an unforgettable performance for the Society at the British Embassy in Lisbon this Spring, but was also about to serve another term as a committee member.

The Royal College of Music

was fortunate to have Ruth's loyalty and dedicated harpsichord teaching from 1964 until she voluntarily retired ten years ago, informing them that as she had turned seventy, she thought it perhaps about time! She left her RCM pupil, Robert Woolley in her place and her support to the college was unstinting. She was adored by all her pupils and not only those at College, including Melvyn Tan, Sophie Yates and Katherine May but also the many, young and old, she tutored at Summer Schools and the popular weekends she gave with singer and harpsichordist, Peter Medhurst, who gave the excellent address at her funeral in Chichester Cathedral, where she regularly worshipped. The full nave was a tribute to the love she inspired. She was always generous in attending students' concerts and we all remember how she not only came to the event, or listened to BBC recordings, but wrote an encouraging card or letter immediately afterwards. Her musical criticism and scholarly erudition was always worth having and she would promptly find time to write a letter of reference or recommendation.

Ruth Dyson must have been one of the best adjudicators Music Festivals ever employed. She was always kind and amusing but uncompromising in her musical integrity. A total professional, she was reliable in every way and always punctual.

She married Edward Thomas in her forties. They made a perfect team, sharing their immense understanding and enthusiasm for their many and wide-ranging interests with staggering erudition and wit.

Ruth and Edward were keen members of the Edward Thomas Society and apart from their link with Edward's uncle's poetry, had a deep love of the English countryside. Ruth was a knowledgeable bird-watcher or perhaps I should say, bird-listener, and conversation would stop as she would turn her head to catch the sound of a local goldfinch. Edward's death in January 1996 was a lasting grief.

I started lessons with Ruth aged seventeen and am grateful for her precious musical legacy. It was very moving to accompany James Bowman in Purcell's *Evening Hymn* and Peter Medhurst in the last of the *Songs of Travel* by Vaughan Williams for Ruth's funeral. I have treasured memories of Ruth at our wedding, or in her kitchen, cooking us delicious meals from Edward's garden produce, dancing around the grass with one of my twin toddlers in each hand at West Humble (she was very comfortable with children, who loved her, and she had written some nursery play songs with Rose Fylman in the 1950s.) We had such fun shopping in a Portuguese flea market or seeing the film of Carrington together and sharing our delight in the Ivon Hitchens paintings at Pallant House, Chichester or A.S. Byatt's *Possession* when it came out in paperback. Always she enlivened the occasion with witty anecdotes which were perfectly suited to the subject.

There are many of us who will sadly miss her but know ourselves the richer for having known her. She is survived by her stepson and stepdaughter.

PENELOPE CAVE