

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

OBITUARY

KENNETH MOBBS 1925 – 2017

by Ben Marks.

Kenneth Mobbs, performer, musicologist, collector and scholar of keyboard instruments passed away, aged 92, on 29 October 2017. Born on 4 August 1925 in Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire, Kenneth had apparent musicality at an early age. In 1941, aged just 16, he was awarded the Licentiate Performing Diploma of the Royal Academy of Music (L.R.A.M.) before going up to Clare College, Cambridge, on an organ scholarship and state science bursary, from where he graduated with degrees in both Natural Sciences and Music. After being awarded the Fellowship Diploma of the Royal College of Organists (F.R.C.O.) with the Turpin Prize for practical work in 1949, Kenneth became a post-graduate student at the Royal College of Music, where he studied piano, organ, conducting, viola and orchestration. In 1950 he was appointed to the staff of the Music Department of Bristol University, where he remained as Senior Lecturer in Music until his retirement in 1986.

Kenneth Mobbs' contribution to the West Country music scene over a period of 60 years was significant and far-reaching. As a lecturer, Kenneth was beloved of his students and he maintained lifelong connections with many of those he taught; his musical influence has been truly lasting. He was an active member of the 114-year-old Bristol Music Club and a sought-after accompanist and conductor who collaborated with many esteemed artists and ensembles, including the Dartington String Quartet, the Bristol Sinfonia and the Bristol Opera School.

Kenneth broadcast frequently on BBC radio as a soloist, duettist, accompanist, and as an ensemble and continuo player. His catholic musical taste is borne out by an extensive discography and the breadth of his activities and accomplishments by such major undertakings as the adaptation with George Rowell of lesser-known Gilbert and Sullivan material to create the popular comic opera *Engaged!*

Kenneth was known particularly for his use of period keyboard instruments, the performance practice and history of which became a focus for him during the latter part of his life. It is in this capacity, as a keyboard instrument scholar and collector, that Kenneth was best known to Harpsichord and Fortepiano. A subscriber for over 30 years, Kenneth contributed to the magazine many articles, reviews and letters, in addition to writing extensively for numerous other specialist publications on diverse musical subjects, often in collaboration with other respected scholars. Of particular note is his work on harpsichord soundboard decoration, undertaken jointly with his wife, Mary, herself an accomplished musician and artist. Together, Kenneth and Mary traversed the globe inspecting and playing historical instruments and presenting lecture-recitals at major music venues, conservatoires and heritage institutions. Kenneth's examination of countless keyboard instruments, the majority in private hands, resulted in a collection of 19,000 photographic slides that have immeasurable value to the organologist and which have been made available online to researchers. Thanks to his extraordinarily

energetic and enthusiastic exploits, Kenneth possessed a thorough knowledge and a deep insight into his chosen field that other keyboard specialists consulted regularly. See cover photo.

The Mobbs Keyboard Collection was at the centre of Kenneth's organological activity and many are those who possess fond memories of the splendid Clifton townhouse that served as both a museum and home. As well as purchasing new instruments and supporting the activities of modern makers, Kenneth's acquisition of often neglected or time-worn antique keyboard instruments gave many of today's practicing restorers and conservators an important opportunity to hone their craft skills and expand their technical understanding of, primarily, late 18th- and early 19th-century English pianos. A keen antiquarian, Kenneth saw potential in even the most dilapidated of instruments, and his instinct to preserve the material vestiges of the musical past ensured the survival of fine examples of the piano maker's art that might otherwise have been lost.

Kenneth's effort to rescue previously undervalued instruments, together with the serious educational initiative that fueled their recovery and repair, was much akin to the foresight demonstrated by Major George Henry Benton Fletcher, whose important working collection, amassed at the beginning of the twentieth century, is displayed and maintained at the National Trust's Fenton House in London. Indeed, of the 29 antique keyboard instruments that comprise the core of the Mobbs Keyboard Collection, five were donated in Kenneth's lifetime to Edinburgh University's musical instrument museum at St Cecilia's Hall, nine loaned to the Royal Academy of Music Museum at York Gate and the remainder

exhibited in a purpose-built music centre at Golden Bay, New Zealand. It was Kenneth's desire, as it has been of many collectors of historical keyboard instruments in recent times, to share the valuable musical resource that they offer to musicians in restored condition, and his particular success surely lies in having managed to secure the future of a large playing collection, albeit dispersed, in places where instruments may be freely accessed by those who stand to gain the most from them.

In addition to keyboard instruments, Kenneth's fascination with mechanism extended as far as the miniature locomotion of early 0-Gauge Hornby railways, of which he assembled a large and representative collection. His appreciation for artificial engineering did not, however, exist at the exclusion of more organic systems; Kenneth was deeply passionate about the natural world and held a lifelong concern for its conservation and protection.

Kenneth sought to develop his every interest and to realise fully every enterprise. For him, knowledge was never to be confined, but rather augmented and thereafter offered freely to all who sought it; Kenneth's is thus an enviable legacy that spans several generations of professionals in the fields of organology, musicology and performance practice. His academically inquisitive mind and profound musicality marked him out as a man of great sensibility and sensitivity, but it is perhaps for his boundless benevolence and generosity that he will be most missed and fondly remembered by his family, friends and colleagues.



Kenneth with Kemp and Helen English, February 2011



Kenneth playing his 1785 Longman & Broderip Culliford harpsichord, 1993

Kenneth Mobbs remembered by Kemp English.

Kenneth Mobbs and I had the rare pleasure of being united through family connections as well as through our shared musical passion for early keyboard instruments. My wife and I visited Kenneth and Mary in their beautiful Bristol townhouse whenever we travelled to the UK from our home in New Zealand. These were delightful times spent playing duets, viewing Mary's latest soundboard painting masterpieces, and having fun with Kenneth's Hornby train sets. There was always a great deal of lively conversation about all manner of musical topics, and updates on the progress of the latest fortepiano restoration.

I now have a daily reminder of Kenneth and Mary's generosity as I head to our studio to play instruments from the New Zealand arm of the Mobbs Collection of Early Keyboard Instruments (www.earlykeyboards.co.nz). We feel incredibly privileged to be custodians of these wonderful instruments and blessed to have spent so many happy times with Kenneth and Mary. Reunited, may they both rest in peace.

The New Zealand arms of the Mobbs Keyboard Collection (12 instruments) is housed in a purposely designed studio in Golden Bay (at the top of the South Island of New Zealand). It includes several early Square Pianos ranging from 1792-1812, five Horizontal Grands including a Kirckman (c.1798), a Viennese Fritz fortepiano (c.1815) with jannissary effects, and an unusual up-striking downstriker action Wornum 1842 grand. There are also two rare examples of Upright Grand pianos by Clementi (1806) and Broadwood (c.1817) of the tallest models ever made (each approximately 8 ft. 6 ins. high). The Longman & Broderip 1785 harpsichord is one of only three known full-specification one-manual instruments made by Culliford with both Machine Stop and Venetian Swell.