

Peter Evans (1929-2018)
An obituary by Kenneth Shenton

Peter Evans, who died on 1 January, aged 88, following a long illness, enriched the world of music in a variety of ways. While a distinguished university academic who helped mould the creative careers of many of the country's most eminent practitioners, he was also one of that select band of British musicologists who rose to international prominence. Noted among that first generation of scholars who were intimately associated with every technical aspect of the music of Benjamin Britten, here, as always, his insights and expertise have long remained unsurpassed.



A son of the manse, born on 7 November 1929, Peter Angus Evans spent his early years in the North East, where he was educated at West Hartlepool Boys' Grammar School. From there his prodigious talents took him to St John's College, Durham where he read Music. Finding himself working under the stern but benevolent tutelage of two musical heavyweights, Arthur Hutchings and Arnold Edgar Dickinson, it was they who instilled in him the academic rigour that so came to symbolize his long and distinguished career.

That career began in earnest in 1951 with an appointment as an assistant master teaching music at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury. Elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists in 1952, the following year, now newly married to June Margaret Vickery, he returned to the University of Durham but now as a Lecturer in the Music Department. His early reputation as a scholar was forged at this time with the publication of his realisations of the lute and viol consort music of the neglected 17th century English composer, John Jenkins.

Moving south again in 1961, that year he was appointed the first Professor of Music at the University of Southampton. There over the course of the next 29 years, amid what became a noted centre of excellence in music education, his aspirations found a particularly happy and expressive outlet. His arrival proved propitious, coming as it did with an opportunity to help design the new Turner Sims Concert Hall and later equip it with a magnificent free standing three manual mechanical action organ, built by Peter Collins to Evans's own exacting specifications.

In addition to exercising a most benign influence on countless generations of students, Evans also began playing a pivotal role in the artistic life of the wider cultural community. Despite a broadcast performance of Britten's War Requiem, he was sadly seen all too rarely as a conductor with professional choirs and orchestras, but led all manner of students and amateurs, be it members of The Palatine Opera Group, Southampton Philharmonic Choir or the University Orchestra, with much humour and inexhaustible enthusiasm.

As a teacher, one was immediately aware that his was a cultured and scholarly mind. To those students who truly wished to learn he gave much and became a real mentor. A quiet and courteous presence, his manner was invariably encouraging. However, his disapproval could be bleak, the criticism often devastatingly accurate. Much of what he taught he practised in his own compositions, most notably the elegant *Sonata for Oboe and Piano*, written for his wife, June. Sadly neglected are the cleverly and precisely imagined *Three Plainsong Preludes for Organ*.

As individual in print as he was in the flesh, Evans proved to be a fine writer. From 1960 onwards, his scholarly writings, increasingly focussing on twentieth century music in general and Benjamin Britten, appeared in countless academic journals, including *The Musical Times*, *Tempo*, *The Listener*, *Music and Letters*, *The Musical Quarterly*, *Opera Magazine*, *The Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* and

Die Musik in Geschichte. Likewise, his elegant and stylish sleeve notes, always meticulously researched, graced the catalogues of all the major record companies.

More extended examples of his art can be found in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *Michael Tippett: A Symposium*, together with a chapter on *Music of the European Mainstream*, part of *The New Oxford History of Music*. No less authoritative was his contribution to Stephen Banfield's magisterial 1995 volume, *Music in Britain: The Twentieth Century*. In the interim had come definitive essays prepared for two new opera guides that explored all aspects of Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana* and *Death in Venice*.

In 1979, Evans distilled his extensive knowledge into what has become a seminal text, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*. Comprising more than 500 pages and with 300 musical examples, it remains the first comprehensive review of the composer's output. Concentrating solely on an analysis of harmonic procedures, key relationships and structures, such was its importance, that when Humphrey Carpenter subsequently came to pen the composer's later biography, he felt moved to write: *Without Peter Evans's volume I could have achieved little in the way of musical commentary*.