

THOMAS, JOHN Pencerdd Gwalia (1826-1913), musician

Name: John Thomas
Pseudonym: Pencerdd Gwalia
Date of birth: 1826
Date of death: 1913
Parent: Catherine Thomas (née Jones)
Parent: John Thomas
Gender: Male
Occupation: musician
Area of activity: Art and Architecture; Music; Performing Arts

Born 1 March 1826 at Bridgend, Glamorganshire, the son of John and Catherine Thomas. The father, who had musical interests, taught his son to play the piccolo and the harp, and the pupil became very proficient as a harpist. In 1838, when only twelve, he won the triple harp offered at the Abergavenny eisteddfod. In 1840, by the kindness of countess Lovelace, daughter of lord Byron, he was sent to the Royal Academy of Music, where he was taught by J. B. Chatterton and Cipriani Potter. He stayed at the academy for six years, being made a Fellow when he left; later he was made an honorary member. In 1851 he began a tour in Europe, holding concerts in France, Germany, Russia, Austria, and Italy. He was designated as Pencerdd Gwalia at the Aberdare eisteddfod of 1861.

In 1862 John Thomas gave his first London concert of Welsh music. In 1871 he was appointed harpist to queen Victoria and teacher of the harp at the Royal Academy; he also formed, in that same year, the London Welsh Choral Union - the choir also instituting the John Thomas scholarship at the Royal Academy. He became, in 1882, a Royal Academy examiner and teacher of the harp in the Royal College of Music and the Guildhall School of Music. He was honorary member of the Societa di Santa Cecilia (Rome), Societa Filharmonica (Florence) the Philharmonic Society (London), and the Royal Society of Musicians (London). He composed a harp concerto, symphonies, overtures, quartettes, operas, and songs, besides variations on Welsh airs for the harp. The cantata, 'Llewelyn,' was written for the Aberdare eisteddfod of 1863, and the cantata 'The Bride of Neath Valley,' for the Chester eisteddfod of 1866. He used to deliver a public lecture on Welsh music. For his presentation of the early (and difficult) Welsh music see *The Myvyrian Archaeology of Wales*, 2nd ed. He published four volumes of Welsh airs and was the editor of *Songs of Wales* (J. B. Cramer), 1874. He died 19 March 1913 and was buried in the West Hampstead cemetery, London. The N.L.W. possesses a large collection of his papers.

His brother THOMAS AP THOMAS (1829 - 1913), musician, learned to play the harp when he was quite young and, like his brother, became well known as a harpist in various parts of the world. He visited several European towns and, in 1872, took part in one of the concerts held at the Gewandhaus, Leipzig. He composed a cantata, 'The Pilgrim's Progress,' together with a large number of pieces for the harp. In 1859 he published *The History of the Harp*. When he was 70 years of age he emigrated to the U.S.A., going afterwards to Ottawa, Canada, where he died in 1913.

Sources

M. O. Jones, *Bywgraffiaeth Cerddorion Cymreig* (1890)

F. Griffith, *Notable Welsh Musicians* (1896)

Y Geninen, xxxiii, 30

Y Cerddor, July 1904, and May 1913, October and December 1916, January and February 1917

Robert Williams, *Enwogion Cymru. A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Welshmen* (1852)

Groves, *Groves' Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1940)

The Oxford Companion to Music (1950)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [John Thomas \(Pencerdd Gwalia\) Manuscripts](#)

VIAF: [17409723](#)

Wikidata: [Q1701921](#)

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