

JENKINS, DAVID CYRIL (1885-1978), musician

Name: David Cyril Jenkins
Date of birth: 1885
Date of death: 1978
Spouse: Winifred Louise Jenkins (née Freeman)
Spouse: Pauline Ouri H. Jenkins (née Ouri?)
Child: Diedre Jenkins
Child: Derek Jenkins
Parent: Mary Jenkins
Parent: John Jenkins
Gender: Male
Occupation: musician
Area of activity: Music
Author: Trevor Herbert

Cyril Jenkins was born in Duvant, Swansea, on 9 October 1885, the son of John Jenkins, a coal miner, and his wife Mary; the family moved to Cilfynydd when Cyril was a child. His first music teacher was David Lloyd of Tonypanyd, but he was educated at the Pontypridd County Grammar School and took lessons in music theory with **Harry Evans** and organ lessons with W. G. Alcock. While still in his teens he was made organist of Moriah Chapel, Cilfynydd, but by 1911 he was living in lodgings at 50 Cardiff Street, Treorchy, and working as organist at Bethany Chapel, Treherbert, and as a teacher of music.

Shortly before the First World War he moved to London where he found work as an insurance underwriter which provided sustenance as he took composition lessons with Stanford and Prout. Some sources refer to his having been a pupil of Ravel, but this is not mentioned in Jenkins's writings, and if true, it would be something he would have been likely to flaunt. He saw war service with the Royal Field Artillery and was promoted to the rank of acting captain. In the years following the First World War he adjudicated at various eisteddfodau, and his choral works were performed at the National Eisteddfod.

In 1921/2 he succeeded the light music composer Hubert Bath (1883-1945) as director of music to the London County Council, in which capacity he organised band concerts in London's various parks. This appointment too was taken to fund his work as a composer, and he enjoyed a good measure of success. His compositions, particularly the part-songs, were invariably published and were well-regarded by critics and fellow composers.

Late in 1929 he moved to Australia. A report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (31 January 1931) announced his recent arrival and imminent engagement as a conductor of Cymanfa Ganu. The move may have been prompted by ill-health and the prospect of its remedy in a more temperate climate. In any case, he quickly established himself: he found plenty of work as a conductor, teacher and adjudicator, and while he enjoyed a special status in Welsh expatriate communities, his work as a music critic for the *Melbourne Herald* and the weekly magazine *Table Talk* made his name and views recognisable to a much wider audience.

In the years following the Second World War Jenkins travelled frequently between Australia, North America and Britain. He was regularly invited to adjudicate in the USA and Canada and was a frequent guest conductor with the celebrated Tabernacle Choir of Salt Lake City, Utah. On such trips he lost no opportunity to promote his own compositions, and it was for this reason that he also returned to London several times before his permanent return in 1968.

Jenkins was not a great composer but he was efficient and extremely prolific. He regarded his larger-scale choral works, tone poems and part songs as his greatest achievements, and once made the extravagant claim that his *Out of Silence* (1949) was one of the most popular works ever published, with a quarter of a million copies sold. In fact, none of his compositions has stood the test of time. His most important works were probably for brass band. He wrote four championship test pieces (the principal brass band genre), two of which, *Coriolanus* (1920) and *Life Divine* (1921), had canonical status for much of the twentieth century. They also provided something of a model for the format by showing the way for others to move to original idiomatic writing and away from the prevailing practice of simply adapting existing works.

Though Jenkins was a product of the working-class, industrialised south Wales, eisteddfod-focused music network, he developed an alienation from it and became something of an outsider. He always held forthright views and shared them without the slightest provocation: for example, one of his first acts on arriving in Australia was to issue a frank and public assessment of the state of choral singing in the country and how he intended to improve it. However, it was his opinion of Welsh music, delivered in a lecture in Manchester on 30 September 1921 and reported in both the English and Welsh editions of the *Manchester Guardian* (1 Oct 1921), that tainted his reputation with the Welsh music establishment. His feelings on the subject were apparent as early as 1913 in an article in the journal *Wales* (3 March 1913: 163-4), but the 1921 lecture was more focused and strident. He denounced Welsh music as insular, backward and ignorant of modern trends (he cited Sibelius as a composer virtually unknown in Wales). He further argued that this insularity was directly caused and sustained by undue deference to a few composers, particularly **Joseph Parry**, who was a target of his discontent throughout his life and to whom he was reported to have referred as a 'ready imitator of commonplace and even vulgar phrases'. Jenkins strengthened his argument by singing and playing various extracts of Welsh repertoire to 'flagrantly illustrate its shortcomings'.

Apart from the reciprocal derision, there followed rejections of his work for performance at the National Eisteddfod. In fact, while his views on **Parry** and the tradition to which he was central may have been unpalatable to some, they were rational and to a large extent accurate. On the other hand, it is difficult to deny that he carried a chip on his shoulder, and this is just one of the reasons why his correspondence and published writings reveal him to be a perpetually irritable, impatient man who felt let down by others. Oddly, his ambition to be recognised in Wales never left him.

In 1916 Jenkins married Winifred Louise Freeman. It was a brief and unhappy marriage, but it produced two children: Derek and Diedre. A temporary US immigration visa issued in New York in April 1947 shows him to have been married to an Australian national. This was probably Pauline - the name Ouri, possibly a given name, is also attached to her - (1902-1989) whom he probably married around 1939 and who was the mother of two further children. Various bouts of ill-health, including problems with his eyes, forced him into retirement by 1970. He left London and settled at 56 Wick Hall, Hove, Sussex, where he died on 15 March 1978.

Author

Trevor Herbert

Sources

Official Birth, Death, Marriage and Census documents

Ships passenger lists

Personal papers at the Ty Cerdd Archive, Cardiff

Gerald Cumberland, 'Cyril Jenkins' in *Wales, the National Magazine for the Welsh People*, Vol 3 (1913/14), 34-8

Photographs of Cyril Jenkins were published in the National Eisteddfod Programme/Handbook in 1921 and 1922

Further reading

Gareth Williams, 'Jenkins, Cyril (1889-1978)', *Cydymaith i Gerddoriaeth Cymru* (Talybont 2018), pp.265-66

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APA Citation



Herbert, T., (2015). JENKINS, DAVID CYRIL (1885-1978), musician. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 10 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s10-JENK-CYR-1885>

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