

JENKINS, HENRY HORATIO ('RAE') (1903-1985), violinist and conductor

Name: Henry Horatio Jenkins
Date of birth: 1903
Date of death: 1985
Spouse: Miriam Jenkins (née Staincliffe)
Parent: Ann Jenkins
Parent: Henry Jenkins
Gender: Male
Occupation: violinist and conductor
Area of activity: Music
Author: Trevor Herbert

Rae Jenkins was born at 13 Hall St, Ammanford, Carmarthenshire, on 19 April 1903, the son of Henry Jenkins, a colliery labourer, and his wife Ann; the parents were also caretakers of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Ammanford. According to the 1911 census there was one other male child, Rees, who was born c.1900. A girl, May, was also mentioned in Rae Jenkins's appearance on *Desert Island Discs*. The name 'Rae', by which he was known throughout his adult life, came from a two-stage contraction of Horatio: first 'Ratio', then 'Rae'.

When he was only four his grandfather gave him a violin, which he learned under the tutelage of George Evans, a collier, who was also a talented violinist. As well as providing his charge with lessons, Evans enrolled him into the small band that accompanied silent movies at the local cinema, and this may have initiated the versatility that was to mark Jenkins's career.

After no more than the mandatory period of school education, he followed the predictable path to the Betws and Tir-y-Dial collieries, where he worked for almost three years, but his musical inclination was overwhelming and before his eighteenth birthday he was accepted at the Royal Academy of Music. At the Academy he was taught violin by Hans Wessley, viola by Lionel Tertis and conducting by Sir Henry Wood. Wood became something of a mentor and engaged him as a violinist in his Queen's Hall Orchestra, but by this time he was capitalising on his experience in the silent movies bands of the Amman Valley by moonlighting with various London variety pit bands.

By the start of the Second World War he was established in both the classical and lighter sides of the London music business as a violinist and occasionally a conductor. Recognising the increasing importance of broadcasting, he formed 'The Caravan Players' to perform gypsy music on the BBC. This led to a life-long fascination with gypsy music, which he researched assiduously throughout Europe, collecting a repertory of more than two thousand pieces.

At the outbreak of the Second World War he was one of the group of brilliant and available London players picked out by the BBC to form what it called the Salon Orchestra, which broadcast high-quality performances from the comparative safety of Evesham. In 1942 he became conductor of the BBC Midlands Light Orchestra. In 1946 he became conductor of the BBC Variety Orchestra.

After the war he became a household name through his radio appearances as music director for Tommy Handley's *It's that man again* (ITMA) programme. One of its features was the banter between the two men, in which the terms 'Play Rae' and 'Right you are Tommy bach' were routinely uttered, to the delight of the listening audience. In 1950 he was appointed conductor of the BBC Welsh Orchestra, a position he held until 1965. He was appointed MBE for services to music in 1966, having previously been awarded the Fellowship of the Royal Academy of Music (FRAM). Following his death, a plaque was unveiled in his memory at Ammanford Town Hall.

Rae Jenkins was neither a profound conductor nor a virtuoso violinist, but while he is not remembered for a body of distinctive and truly great performances, he was considerably more than a safe pair of hands and one of the most successful Welsh musicians of his generation. His instinctive musicianship and ability to shift seamlessly between classical and lighter idioms enabled him to perform with the great symphony and chamber orchestras of the country with equal ease as with Geraldo and the BBC Variety Orchestra. Furthermore, his stewardship of the BBC Welsh Orchestra was an important force in the orchestra's development in a period of post-war reconstruction.

He was known publically as an unfailingly pleasant man absorbed by music, gardening and fishing, and this appears to have been true of his personal life. However, his reputation among orchestral players was considerably different. Few doubted his musical gifts, but creating a spirit of collegiality with his players was not one of his priorities and he was prone to bouts of temper and even victimisation. Such behaviour was not uncommon among orchestral conductors at that time, but Jenkins became famous for it.

In September 1931 he married Miriam Staincliffe, who had been contemporary with him as a pianist at the Academy. Apart from the wartime residency in Evesham, the couple lived at 53 Selvage Lane, Mill Hill, London until retirement, when they moved to Grantown-on-Spey, Morayshire, Scotland where Rae indulged his passion for fishing. He died on 29 March 1985. His funeral was held at the local St Columba's Church.

Author

Trevor Herbert

Sources

Various obituaries and press reports

Jayne Marilyn Johns-Davies, *Rae Jenkins F.R.A.M M.B.E: The life story of Welsh conductor and musician 1903 to 1985* (2006)

Official Birth, Death, Marriage and Census documents

Personal knowledge and consultations with the subject's former colleagues

Appearance on [Desert Island Discs, 6 September 1965](#)

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