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MATHIAS, WILLIAM JAMES (1934-1992), composer and teacher

Name: William James Mathias
Date of birth: 1934
Date of death: 1992
Gender: Male
Occupation: composer and teacher
Area of activity: Education; Music
Author: Rhidian Griffiths

William Mathias was born on 1 November 1934 in Whitland. His father, James Hughes Mathias (1893-1969), was a history teacher at Whitland Grammar School and his mother Marian (née Evans, 1896-1980) was an organist and pianist. At the age of six he began to take piano lessons with David Lloyd Phillips of Llanfyrnach, and it was to him that Mathias dedicated his sonata for piano, op.23. In 1952 he went to the University College of Wales Aberystwyth to study with Ian Parrott. He graduated in 1956 and took an open scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music to study composition with Lennox Berkeley and piano with Peter Katin. In 1959 he was appointed a lecturer in music at the University College in Bangor, where he remained until he moved to Edinburgh University in 1968. However, he returned to Wales in 1969 following the death of his father, and in the following year was appointed Professor of Music at Bangor, a post he held until his retirement in 1987. He was elected FRAM in 1965 and was awarded a D.Mus. (Wales) in 1966. In 1972 he founded the North Wales Music Festival at St Asaph and continued as its musical director until his death. He was awarded the Bax Society Composition Prize in 1968 and was president of the Incorporated Society of Musicians, 1990-1.

William Mathias was one of the foremost Welsh composers of the twentieth century. He achieved early success with a performance of his Sonata for clarinet at the Cheltenham Music Festival in 1957, and two years later his *Berceuse* for orchestra was performed at the Festival Hall in London. During the 1960s he developed markedly as a composer and discovered his own unique voice, writing in almost every form and embracing sacred and secular works. He succeeded in creating music notable for its rhythmic vitality and its ready appeal to audiences, and it was said of him that he had succeeded in bringing contemporary European influences to Wales without losing his own distinctive voice.

Among his best known choral works are *St Teilo* (1962), *This World's Joie* (1974), *Lux Aeterna* (1982) and *World's Fire* (1989). He composed one full-length opera, *The Servants*, to a libretto by the writer Iris Murdoch. His anthem 'Let the people praise thee, O Lord' was commissioned for the wedding of the Prince of Wales in 1981. During the 1970s he created a series of works for orchestra which he called 'landscapes of the mind': *Laudi* (1973), *Vistas* (1975), *Helios* (1977) and *Requiescat* (1977). He composed three symphonies, and left a fourth unfinished at his death.

He married in September 1959 (Margaret) Yvonne Collins from Aberdare, and they had one daughter, Rhiannon (born 1968). He died at Menai Bridge on 29 July 1992. His manuscripts were placed in the National Library of Wales.

Author

Rhidian Griffiths

Sources

Malcolm Boyd, *William Mathias* (Cardiff 1978)

Geraint Lewis, William (James) Mathias, Grove Music Online

John G. Slawson, 'The choral music of William Mathias' (University Cincinnati, D.M.A., 1985)

ODNB

Further Reading

William Mathias (1934-92), Discover Welsh Music website, viewed 7 March 2018

Helen C. Thomas, Mathias, William James (1934–1992), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

Wikipedia Article: William Mathias

Additional Links

NLW Archives: William Mathias Music Manuscripts and Papers

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