

NICHOLAS, JOHN MORGAN (1895 - 1963), musician

Name: John Morgan Nicholas
Date of birth: 1895
Date of death: 1963
Spouse: Marion May Nicholas (née Lloyd)
Child: Meriel Nicholas
Child: Joan Nicholas
Parent: Margaret Nicholas (née Jones)
Parent: Rhys Nicholas
Gender: Male
Occupation: musician
Area of activity: Music
Author: Rhidian Griffiths

Morgan Nicholas was born on 4 June 1895 in Pen-y-cae, Port Talbot, the youngest but one of the seven children of Rhys and Margaret Nicholas. His father, a carpenter, who was also a good musician, and precentor at Saron Calvinistic Methodist chapel in Pen-y-cae, came of a family well established in the area and said to be descended from a family of Greek carpenters and musicians shipwrecked on the south Wales coast in the eighteenth century. His mother Margaret (née Jones) likewise came from an old established family which had for generations farmed Grugwellt Fach on Margam mountain, one of the old granges of Margam Abbey. Her brothers, [John Morgan Jones](#) of Merthyr and W. Margam Jones of Llwydcoed, were well-known ministers in the Calvinistic Methodist church.

Morgan Nicholas showed precocious musical talent at a very young age, and as a small child was said to be able to reproduce accurately on the piano pieces he had heard only once. At eight years old he was accompanist to the Aberafan choir at concerts and eisteddfodau, and at the age of twelve was highly praised by the adjudicators for his piano playing at the Swansea National Eisteddfod of 1907, being proclaimed winner out of 63 competitors. He was also one of the twelve players who accompanied the singing on harmoniums at the south Wales Calvinistic Methodist cymanfa ganu held in the National Eisteddfod pavilion in September of that year.

His exceptional talent caused him to be noticed by Miss Emily Talbot (1840-1918) of Margam, who paid for his education at the Eton Choir School, from where at the age of sixteen he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music. In 1916, aged 20, he joined the army, serving in the Reserve Household Battalion, then the Welsh Guards and the Grenadier Guards. He was stationed at Windsor and deputised for Sir Walter Parratt as organist at St George's Windsor until his battalion went to France in 1917. During his time in France he discovered a piano undamaged in the ruins of a château and played it for some hours one evening, only to find that his commanding officer was listening in the shadows, a scenario that was repeated many times.

In 1920 he was appointed Music Organiser for Montgomeryshire, a post funded by [Gwendoline](#) and [Margaret Davies](#) of Gregynog, and pioneered the development of music teaching in Montgomeryshire schools. Four years later, in 1924, he moved to Clwyd Hall, the home of Sir Crossland Graham, serving as a church organist and choir conductor. From 1926 to 1947 he was organist and choirmaster of St Oswald's Church, Oswestry, and taught music at the local grammar school and at Ellesmere College. During the Second World War he also taught at Gordonstoun during the school's evacuation to Llandinam.

In 1947 he was appointed executive officer of the University Council of Music in Cardiff, a post he held until his retirement in 1960. In this capacity he had huge influence over all aspects of music-making in Wales, particularly through the regular summer schools for music teachers at Harlech. In 1951 he established and conducted the Welsh Festival of Britain choir, which sang at venues throughout Wales and in London's Festival Hall, and made an LP record. He also conducted the choir at the opening of the Commonwealth Games in Cardiff in 1958. After his return to Cardiff he became organist and choirmaster at Pembroke Terrace Calvinistic Methodist chapel, where his cousin, Morgan R. Mainwaring, was minister.

He composed works in many forms, a large number of which remain unpublished. His chorus for male choirs, 'Ysbryd yw Duw' and his song, 'Y Dieithryn', dedicated to the tenor [David Lloyd](#), with whom he made two records as accompanist, are excellent examples of his work. But he also wrote instrumental pieces, for instance for the cellist [Ffrancon Thomas](#), and some of his works were in the repertoire of the celebrated oboist Léon Goossens. Two pieces for oboe and piano, 'Rhapsody' and 'Melody', were dedicated to the memory of his daughter, who was a promising oboist. His best-known composition is his classic hymn-tune 'Bryn Myrddin', written for the words 'Mawr oedd Crist yn nhragwyddoldeb' by [Titus Lewis](#).

He married Marion May Lloyd of Ton Pentre, Rhondda, on 27 April 1921, and they had two daughters, Joan, who died of polio aged 16, and Meriel. Morgan Nicholas died on 12 August 1963 and his funeral took place at Thornhill crematorium in Cardiff on 15 August. His ashes were buried at Oswestry.

Author

Rhidian Griffiths

Sources

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