

William Henry Harris

(1883 – 1973)

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Sir William Henry Harris was born in Fulham on 28th March 1883 and was named after his father. His mother was Alice Mary (née) Clapp. There was a musical family, and at fourteen the boy's exceptional gifts had attracted enough local attention to generate sufficient financial help to send him to St David's Cathedral, South Wales, to assist its somewhat easy-going organist, Herbert Morris.

He was soon quite content to let Harris take over at times, certainly when he preferred to sleep in during a weekday Matins. A scholarship at sixteen to the Royal College of Music, not to mention an FRCO, soon drew Harris to the attention of its Director, Sir Hubert Parry.

His long association with St George's Chapel, Windsor, dates back to this time, since its organist Sir Walter Parratt became his organ teacher. Composition was encouraged by Stanford and Charles Wood, and by Walford Davies, whom Harris would sometimes help out at the console of the organ in the Temple church London.

Appointed assistant organist at Lichfield Cathedral (1911) which he then combined as Master of Music at St. Augustine's Edgbaston following the death of Alfred Gaul.

With encouragement from Sir Granville Bantock, he took on some teaching at the Birmingham and Midland Institute.

A surprise appointment to succeed Sir Hugh Allen at New College Oxford (1919) gave Harris his first taste of being in charge, but only just, since his powerful predecessor did not find letting go at all easy. Moreover even five years later, having failed to prevent Harris founding the University Opera Club, Allen did his best to stop him putting on a pioneering production with Jack Westrup of Monteverdi's Orfeo. Mercifully, Allen was a good loser, and handed over the stewardship of the Oxford Bach Choir in 1926, although it cannot be said that Harris was ever quite as effective with a large choir as with a smaller one.

Politics at New College were not always kind to Harris, and he took the opportunity to move to Christ Church Cathedral in 1929 where conditions suited him better. In 1933, however, he was

head-hunted for the post of organist at St George's Chapel, where the early death of Charles Hylton Stewart after only six months in the position had created the vacancy.

Of all his Oxford duties not one was to remain, but he did retain his post as Professor of Organ and Harmony at the Royal College of Music until 1955, an appointment made as long ago as 1921.

Harris was always happy at Windsor. His tenure lasted almost three decades during which he composed much music both for choir, for organ solo and larger pieces too for the Three Choirs Festival and even two premières at the London Proms. Amongst his duties was the tutoring of the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose, the musical direction of many royal occasions and Garter Services, and the sub-conducting of both the 1937 and 1953 Coronation Services, all of which eventually resulted in a well-earned KCVO in 1954.

As an organist Harris had inherited from Parratt a wonderful sense of restraint, in complete contrast to Dr. Henry Ley, the much celebrated organ-playing Eton Precentor, just down the road. *"During my five years as a chorister, I doubt if I heard the Tuba stop drawn as many times, whereas I have little doubt that Etonians were hearing theirs as many times in a week. Nor have I ever since heard psalms accompanied with such subtle yet gentle imagination".*

Harris's flawless technique never seemed to fail him, even in later years when his control of the pulse sometimes did. There would be consternation down in the choir stalls as long introductions to such anthems as Haydn's 'Insanae et vanae curae' inexorably gathered speed before the time came for the choir to join in.

Sir William Harris retired to Petersfield in 1961 with his wife Kathleen Doris (née) Carter. They were married in 1913 and had two daughters. As early as 1925, Doris had all but lost her hearing, though experts advised that hers was a condition that advancing techniques might well some day remedy. Amazingly, in 1961, her hearing was partially restored. She died in 1968. Sir William lived on, reaching ninety in 1973 and dying on 6th September.

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