

# JOHN EDWARDS: A BIOGRAPHY

by  
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[“The Story of the Guild for the Promotion of Welsh Music” 1980]

In this, the Silver Jubilee year of the founding of the Guild for the Promotion of Welsh Music, it would seem a suitable opportunity to tell you something of its founder: John Edwards. A new generation of young musicians has arisen in Wales, indeed many composers may have been given an opportunity to write without knowing anything of the man whose idea it was to give Welsh composers the stimulus they so desperately needed and deserved. It was my good fortune to be one of John Edwards's pupils from the age of eight, until I went to the Royal College of Music, London, where he himself had been a student. Inevitably I grew to know and understand what he so desperately wanted, musically, for the Wales he loved. He once said,

*“I would like to see the day when the name 'Wales' will be as closely associated with our Composers in the eyes of the world as Norway is with Grieg and Finland is with Sibelius.”*

In October 1959 Sir Arthur Bliss paid a warm tribute to John Edwards as founder of Qualiton Records when he visited the factory in Pontardawe:

*“Here is something practical being done for Welsh music. John Edwards has in mind for getting a number of people to become subscribers to a library of records and music by Welsh Composers - this is something quite unknown to us in England.”*

After John Edwards's death in 1966, at the age of only 61, a tribute written by R.H.C. Rowlands (then Chairman of the Guild) said:

*“By founding the Guild, John Edwards has done more for Welsh music in our time than any other individual or body. He didn't, want the plaudits of the public, his concern was with Welsh music and Welsh Composers.”*

There is no Guild for the Promotion of English Music and we well know there is no need for Guilds to exist for the promotion of German, Italian, French, Spanish, Russian, Norwegian or Finnish music. The truth is, as John saw it, that the history of music is very largely the history of patronage. The lack of musical development in the history of a nation does not mean any lack of native genius to ‘create’ music, but, rather it is attributable to the lack of patronage to nurture native ability.

Who, therefore, was this man, John Edwards, with the quiet persuasive voice and the face of a visionary? Who, from his humble origins brought to the notice of the world the gifted and talented Composers of Wales? Who created the first recording company in Wales? Who managed to persuade the Master of the Queens Musick to come to Pontardawe (in October 1959)? Who encouraged and developed and whetted the appetite of any young talent he could find to teach? Examples are numerous, but Iola Edwards passed her ARCM and LRAM in piano at the age of 13.

John Edwards was born in Gwaun-Cae Gurwen on 28 July 1905, His forbears trekked to the South Wales 'Klondyke' from the rural north in the big migration of the mid nineteenth century. His maternal grandfather was John Jones "Y Coedwr", a timber craftsman of the pits and fashioner of superb wheelbarrows, walking sticks and fishing rods. It was the age when men delighted in the use of their hands and imagination. His father was a miner, and one of John's earliest recollections was of being carried on his father's shoulders by bicycle for his first music lesson at the house of Richard John Jones, the dynamic village schoolmaster of Cwmllynfell. The influx of unemployed miners from the English Midlands probably introduced the gusty Moody & Sankey hymns into John's life, instead of the traditional "Caniedydd". A young Devonian with the wonderful name of James Chaffe Pooke infused the minds of the young of the period in GCG with fanatical devotion to evangelical "swing", but his greatest feat was to fire eight year old John with a passion for music. He amazed his parents by his continuous playing of hymn tunes on the harmonium when he should have been playing with other children. A piano later replaced the harmonium, with no change in young John's habits.

When he left school at the age of 14, John followed his father to the pit - The Raven Colliery, Gernant. He worked in the pit by night, but kept up his piano practice hour after hour during the day (his only escape from the colliery). One fateful night - 23 September 1924 - John committed the unforgiveable sin, he fell asleep on the job underground. "There is no place for you here Edwards; pick up your lamp and go" were the angry and final words of the foreman. The young, forlorn John returned home, however, to find a letter from the Glamorgan County Council offering him a scholarship to the annual value of £100, tenable for 3 years at either the University of Wales or the Royal College of Music in London. He decided upon the latter. This was an euphoric day in the life of this shy but determined young man. The miners in his colliery presented him with a gold watch and chain. This he cherished, for it proved they had forgiven him his sin!

Few readers probably realise what a distinguished career John Edwards had as a student at the Royal College of Music under the guidance and supervision of the Principal, Sir Hugh Allen, Referring to John Sir Hugh said

*"I can confidently recommend John Edwards as a most accomplished pianist  
- I am perfectly sure he will always justify my very high opinion of him."*

His piano professor was the celebrated pianist/composer Arthur Benjamin. He also studied with Herbert Howells and C.,H, Kitson. Arthur Benjamin was so impressed by his new young Welsh student that he personally paid for the hire of a piano so that John could practice in his digs.

Amongst his contemporary students at the RCM were Cyril Smith and Phyllis Sellick and a few years his senior, Kendall Taylor.

While still a student he broadcast from Savoy Hill in 1927. He was chosen to give the second performance of the Gordon Jacob piano concerto with String Orchestra, at the Patrons Fund Concert with the Royal Albert Hall Orchestra, the then Dr, Adrian Boult conducting. He was one of the youngest piano students at the RCM at the time of this performance. A newspaper critic stated:

*"Let, us hope it will not be necessary for John Edwards to change his name to Edouards, or something equally foreign in order to placate the people who cannot, imagine anything good coming out of their own land."*

From The Times:

*“This young pianist played brilliantly and with the air of a Master; his technique was flawless, interpretation was perfect; the land of his birth may well be proud of so worthy a son.”*

At this time also he played concertos with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra under Sir Dan Godfrey, the Queens Hall Orchestra, London, the Aeolian Hall Orchestra, and the National Orchestra of Wales with Warwick Braithwaite. He played the Schumann piano concerto under the baton of Sir John Barbirolli with the London Symphony Orchestra at the Neath National Eisteddfod in 1934, This incidentally was Sir John’s first ever appearance in Wales.

He had been offered a Professorship at the Conservatoire in Sydney. This he refused, preferring to return to Wales where he continued to give recitals, concerts and broadcasts, often accompanying many famous artists of the time, such as Jelly d’Aranyi, Dennis Noble, Carrie Tubb, Trefor Davies, Isobel Baillie and Norman Allin,

Inevitably - stimulated by Arthur Benjamin’s teaching - John Edwards himself became interested in composition. Among his works are a suite, **Homage to Richard Jones**, an 18th century Welsh composer, a popular **Fantasy Novelette** and a Modern ‘Spook’ Dance. He also wrote many songs which were frequently broadcast. On a larger scale are **An Orchestral Fantasy on Welsh Tunes** and a **String Quintet**.

His achievements were all the more creditable as it was rare before the war for a young man from humble origins in the coal mine to reach such a high degree of perfection as a musician. Opportunities for young and talented musicians today are much greater, but in his time the step from the Valley and the Pit to the RCM and London was a huge one.

During his time at the colliery he had noticed and admired an attractive young lady from the nearby village of Brynaman. John would sometimes bring fellow students from the RCM to his village to sing and play at charity concerts. It was at a small party after one of these concerts that he was given the opportunity to meet Olwen Joshua – formally. She had been invited to join the party with her brother. To this day she affectionately recalls the times John had gently pursued her, even during his days at the coal pit. They were married on 17 October 1935. Olwen remained a devoted, understanding and sometimes long-suffering wife! His absentminded dream musical world was not always easy to understand, but their sense of humour, hard work and devotion and loyalty remained until the day he died. She believed implicitly in everything he tried to do, and helped without question in every way she knew.

In John’s boyhood days there was no radio, and few, if any, opportunities to hear concert or opera performances - rare even at the Eisteddfod. The coming of wireless was largely responsible for giving us a new world of music. John often posed the question - Would genius born in the wrong place at the wrong time, and without fertile soil in which to grow, come to its full fruition? Would Johann Sebastian Bach, if born in the Vale of Glamorgan in 1685, have produced anything like the music we associate with his genius? If we come nearer to our time and imagine Frederic Chopin being born in Merthyr Tydfil in 1810, would it have been a wasted genius even though Merthyr Tydfil at that time was practically the capital of Wales, with a population three times that of Cardiff? When Chopin died in 1849 his music for the piano was being performed in the great musical centres of Europe. It is hardly likely that Merthyr Tydfil had many pianos as early as 1849 and it was certainly not one of those great musical centres.

Joseph Parry was born in Merthyr 31 years after Chopin was born near Warsaw. Would Joseph Parry or R.S. Hughes, William Davies, John Henry, just a few talented composers of the time, have contributed so much to international music had they not been called upon to pay the penalty of being Welsh at a time when Wales was isolated from the flow of World Music? John Parry (1776-1851), such a talented Welshman was a contemporary of Beethoven and Schubert. As we all know, one thing is unquestioned: the deep rootedness of a nation's music; and the consequent contribution of composers great and small has been conditioned by the availability of patronage by the Church, Royalty, Nobility and State - indeed, the history of music is very largely the history of patronage. The lack of musical development in Wales can surely be attributed to this lack of patronage.

England enjoyed a musical prosperity in the 16th and 17th centuries when Byrd, Dowland, Gibbons, Purcell, etc., made their indelible mark on the world's music, but in the 18th century, England could well have done with a Guild for the Promotion of its music. Probably not until the arrival of Elgar in 1857 did England produce a major composer after the death of Purcell in 1695.

John often confessed his disgust to me, when, as a student at the RCM, his professors challenged him with the paucity of Welsh composers. Some years later, a chance meeting with one of these professors in the Piccadilly underground enabled John to verify that the composer who had recently been awarded the Clements Prize for a String Quartet was David Wynne - A Welsh Man! I know that John's admiration for David Wynne was profound, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that he felt that David Wynne provided the beginning of a new era of modern composers in Wales. The years covered in terms of musical development were so immense that the devotees of music of Wales were caught unawares.

It was over a period of some years with these thoughts and realisations, living and teaching music in Wales at the Castle College of Music, Cardiff, that John slowly devoted more and more time to writing criticisms in the Press; and indeed sometimes controversial articles, where he felt himself somewhat in the nature of a public enemy - mainly as a result of his plea for a hearing for new Welsh music. How well I remember occasions when he told me, with great excitement, of some new Welsh talent he had discovered. An outstanding example of this was a very young Welsh composer, who was then studying composition with Arthur Benjamin at the RCM in London. His name was Alun Hoddinott. John followed his meteoric career with great interest and it was therefore apposite that Alun Hoddinott should be the composer given the first commission when the Guild was eventually formed in 1954 - a symphony played at the Royal National Eisteddfod at Pwllheli in 1955.

In this determined frame of mind John felt that the time had come to take positive steps to promote young composers and, what was more important, give them an opportunity to have their works performed. Before 1954, there was neglect of the Welsh composer, with the very notable exception of the BBC. He told a typical story of one of his efforts in trying to raise funds from a public authority for an orchestral concert. All went well until he mentioned that the main purpose was to give a public hearing of an important work by a Welsh composer. Mr. "Town Clerk" opposed this on the grounds that he knew what he liked, but admitted knowing nothing about music! If the Grieg Piano Concerto was being performed then he was all for it, but he would certainly not tolerate any of this contemporary Welsh stuff!!

When John argued that there were better composers than Grieg in Wales today, things became really heated. In his position and with his power of speech, I'm afraid what Mr. "Town Clerk" liked in music was very important. Grieg's piano concerto was played at that concert - with the contemporary Welsh work (probably due to John's power of persuasion). In fact, it all worked out very well. The Welsh work was Alun Hoddinott's **Clarinet Concerto**, which was so well

received by the audience, that it came as a great surprise to John when Mr, “Town Clerk” himself was gracious enough to apologise for having been a stumbling block to the enterprise. It was obvious of course that Mr. “Town Clerk” had vigorously protested that he knew what he liked, but what he really meant was he liked what he knew! This is so often the case, even today.

It was thus in 1954, during that torrential Ystradgynlais Royal National Eisteddfod that the first meeting of the Guild was held at the Ystalyfera Hotel. Initially, it was called “The Welsh Orchestral Development Guild”: The chairman Dr. Ivor Thomas was present at that meeting and often tells his its embryonic stage. Professor Ian Parrott prevented by floods from attending has written his full and detailed history of the Guild as it has grown from humble origin through to innumerable achievements and to the present day.

An enormous effort was needed to launch the project. Mrs. Edwards recollects folding hundreds of letters to be posted to all the authorities in Wales to convince them of the necessity of the Guild’s being. John worked tirelessly in writing to all the influential musicians in the country asking for their support. This he slowly achieved and was always grateful and proud of their help and encouragement.

As I mentioned earlier, it was my good fortune to have John Edwards as my music teacher from the age of 8. I say ‘Music’ because it did not simply involve learning to play the piano and rudiments of music and singing - yes, singing, despite the fact that he could not sing a note. The most important and profound things that I learnt from the beginning were ‘musicianship’ and ‘professionalism’. He had an in-born talent and ability to encourage a child, which, as all musicians or indeed, any artist will appreciate, is paramount. He had little patience if had not done any practice, but there was always understanding if ‘0’ levels had take priority for a period. His principles in performance were to aim for perfection by absolute mastery of technique so that interpretation of the performance in hand could do justice to the composer.

*“You can overcome your nervousness if you think of the work you are performing and not of yourself.”*

John and Olwen Edwards became my ‘musical parents’; I was accepted, as were most of his pupils, as an important person in their lives. John cared so very much about developing the talent one had. He recognised the necessity to send one to the appropriate College of teacher to improve on anything which he had already found.

His own personal drive and determination gave his pupils the encouragement at an early age to reach goals sometimes far beyond their own ambitions. One of my fellow students at the RCM was a young Scotsman called Alexander Gibson, a wonderful accompanist and played for me, often, at examinations and concerts. I had occasion to introduce him to John Edwards. Their friendship and rapport was immediate. John had such a respect for this young man’s talent that he invited him to the Ystradgynlais Royal National Eisteddfod to adjudicate. Alex delivered his adjudication in Welsh, much to the amazement and admiration of the audience. John's faith in this young Scot is now obvious to us all. He is, of course, Sir Alexander Gibson CBE, Conductor of the Scottish National Orchestra and founder of Scottish Opera. Sir Alexander has kindly written a short appreciation of John Edwards especially for this brochure - there is little more I can add.

John and Alex talked incessantly about music in Wales and Scotland, Alex of course being principally concerned with the need for competitions and opportunities for young conductors (Dr, Daniel Jones agreed that he himself would have benefited from such a training when a student at the RAM). John felt the strong need for a Welsh National Orchestra. Thus an orchestral competition

was introduced at the Ystradgynlais Royal National Eisteddfod, the prize money awarded by the newly formed Guild.

There was also a prize for young conductors (sponsored again by the Guild). Composers slowly emerging from Wales at this time compared favourably with those of any other nation. Some of these were accepted by authorities abroad as capable of contributing substantially to international music - Dr. Daniel Jones, Dr. David Wynne, Arwel Hughes, Grace Williams, Dr. Ian Parrott, Alun Hoddinott, Mansel Thomas and William Mathias.

In the absence of a Welsh National Orchestra the works of these brilliant Welshmen were rarely performed and therefore this effort to establish a place for Welsh musical culture was pathetically impeded. The Guild then tried to arrange for some of these works to be performed in London by some of the first class orchestras and conductors. Dr. Trevor Harvey estimated that a guarantee of £200 would be needed for such a concert - a large sum of money in 1954 - but in the opinion of the newly formed Guild, an essential duty to help promote these composers, to gain much needed prestige for themselves and their nation.

Some Welsh communities with powerful choral traditions have in the past and present been performing musical comedy of low aesthetic standards. The expenditure of thousands of pounds in staffing our Welsh schools with qualified musicians is of no avail if our children grow up to become members of a community which is hampered by lack of musical facilities. The Welsh Development Guild maintained that the National Orchestra when it arrived and indeed orchestral music presented in Wales in the meantime, should be viewed as a social amenity, based on the same economic footing as the park, the bowling green, sports stadium and swimming pool. It is vital to the health of the community.

Thus was the beginning of a long and exhaustive struggle to raise money and enthusiasm for what was eventually to become the Guild for the Promotion of Welsh Music. Slowly the enthusiasm grew in Wales as you will have read in Professor Parrott's history of the Guild.

I feel sure that I speak on behalf of all John Edwards's pupils when I say that we were the most fortunate young musicians in Wales at the time to have in their teacher a man with such devotion, confidence, foresight, vision, stubborn determination and sincere care for our future careers.

His friendship was true and something I will always cherish. He had a wonderful sense of humour - all the more humorous when expressed in his native tongue! (He cared little, if anything, for recognition of his own achievements and success.) He lived in a dream world of his own, was modest to a fault, but his rewards came in his pupils' successes. He drove his car as hard as he drove his own body - knowing little of what went on under the bonnet! His ideas were always for the improvement and betterment of standards of music in his beloved Wales - he believed passionately that so much talent needed to be channeled and pointed in the right direction. John never gave up. Even on the day he died he was making notes for the next Guild meeting! He did so much for our country and her young composers.

During a visit to Stockholm, the principal of an influential Scandinavian Combine of engineering and record processing firm sat with John in the lounge of a luxury hotel. The Scandinavian's eyes assessed the visitor from across the North Sea,

*"You are from Vales - I know of the modern music of Vales - those composers, 'ow do you call them Hoddin-ot, Daniel Chones!"*

The Welshman smiled benignly. It was rewarding to travel from the Swansea Valley to Stockholm if only to hear from the knowledgeable Swede that some Welsh composers are recognised now to be in the mainstream of European music. His modesty prevented him from telling the Swede that this was probably due to his own exhaustive efforts.

Many people have contributed to the success of the Guild, many of its aims have been achieved, Twenty years ago, audiences could be excused for failing to take modern music seriously because of the poor standard of performances. Today the position has been transformed. There is a growing body of musicians who are psychologically on the side of the composer, willing to take infinite pains to perform his works properly. The Guild still has an important part to play in discovering, encouraging and providing the opportunity for the Welsh composer to have his or her works performed despite today's financial stringencies. Neither revolutions, wars, nor poverty have extinguished music in the past. It would take much more than our present problems to do so now.

I have written about John Edwards at some length in an effort to express some of the thoughts of a man of gentleness but of determination, of vision but of deep practical humanity. Those who knew him knew a remarkable Welshman. I hope that those who did not have the good fortune to know him may now have some understanding of his philosophy and the struggles he had on their behalf. In Professor Alun Hoddinott's words,

*"He was a man fifty years ahead of his time."*



John Edwards 1905 - 1966