

John Sanders

The only biography available online of **John Sanders** is his obituary from *The (London) Independent* (December 31, 2003)

By Kenneth Shenton

AS ORGANIST and Master of the Choristers at Gloucester Cathedral and Conductor of the Three Choirs Festival for over a quarter of a century, John Sanders enriched the world of music far beyond the normal confines of the provincial organ loft. Organist, conductor, composer, teacher, adjudicator and, not least, an assiduous administrator, this multi-faceted musician influenced and nurtured the lives of many generations of aspiring musicians.

Born in Woodford, Essex, in 1933, Sanders won a music scholarship to Felsted School before, in 1950, moving to the Royal College of Music, where he studied with Sir John Dykes Bower. Two years later he moved to Cambridge to read Music, becoming Organ Scholar at Gonville and Caius College. In 1955, by examination, he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists.

John Sanders began his cathedral career in 1958 when he was appointed Assistant Organist of Gloucester Cathedral and Director of Music at the King's School. Moving north in 1963 to become Organist and Master of the Choristers at Chester Cathedral was to prove particularly propitious. Here he not only met his future wife, but started playing a pivotal role in the musical life of the diocese as well as becoming Artistic Director of the Chester Festival.

The retirement, in 1967, of his musical mentor, Dr Herbert Sumsion, the long-serving Organist of Gloucester Cathedral, offered him the perfect platform for his emerging talents. Dynamic and diverse, as before, Sanders also made his mark within the local community, conducting both the Gloucestershire Symphony Orchestra and Gloucester Choral Society. In 1968, he succeeded Sumsion as Director of Music at Cheltenham Ladies' College.

As a recitalist, Sanders particularly rejoiced in British organ music of both the 19th and early 20th centuries. As his recordings illustrate, his playing was fiery and impassioned, his sense of rhythm matched by a love of colour, all solidly underpinned by a splendidly natural technique. As a choral technician, he was solid and musicianly, exacting and demanding by degrees. He expected, and gently obtained, the highest standards in choral technique be it amid the intimacy of the cathedral choir or the vast resources of larger choral groups.

Equally adept as a composer, his particular feel for the liturgy allowed him to write well for voices. Here his anthems, services, chants and choral works, often written for special

occasions, have retained their place in the repertoire. Liturgical pieces include an early Festival Te Deum (1962), Te Deum (1985), Jubilate Deo (1986), Two Prayers (1988), A Canticle of Joy (1991), The Reproaches (1993) and the more extended St Mark Passion (1993). For the organ he essayed the contrasting Soliloquy (1977) and Toccata (1979).

The role of Organist of Gloucester Cathedral automatically thrusts its holder into the maelstrom of music that is the Three Choirs Festival. In partnership with his fellow organists at Hereford and Worcester Cathedrals, the Organist at Gloucester has triennially the responsibility for planning and performing the music for what is now a week-long cultural festival held at each venue by rotation. Dating back to 1715 and, for many years, dominated by the venerable presence of Sir Edward Elgar, the festival has moved forward in a most positive manner, thanks in no small part to such as John Sanders.

In charge of nine Gloucester festivals during his long tenure as Organist, for almost 20 years, from 1975, he formed a unique and stable artistic triumvirate with Roy Massey at Hereford and Donald Hunt at Worcester. Friends as well as colleagues, their relationship was solidly underpinned by a trust and respect and it was Hunt who, looking back, later wrote that "it was one of the happiest associations that could be imagined!"

Able assisted by his wife Janet, who sang soprano in the Festival Chorus, Sanders took meticulous care with everything with which he was involved, be it a piece of administration or a performance of the Verdi Requiem. It was to Sanders that the honour fell of conducting the 250th festival in 1977, and one for which he was admirably equipped, though he possibly did not realise it at the time.

In the Silver Jubilee Year the festival committee had commissioned a Mass of Christ the King from the Master of the Queen's Musick, Malcolm Williamson, to be dedicated to the Queen. Regrettably the work failed to be completed on time. Amid an encircling media frenzy, in choosing to perform the work as it then stood Sanders adroitly rescued a difficult diplomatic situation, with his reputation rightly enhanced, as the Musical Times reported:

Mr Sanders is the figure to emerge with honour. His public statements attributing the affair to the strain under which Mr Williamson was working in Silver Jubilee Year were restrained and dignified, and an hour before the concert he was still insisting at a press reception that there were no recriminations.

It was indeed Mr Sanders's festival. He was, to borrow an expression from one-day cricket, the man of the match. Not only did he approach the new Mass with zeal and devotion in difficult conditions; during the week he turned in a series of performances, which emphasises how much he grows in authority with every festival. It was largely down to him that the 250th anniversary had so much that was illustrious.