



John Mansfield Thomson

1926-1999

'The motive of history is at bottom poetic'. Those significant words of Trevelyan were used by John Thomson to introduce a speech acknowledging his receipt of the CANZ Citation for Services to New Zealand Music in February 1988. And there is poetry in all John's writings; poetry in the finesse of their polished presentation as well as in their psychological origins. Until the end of his life, John declined to be called a musicologist, preferring instead the term music historian. He considered history writing to be a noble profession. As a historian of New Zealand music, his avowed aim was to create a 'sense of community, not only with the present but also with the past' and thereby 'satisfy a craving we all have for a valid, dynamic history'. In the end he achieved that goal, but it cost him many years of labour, not to mention incidents of thanklessness and hurtful controversy. It is too soon, yet, to gauge exactly the full measure of John Thomson's musical history-making contribution to this country, but I feel sure time will reveal it to be substantially greater than most musicians here are currently aware of. He succeeded in laying the foundation stones of our music history, uncovering artistic vitality and continuity where previously there had been vagueness or ignorance.

The award of the Citation in 1988 was especially welcome for John because of its timing, conveying to him some much valued public encouragement from composer colleagues. It preceded the final publication of his most ambitious and most troublesome project undertaken in his home country — the one volume history of New Zealand music. This book was over ten years in the making, and the last stage of editing and cutting during 1987-88, at the behest of an editor he found unsympathetic, was painful. When the *Oxford History of New Zealand Music* appeared it was far from the author's original ideal and to the end he regretted its final, truncated and distorted shape. The editorial cutting demanded of that book at least gave birth to the *Biographical Dictionary of New Zealand Composers*, so all was not lost.

The cultural value of history was pre-eminently interesting to John, and he always welcomed opportunities

to show how music functioned as a social activity. The last book he edited is a fine example of this integrated approach. *Farewell Colonialism; the New Zealand International Exhibition, 1906-7* covers the spectrum of displays and activities of that famous exhibition in a series of invited essays arising out of a Stout Research Centre conference. As well as editing the book, John contributed two articles, one on the influential Crystal Palace Exhibition in London of 1851 and the other on music in the Christchurch exhibition itself. Both are characteristically lively pieces, as invitingly readable as they are informative and well-researched. His recent Cambridge Companions to the recorder and to the flute display similar qualities of scholarship worn lightly. Dull writing was anathema to John. His own numerous publications stand as models of beautifully crafted prose: they are typically concise and stylish, revealing a sensitivity to words and tone which is genuinely poetic, whatever the subject matter in hand.

John Thomson was born in Blenheim. Impressions of his early years there are evocatively recorded by him in 'Suspensions and resolutions: Words about Music', his contribution to the book *The Godwits Return*. In a circle of fate which he enjoyed greatly, his beloved Marlborough region was becoming a centre for New Zealand fine wine making when he returned to live and work in Wellington in the mid 1980s. A long-standing interest in wine, its regions and varieties and complexities — as well as its pleasures — was one of John's enduring passions. The now-proven healthy properties of red wine, which he preferred, probably helped prolong and certainly enhanced his life in his later years when he was dogged by inherited heart problems. His persuading the octogenarian Sir Michael Tippett to fly with him in a tiny single-engined plane across Cook Strait from Wellington to Koromiko for a quick mini-tour of Marlborough vineyards in 1990 has become a minor folk legend.

Following the Blenheim childhood there came a less happy spell at Nelson Boys College, but while there he learned piano at the Nelson School of Music. During 1944-45 he briefly saw war service in the fleet air arm and on

being demobilised encountered the cultural richness of life in London. This would prove to be a decisive experience. He returned to New Zealand in 1946 and completed a BA in history at Victoria University of Wellington. At the same time he learned flute from James Hopkinson, then principal flute in the National orchestra. He also studied recorder with Zillah Castle in Wellington and later with Walter Bergmann in London.

In 1949 he launched his editorial activities with *Hilltop*, a journal which gave first publication to a number of New Zealand writers later to become prominent, such as the poet Alistair Campbell. Later that year John moved to Sydney, and then on to London where he worked for the next 34 years. He founded and edited *Composer*, the journal of the Composers Association of Great Britain (1963-66), then became music books editor for publishers Barrie and Jenkins (1964-66). Moving to Faber and Faber (1966-71) he edited such influential books as Charles Rosen's *Classical Style*.

In 1973 he accepted an invitation to found the journal *Early Music* for the Oxford University Press and went on to edit it for ten years. Studies in typography and design at the Camberwell School in London combined with John's innate good taste lead to *Early Music* gaining recognition as an international exemplar of beautiful journal design, as well as its excellence of content. It remains the foremost journal in its field to this day.

John returned to New Zealand in 1984 to become the inaugural Research Fellow at the Stout Research Centre in Wellington. This fellowship was instrumental in enabling him to complete the *Oxford History of New Zealand Music* and to continue work on several other projects. It provided a crucial springboard for him to re-establish himself as a presence in the local literary and musical scene after three and a half decades away. The Wellington milieu was not always as open and warm-hearted as the one John had been used to in London. For someone so naturally gregarious and generous as he was, the instances of insularity and mean-spiritedness he sometimes encountered back in New Zealand were especially hard to bear. Lack of generosity of spirit was an aspect of the national character he had forgotten about: he recharged his emotional batteries with trips overseas and lively times with appreciative friends locally.

It has been said that John Thomson had a gift for friendship. That is true, but friendship was a quality he felt so important in life that he devoted large amounts of time and thought to maintaining and developing it. The extent of his network of friends was extraordinary. Some of the affection in which he was held around the world has been evident in the various obituaries published, but there is also a large archive of correspondence revealing the depth as well as the sheer number of friendships he had. He lived alone, but as if in inverse proportion to that, the well-being of friends and family figured large in his scale of things. Perhaps he was especially sensitive to this from having been orphaned relatively young himself. In any event, to be privileged with John's friendship was to have one's life permanently enriched.

John was one of the very few New Zealander music scholars, with a genuinely high international profile, and not just in the English-speaking world. For many years he contributed to MGG, the German equivalent of the New Grove Dictionary. His death was noted in news broadcasts on the European equivalents of our Concert FM radio network.

John was the recipient of several prizes and awards, including the Oxford University Press Biography Competition for *A Distant Music* (1978), his biography of the

(opposite) John Mansfield Thomson (Guy Robinson)

composer Alfred Hill, and the Citation for Outstanding services to New Zealand Music mentioned above. In 1991 he was conferred Doctor of Music (honoris causa) by Victoria University of Wellington and from 1996 until his death was Research Associate in the Music Department at the University of Waikato. He was delighted by an unexpected award from the Lilburn Trust a few months before his death recognising his lifetime's achievement: the award money he spent on a new computer to facilitate more work.

The cold winter of 1999 damaged John's already delicate health. For a number of years he had depended on medication and careful diet management to control a failing heart, but cold winds and a progressive deterioration of his condition lead to a series of hospitalisations during the winter. To those who knew him well, it became increasingly clear that a recovery was unlikely. Despite the best efforts of the Wellington Hospital surgeons to repair the heart, in early September he was advised by doctors that he should put his affairs in order. He responded that given the number of projects in progress he could probably squeeze that into five years or so! It was not to be, and he died early on Saturday morning, 11 September. During the last few weeks in hospital, John faced approaching death with great courage and dignity. A stream of family, friends and well-wishers from all around the country made their way to his bedside, temporarily turning the ward in a hospital tower block into a salon in the sky. To the end, as ever, bottles of fine wine were brought in and convivially shared, lively and stimulating conversation exchanged.

The funeral service a few days later was held in Old St Pauls. The tone was both celebratory but inevitably sad as well, with memorable eulogies from Vincent O'Sullivan, Alistair Campbell, Lauris Edmond and others. To conclude the service, the New Zealand String Quartet played the Cavatina from Beethoven's Op.130. At John's own request, his ashes have been scattered from a headland by members of his family.

John Thomson exemplified an inclusive attitude to art and culture not so common in this country: his outlook was holistic. The world of music permanently fascinated—indeed obsessed—him. He sacrificed any chance of achieving wealth by devoting himself to writing about music and to carving out the foundations of New Zealand's own music history. It was not always an easy path. The final piece of writing published by John appeared in the previous issue of *Music in New Zealand* on the subject of Berlioz's letters. The article begins with a personal observation: 'Writing about music can be a delicately dangerous business . . . ' However, his lifelong fascination with music enlivened an interest in the other arts: his collection of paintings and engravings was built up over decades with loving care. He was also widely read and an accomplished photographer, especially of architecture and landscapes. His interest in wine was famous. For John, intelligent engagement with these things within a wide circle of good friends constituted the good life. He was a passionate man who could become heated in debates on topics close to his heart, but he had sufficient largesse to apologise if the mark were overstepped in the heat of the moment. He was quick to begin mending fences if a friendship were strained. A profoundly humane man, courtesy, concern and generosity were the outward signs he gave of respect for others and the value he put on friendship. As a scholar he was scrupulous and generous, and as a colleague he was unfailingly supportive. Despite the rich legacy he leaves in his work, he will be dearly missed.

MARTIN LODGE