Allan Wicks, 1923–2010

A personal tribute by D'Arcy Trinkwon

Allan Wicks died on 4 February 2010. Although his name may not be so familiar to younger generations, to those older he was known as one of the most eminent of all cathedral organists, a formidable musical crusader – both at the organ and at the helm of his choir. Although it is impossible to do full justice to such a charismatic and fascinating spirit in the space allowed, I hope my efforts may to some extent show even just a pale shade of his exceptional talent and personality.

Appointed CBE upon his retirement in 1988 (at the conclusion of the Lambeth Conference that year), Allan gave nearly 30 years of service as Organist and Master of the Choristers at Canterbury Cathedral. Although many might have welcomed their new found freedom to give more recitals, he chose to firmly draw a line under his distinguished career and refused all invitations to give concerts: he had, as he wryly remarked to me at that time, done quite enough practice over the years and now wanted the time to do all the things (and explore all the music) that he had never had the time to do before. He also wanted to spend time with the family whom he adored.

The son of a parson, Allan Wicks was born near Skipton, Yorkshire. A very advanced pianist as a child, he turned to the organ as a teenager believing himself, in his typically modest fashion (one of his hallmarks), upon the advice of his teachers, unequal to a career as a pianist.

His studies at Oxford (as an organ scholar at Christchurch) were interrupted by the Second World War during which time he served as a Captain with the 14th Punjab Regiment in India. He later remarked that his ear for languages had doubtless saved his life: he learned Erdu fluently by ear very quickly and was thus assigned to interrogating prisoners, unlike his colleagues who were usually sent straight into the battlefield. Upon the cessation of hostilities, he resumed his studies in Oxford, and in 1947 he was appointed Assistant Organist at York Minster. (Francis Jackson had been appointed Organist in succession to Bairstow in the preceding year.) Whilst at York, Allan was also appointed chorus master of the Leeds Philharmonic Society – much to Bairstow's chagrin. Allan had deputised for Bairstow, and the choir subsequently expressed their preference, therefore he was appointed). He also taught at St Peter's School, and was pivotal in the revival of York's Mystery Plays, directing the music commissioned from James Brown to accompany their performance in the 1951 Festival of Britain.

In 1954 he moved to Manchester as Organist of the Cathedral and quickly began to build the reputation and repertoire of the choir far beyond their previous limits: early music and 'modern' composers such as Britten, Berkeley, Tippett, Ligeti, Ridout and Stravinsky quickly began to appear alongside all the more traditional names in the music lists. He also formed a cantata choir and occasional orchestra with whom he performed all the Bach oratorios, passions, Mass, plus those of Mozart, Haydn, Britten, and Stravinsky. As to his appointment to Canterbury in 1961, I remember him describing how he had only got the post by 'accident': the then Dean (known as the 'Red Dean') was evidently much disliked by his Chapter, and when he took such a strong dislike to Allan they voted *for* Allan just to spite him! He served Canterbury with dedication, devotion, and dignity under three archbishops. In fact it was such a perfect match that it would have been hard to envisage a

Canterbury Cathedral without an Allan Wicks.

He soon became one of the most highly regarded cathedral musicians of his day, not by posturing, but by *what* he did and *how* he did it. Never pompous or arrogant (like some of his colleagues undoubtedly were), he held the greatest respect for the office and traditions – musical and spiritual – that his role represented, fulfilling his role with deep reverence and a marked absence of pretentious piety. His work with the choir was in so many ways radical. For one thing, he hated the overly refined style so prevalent in the early years of his career, instead exploring what was then termed 'continental tone' – a more natural, unaffected sound with less-distorted vowels. As at Manchester, he continually introduced new works – not just as a result of his own interest but also because he feared that such musical establishments might become little more than 'museums' unless living composers were tempted and encouraged to write new music to carry the traditions into the future.

At the start of his career, choir conducting was not the norm. 'We never used to conduct like the cathedral organists now [who] hardly ever play the organ, they're down there wagging a finger and waving their arms about'. Not that he ever waved his arms or made a spectacle of himself. Standing quietly on one side of the stalls, he was one of the most discreet conductors of all, his movements devoid of any exhibition. The onlooker was only usually able to see subtle, graceful hand and arm movements: the expression directions themselves were all in his face. He *felt* the music so deeply that all those singing under his direction had only to *see* the expression in his face: as one of his lay-clerks so beautifully said to me 'Allan transported us all to Heaven with a few waves of his hands'.

The utter magic Allan could create in music – his psalms, particularly, were legendary – was perhaps unequalled (as Ralph Downes noted in his memoirs). A man of letters, he passionately loved the dramatic possibilities of cathedral music in its liturgical setting and here his passion and understanding of, and for, the theatre deeply informed his sense of timing and space. In addition to all the standard works he did so wonderfully, he was among the first to introduce spirituals into the liturgy and his ability to create other-worldly atmospheres was as apparent in pieces such as *Steal away* as it was in a Howells service or responses, the Tudors or anything else. So often would he tell us things like 'I don't want a dry seat in the house!' when preparing music of great emotion. I wonder how many other organists of his day introduced tambourines and percussion (when suitable) to bring Renaissance music to life?

Often his methods were quite unconventional...once he hurled a hymn book down the length of the Quire; watching in rapt silence, he instantly seized our attention and fascination (not to mention disbelief and amusement). When it landed – BANG! – just missing the High Altar itself, he explained how a musical phrase naturally had a rise, an arch, a fall, an end. We instantly understood. On another occasion, the Cathedral was thronging with noisy tourists as we were rehearsing in the Quire before a Saturday evensong. Suddenly, exploding, he cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled – in raucous football-terrace tones – 'Get that brat out of here!'

As a recitalist he was respected not only as one of the most brilliant of his day, but also as a real visionary, and his programmes were always innovative and featured new and lesser-known works. He was, after all, performing Messiaen widely in the late 1950s before anyone else in England had really heard of him, let alone learnt any. He was never afraid of courting controversy either – he played Ligeti's *Volumina* during the late 60s, at a time when many organists had never even *seen* a graphic score. (His performance at the Festival Hall fused the organ in the first moments!) Tirelessly hoping to stimulate new interest in the instrument's future, he commissioned more new works than any other organist of his day – composers such as Chapple, Wood, Joubert, Williamson, Hamilton, Goehr, Whetham, Mathias, and Maxwell Davies all wrote for him. Of particular significance were the many pieces written for him and the choir by Alan Ridout who lived within the shadow of the huge Cathedral. Bach always featured prominently in his recitals and he had his own, utterly unique, way of performing it. However, as with everything else, he never aimed to create mannered or academically 'authentic' performances – just those that respected the beauty of the music, made it come to life, and moved the listener. Whilst he could do truly remarkable things at the organ, he himself was the first to admit things sometimes didn't go quite as he hoped: I remember him playing a *Trio Sonata* in Canterbury once and after a few bars...silence... Then a distant, irritated and faceless voice called down from the Rood Screen 'It's not fair to treat Bach like that: I'm going to start again!' Elsewhere, his performance of *Toccata in F* (BWV540) got somewhat 'tangled' – infuriated, he approached the audience and said with ineffable poise quite his own, 'I made a mess of that: I can do it much better! And to prove it, I'm going to play it again!' (Which he did, perfectly.) Evidently he valued Bach's reputation far more than he concerned himself with what others may have thought of his.

Although he made a number of LP recordings (and many BBC broadcasts), it is lamentable that none are available on CD. For example his remarkable performances of Williamson's *Symphony* and *Vision* at Coventry, his wonderful *La Nativité* at St Paul's (before the Mander rebuild) would be such splendid additions to the catalogues. It is also a pity that no one ever recorded his improvisations or final-verse re-harmonisations: these were so often extraordinary, even cataclysmic.

On top form he was absolute dynamite: I remember vividly the walls of Canterbury literally shaking with the raw elemental energy with which he threw himself into pieces like Langlais' *Fête*, Dupré's *Prelude & Fugue in B*, or *Evocation*, the finale of Widor VI, *Transports de Joie*, and not forgetting his quite demonic Liszt BACH. Whilst to some his explosive playing gave only irritation (I recall one dull grey person snivelling through gritted teeth 'Oh! There goes Mr Wicks...showing off again'), to Allan, the music – be it choir or organ – was a living expression and affirmation of the religious rituals he

tried so hard to imbue with spirituality, life, and a message of hope.

He could, however, be highly mischievous, even capricious – and so many of us know countless hilarious stories of his antics. I remember during the time I was 'organ-boy' (the chorister whose duty it was to page-turn at the end of services) one day running to the top of the organ loft stairs – for I always ran as fast as I could to avoid missing anything – where Allan was improvising seraphically on célestes after a big service. With an impish glint in his eye, he turned to me and said, 'lean over and tell me if those buggers are kneeling down praying!' When I said they were, he declared 'Right! Let them have it!' and launched into an apocalyptic *Transports de Joie* that jet-propelled them from their kneelers. On another occasion I was turning pages when – that thing dreaded by all page-turners – the aged music fell to pieces, pages flying and fluttering everywhere. 'Find page 15! Bloody page 15!' he squawked whilst thundering the piece out. We all knew his practised methods for putting preachers off their stride and bringing them to a halt if he considered their sermon had gone on too long. First, he would switch the organ blower on (which prior to the 1978 rebuild sounded as though an aeroplane was about to take-off via the roof). If that didn't work he would stick a pencil into the top C of the 1' stop, which to the uninitiated, sounded like a perilous electrical fault with the microphones. However, on one occasion, these tactics went unheeded as a tubby old village priest continued to rant and rave on the ills of society (whilst fiddling with his hearing-aid). To his, and our, shock it was not the Apocalypse itself, which he had been so emphatically predicting for more than 45 minutes, that interrupted him, but Allan blasting out the introduction to the final hymn on full organ. Everyone leapt to their feet and sang with gusto, desperate to get out and go home. Cathedral organists of today are probably too bound by contractual terms for anyone to dare follow his example!

Extensively read and a man of great culture, his laser wit and (so often hilarious) humour were known and loved by all, if equalled by none. Although he normally showed everyone the greatest courtesy, he was not one to hold back from bringing anyone (especially those who presumed themselves nearer to God) firmly back to earth with a stinging remark that they only usually fully understood as they minced off. He loathed pomposity and loved to confront priggish social attitudes. Again so many examples, but I remember an irritatingly grand bassoonist having his pretensions of grandeur exploded when Allan mischievously said 'you play the farting bed-post'. Once he enthusiastically told me that when a well-known recitalist's agent quoted their fee for a possible Canterbury recital, he dismissively replied 'I can play as many wrong notes as they can for that price!'

Allan's enormous modesty and humility surely meant that he never quite saw as busy a recital career as he most certainly could have done – and others did. Also, in his early Canterbury years the Chapter's refusal to allow him to be absent to give recitals (or really to have any career outside the building) didn't help. (This once resulted in a rage during which he tore a door of its hinges!) In typically self-effacing manner, he dismissively listed his interests in *Who's Who* as such things as 'washing-up', 'destructive gardening' and so on.

We choristers loved him. Ever fair, he always treated us with kindness, unafraid to show his humanity and compassion. He didn't display favouritism: we were all on the same voyage, we were all equally important to him. Never unkind, he never spoke in a patronizing manner, and not once did he stoop to the terror tactics of some cathedral organists. In fact, he talked to us almost as confidents, eliciting our greatest admiration and respect by the value he showed us by his trust. He knew how to get the best out of people and how to allow them to flower – someone recently wonderfully termed him 'An Angel of Inspiration'. We were, of course, expected to behave properly and with manners at all times, but in effect our manners only reflected the example he set. He didn't tolerate bad manners and occasionally his temper would explode, sometimes spectacularly. This might be frightening, even hilarious, for the onlooker rather – if not the recipient. I remember one ill-humoured chorister who, after making a V-sign at the matron, found himself booted into the kitchen in a dust-cloud of terrifying rebukes.

One of our highlights as choristers was always being invited to the Wicks' beautiful home a few miles from Canterbury. Invitations were by rotation, and none were favoured. During the periods when the choir had to be in residence during school holidays (Christmas, Easter etc.) all the choristers would spend the day. We would play games and amuse ourselves in the lovely gardens, with Allan himself directing and taking part in all fun and proceedings to the full.

A person of true integrity and Christian humility, Allan was devoted to his wife and two daughters and their families – all of whom survive him. He once joked that he had turned down an invitation to give a lecture by someone he didn't hold in any regard saying 'Thank you, but I would far prefer to play with my family!' His devoted wife Elizabeth was always by his side, the rock who quietly looked after him and made his very special family life possible, whilst giving him freedom to work. The enormous respect and devotion he inspired was reflected in the 80th Birthday celebrations organized for him by the Canterbury Old Choristers – more than 140 of the 180 choristers he had had during all those years there turned up to mark their affection for such a unique person. In a typically eloquent speech, holding his wife's hand throughout, he spoke of how they had always 'done everything together', he had not done it alone and pointed out that that was what had really mattered.

May I conclude by saying that (and might I dare to be a voice for all those who knew him) whatever we may be able to do, we are all indebted beyond words to his example, influence, and inspiration. I think it also right to state that he was one of those rare things – a truly great man.

D'Arcy Trinkwon began his musical career as one of Allan Wicks' choristers at Canterbury.