

Four colleges and a cathedral

Memories of Lucian Nethsingha, from the back row of the choir

The remarkable story of Lucian Nethsingha's career began in Ceylon (the name he always used when talking about his home country). He was educated at an impressive Anglican church school just outside Colombo, St Thomas's College. There his outstanding musical talents, primarily as a pianist at that time, were recognized by the college's chaplain and choirmaster, Canon Roy Yin. Andrew will have more to say about Roy Yin's role in Lucian's life. It was through his intervention that arrangements were made for the eighteen-year-old Lucian to travel to England to continue his studies.

He spent three years at the Royal College of Music, studying organ and composition, and then went on to Cambridge where he took a degree in music at King's College. That's three significant colleges so far, each of which played a huge role in Lucian's development. St Michael's was to be the fourth: in 1959, at the age of 23, Lucian was appointed organist and master of the choristers here, just five years after that one-way voyage to England.

He quickly acquired a reputation as a dedicated and meticulous choral director in the great Anglican tradition of cathedral music which St Michael's College represented, and which Lucian loved. Most choir schools are associated with great cathedrals or university colleges in large cities, but here, in this quiet corner of Worcestershire, there was no steady supply of choral scholars or lay clerks, and finding altos, tenors and basses to complement the wonderful array of trebles in the front desks must have been a nightmare. When (for example) a bass left the choir who happened also to teach maths the post could only be filled by ... a bass who could teach maths.

When I joined the choir in 1968 the men's voices consisted of just three basses, two tenors, and two altos. Two of the men were long-established lay clerks who lived and worked in Tenbury (the wonderful George Coles and Vin Petley); the rest of us were teachers at the College.

During term we sang Matins on most weekdays – I think we were the only establishment other than St Paul's Cathedral that still did this – and Choral Evensong every day, and of course two sung services every Sunday. The choir sang thirteen choral services each week, and Lucian had to make that happen more or less single-handedly, with no assistant to help him.

We rehearsed in this church, and also in the famous college library, surrounded by shelves of rare leather-bound volumes. I remember at first being puzzled about why we spent so much time rehearsing the hymns and the psalms at the expense of singing the more substantial anthems and canticles. The answer was of course that Lucian attached equal importance to every detail of the service and was not satisfied with anything that failed to reach his very high standards. Like the services themselves, choir practices were serious affairs, and I think we were all aware of our responsibility, and proud of the unique institution to which we belonged.

Lucian had married Jane in 1965, and it would be hard to overstate the importance of the role she was to play throughout their life together. They lived in the small cottage on the other side of the cricket pitch. There was no room for an office or study – Lucian would work on service lists and rehearsal plans sitting at a tiny desk in a corner of the drawing room.

Andrew's fascination with service lists probably began at that desk at a very early age!

Lucian's modesty, exquisite manners, and lack of self-importance meant that he rarely talked about himself; and he was adept at politely steering the conversation in some other direction if you asked him the wrong questions. But I do have one or two precious memories of occasions when he opened up a little more than usual about his earlier life. Ceylon remained very important to him and he made regular trips there, especially during his later years.

But English Cathedral music was at the centre of his life, and it was a great English cathedral, Exeter, that in 1973 laid claim to him after thirteen years at St Michael's. He was a third of the way through his career, the greater part still ahead of him; but Andrew is the person to tell us something about the Exeter years.

The friendships Lis and I made while we were in Tenbury have lasted a lifetime; but we too had to move on, hard as it was to leave St. Michael's. It never occurred to us that the College itself would cease to exist just a few years later, and that beautiful music, such as we've heard today, would soon be a rarity in this church rather than a daily occurrence.

Let me end with a few words from a tribute to Lucian published in the magazine of St Thomas's College, his first alma mater

It could truly be said that Lucian Nethsingha spent himself in the service of God; and his life's contribution to the cause of the choral music he was passionately committed and wedded to will be remembered forever by the many he touched and influenced.

I'll say amen to that.

Anthony Winder (Lay clerk 1968-74)

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