



Obituaries

CLIFFORD BENSON

Sensitive and intuitive piano accompanist, chamber music player and composer

Clifford Benson was one of the leading piano accompanists of his generation, widely respected in the profession. One of his colleagues remarked on the affection in which he was held by his students, colleagues and audiences alike, adding "it is not always that fine musicians are universally liked!"

The son of a local government official who was an amateur violinist, Clifford Benson attended Aveley Technical High School, at Grays in Essex, before studying at the Royal College of Music, where his teachers were Lamar Crowson and Cyril Smith. Benson also had warm memories of coaching from the celebrated harpsichordist George Malcolm. He won the Chopin Prize, the Geoffrey Tankard Lieder Prize for Accompaniment and the Tagore Gold Medal.

Benson's keyboard ability was developed in his early teens at the Royal College of Music Junior Department where he first met the violinist Levon Chilingirian, a couple of years his junior. Chilingirian tells how Benson willingly agreed to accompany him when many might not have been so sympathetic. While still in his teens, Benson appeared with the RCM First Orchestra in Rachmaninov's Second Concerto, but later he seemed less drawn to the rather lonely life of the concerto virtuoso.

Indeed this became a leitmotif of his career – all who encountered him remember him for his role as a sensitive and intuitive accompanist and chamber music player. In fact his portfolio of professional activities later encompassed solo recitals and concertos, teacher, adjudicator and composer. His career was launched by his partnership with Chilingirian when they won the BBC Beethoven Duo Competition in 1969, followed in 1971 by the Munich International Competition – "a much bigger affair altogether," Chilingirian said.



Benson: deeply etched musical thinking and outstanding technique

As a result of the BBC competition, they began to get broadcasts, and their South Bank début followed at the Purcell Room in London in 1970. Their programme for the 1969 competition had, as well as Beethoven, Thea Musgrave's *Colloquy* and Rawsthorne's Sonata, and a notable early broadcast in 1972 was of the latter work. Benson also received

a Martin Music Fund Scholarship awarded by the (New) Philharmonia Orchestra. Through the late John Bishop, Benson and Chilingirian became associated with the Pearl record label for whom they recorded a disc of Schubert Sonatas, followed in 1976 by the first recording of the Frank Bridge Sonata. Benson became the pianist with the

Nash Ensemble, and the Nash director Amelia Freedman remembers him as a brilliant chamber music player and a very easy person to work with in rehearsals and recordings. This brought him a very varied repertoire, working with such artists as Cleo Laine and Eartha Kitt. Highlights among his Nash recordings were Howard Ferguson's Octet, Schubert's *Trout Quintet* and septets by Hummel and Berwald. With the Nash, he appeared at the 1975 Proms playing Constant Lambert's *Concerto for Piano and nine instruments* and Bartok's *Contrasts*. In 1979 Benson was the accompanist on BBC2 for the televised Jacqueline du Pré masterclasses from the Guildhall School of Music.

Notable among Benson's long-standing chamber music partners were two flautists, William Bennett and Trevor Wye. He met Bennett when the flautist's first wife, Rhuna Martin, gave him lessons as a teenager. With Bennett he made many recordings, not least for the Japanese Camerata Tokyo label, recordings which include live concerts from Japan, Taiwan and Vienna and (issued on Bennett's CD label Beep Records) the Wigmore Hall. He accompanied the second half of Bennett's 60th birthday concert at Wigmore Hall where in an encore they sang "When I'm 64", accompanying themselves on a ukelele. Benson was delighted to be able to say he had sung at Wigmore Hall.

Benson met the flautist Trevor Wye in 1967 and regularly participated in his International Flute Summer Schools, at first at Canterbury, later at Ramsgate, playing with the great French flautist Marcel Moyse on his first appearance in 1969. At summer schools in Japan and the United States, Benson brought a special insight, with sonata classes in which he taught the pieces from the perspective of the pianist. Their "flute spectacular" *The Carnival of Venice* found Benson having to play in a wide variety of styles as his partner constantly changed instruments.

Invited to appear on Hyperion records by Ted Perry, Benson partnered Thea King in the Brahms' Clarinet Sonatas, Trio and Quintet. He then became known for a series of British music recordings, first of clarinet music by English composers, then a variety of song recordings, providing sensitive and idiomatic performances with the tenors Ian Partridge and Martyn Hill,

the baritone Stephen Roberts and the bass Michael George. His two volumes recording Stanford songs with the baritone Stephen Varcoe were very warmly received.

The record producer Paul Spicer remembers Benson as

one of those consummate musicians with whom one felt totally and completely at ease. Of all the many marvellous performances Clifford gave, the one which stands out in my mind as typical of his deeply etched musical thinking and outstanding technique was that wonderful song by W. Denis Browne "To Gratiana, Dancing and Singing". It has a fiendishly difficult piano part which needs intellectual rigour, an iron grip on technique and complete mastery of tone control. I have never heard this better accomplished. Thank goodness it was recorded.

Benson had earlier recorded the Shostakovich Piano Quintet with the Alberni Quartet, and later for Chandos he accompanied the violinist Lydia Mordkovitch in sonatas by Nielsen, Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Schnittke. This perhaps underlines his versatility, which we encounter in quite a different vein in his work with the violinist Shlomo Mintz on his Deutsche Grammophon recording of Fritz Kreisler encores.

A Benson speciality was thematic programmes, sometimes with his own punning and humorous linking commentary. Perhaps the most notable of these was at the BBC's "Proms at the V&A" where in 1998 he accompanied the mezzo-soprano Louise Winter in an entertainment based on the memoirs of Hector Berlioz, with readings by Samuel West. Benson's last such appearance was at the Portsmouth Festival – a regular date – where in 2006 he produced a programme celebrating Isambard Kingdom Brunel which he called "Music to Transport".

Benson joined the Royal Academy of Music in 1993, where he was particularly noted for his chamber music workshops, and from then his teaching blossomed in tandem with his performing career. He was also a composer, although only a few of his pieces were published. These included the flute solo *A Song for Wigg and Tango Variations* for William Bennett, *Three Pieces for Piano* published by Novello and *Mozart Goes to Town* for piano duet.

Lewis Foreman

Clifford George Benson, pianist and accompanist; born Grays, Essex 17 November 1946; married 1973 Dilys Davies (two daughters); died Tonbridge, Kent 10 August 2007.