

Michael Winfield

1930 – 2017

~ Career Dates ~

13-08-1947 Hallé Orchestra (2nd Oboe)

01-06-1960 London Symphony Orchestra (Cor Anglais and Sub-Principal Oboe)

01-06-1968 Philharmonia

1984 Became Freelance

Article written by Nick Winfield:

'Double Reed News' Celebrating Michael's 70th Birthday

Born November 15th 1930 in Swanick, Derbyshire the youngest of three children and only son into a family steeped in amateur music tradition, he was the fifth generation and the first to become professional. His father Levi Winfield – an engineer and amateur bassoonist, who worked at Rolls Royce in Derby and who was the music director of the symphony orchestra and operatic society which flourished during the war because so many older musicians were in munitions. Swanick, which is famous for 'The Hayes' conference centre, was during the war, a huge prisoner of war camp and held many prisoners from Italy and Germany who were musicians. Levi soon took advantage of this and would hire the local church hall – or use the front room of his home to gather together and form the most unusual ensembles. At this time Michael was just an onlooker but one day in 1943 his father brought home an 'Albert' oboe – conservatoire, simple system, from a colleague at Rolls Royce, for his father – Michael's grandfather an amateur oboist to repair. Michael got hold of this and nagged his grandfather for lessons, practicing day and night, sitting up cross-legged in bed. The lessons took place every Monday in his grandfather's living room sitting at the table – which was covered in newspaper as a cloth, using the Langey Tutor.

At this time, he began studying to be a draughtsman at Chesterfield Technical College where he met Dr. Cooper organist at the famous 'crooked spire' church. After hearing him play, Dr. Cooper suggested to Michael's parents that he should be encouraged to give up engineering and pursue a career in music. His parents wrote to Evelyn Rothwell who subsequently heard him play and took a great interest in him. His first lesson with her was at her parents' home in Wallingfor in May 1946. Evelyn suggested he try for the Royal Manchester College of Music where he gained an exhibition and in September that year he began his study in Manchester where he had 2 terms with Evelyn Rothwell and 1 with Sylvia Spencer. During his first term, he found a Louis Oboe for £18.50 in the 'Exchange and Mart' which Charles Morley completely overhauled and made into a wonderful

instrument which carried him through his career until after trying several other makes of instrument, settled on a Howarth S5.

After only a few months at College, Evelyn sent Michael to play for her husband – John Barbirolli, conductor at that time of the Halle Orchestra. There was no suggestion that this was anything other than a routine hearing. Imagine his amazement and delight to be offered, from that hearing, the position of 2nd oboe in the Halle – joining Elizabeth Hawkins and Patricia Stancliffe first oboe and Cor Anglais respectively. Thus began in August 1947 at the age of 16, the youngest member of the orchestra – a phenomenon in the orchestral world, after only one year at college, the long and distinguished career which continues to this day.

It was here in those first few weeks that he met my mother, Dorothy who worked in administration at the Halle office. She didn't think much to the rather spotty youth in the loud check jacket, but he was persistent and made the most of every opportunity to see her and eventually persuaded her to go to the opera to see 'La Traviata' with him. He had at this time, very bad ingrowing toe nails which were threatened with hospital treatment and a period away from the orchestra. On telling this painful story to Dorothy, she told him that her brother was a chiropodist and he should see him first. Four children, five grandchildren, two great grandchildren and forty-nine years later they are due to celebrate their gold wedding in September 2001.

National service loomed in 1949 and in spite of representations to delay it by John Barbirolli, he had to leave the orchestra for 18 months to join the No.5 Regional Band of the RAF at Cosford. He still had opportunities to play when the BBC in Manchester invited him to play, when off duty, in such things as 'At The Willows' an early 'soap' starring Violet Carson. However, this did not stop him from being very disgruntled about having to leave the orchestra and to earn such a pittance after being well paid, and he soon earned the name 'binder Winfield' from his colleagues.

National Service over, Michael returned to the Halle where Janet Craxton had become principal oboe. After a year together and another as Cor Anglais in place of Patricia Sutcliffe, on an instrument found for him by the principal Bassoon of the time, Charles Cracknell, which cost £100. And is still the instrument he plays on to this day, he became principal oboe in 1952 and so began the most formative and valuable eight years of his career, under the guidance and training of John Barbirolli and with the continued invaluable support of Evelyn Rothwell, for whom he had the honour to deputise at a promenade concert, playing the Marcello concerto, at the Royal Albert Hall, when she broke her wrist.

He was invited to join the LSO in 1960 as Cor Anglais/co-principal oboe with Roger Lord, an oboist of great distinction whose playing Michael had long admired. The following eight years and subsequent seven with the New Philharmonia with Richard Morgan, a friend and colleague whose lovely playing in renowned, were the most richly rewarding years, giving him the opportunity to play

and travel all over the world with the most illustrious conductors and soloists the world has known and provided a store of memories beyond compare.

During this period with the Philharmonia, the family affliction of arthritis began to be evident in his fingers and was very painful. Janet Craxton recommended he consult Dr. Latta in Harley Street. He was well known to many musicians similarly affected and as a result of his strict diet, which was totally vegetarian and seemingly leaving little to enjoy, gradually he was able to control the pain and, although badly misshapen, and with daily practice to maintain the flexibility, he has been able to play with little discomfort.

Michael Winfield had already established himself as a teacher while in the Halle and in 1969 he was asked by Terence Macdonagh to deputise for him at the RCM. A year later he was asked to join the staff at college where he is to this day – due to retire in July 2001. Teaching has been – and still is – a source of great interest and pleasure to him and his commitment and dedication has been rewarded by the many ex-RCM students who have subsequently occupied prominent positions in the majority of the orchestra in the UK and abroad. His reputation spread internationally as a teacher and coach to youth orchestras and music festivals in the USA, Canada, Japan, Greece and Spain while in a private capacity he takes students from Australia, Norway, America and many other parts of the world who travel to study with him. His vast experience of orchestral repertoire is a store of great value to his students who benefit from his teaching.

After 28 years of continuous orchestral life, in 1974, Michael decided to pursue a freelance career thus providing him with a great variety of different experience from the Beatles to Grand Opera – Penny Lane to Pagliacci, television ‘Brideshead Revisited’ to ‘Vets in Practice’ while continuing to play as guest with the orchestras. His operatic recordings include work with the National Philharmonic orchestra and a list of soloists which reads like ‘Who’s Who’ of the great artists of the day too numerous to mention. Major films including several James Bond films, Star Wars etc etc.

In the middle of all this, 1957 to be precise, I came along. I cannot remember a time when I didn’t know the sound of the oboe, so it was inevitable that I should take it up also. Starting at the age of 9 with the recorder, and at 11 moving up! To the oboe, both taught by my father, many rows, tears and arguments later I attended the RCM with Sarah Francis, though still having lessons at home. At the end of my second year I became 2nd oboe in the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, staying for 3 years before deciding to try my luck at freelancing in London. In 1990 moving to Wales to join the BBC National Orchestra of Wales as Cor Anglais.

In overlooking his career Michael Winfield’s feeling is one of immense pleasure and privilege to have been a part of some wonderful performances and to have had a career which has been a hobby as well as a source of income. To have been an influence on the future of so many young people and to have known some of the most outstanding musicians of his time – a rich man indeed.