

John Langdon (1943-2018)
An obituary by Kenneth Shenton

John Langdon, who died recently aged 75, was one of the ablest of that series of all-round musicians produced by Cambridge University during the early 1960s. While perhaps best known to the general public as a virtuoso organist of exceptional quality, he was a no less an accomplished pianist and harpsichordist, always fully capable of taking great delight in the occasional grand gesture. In addition, as a highly regarded lecturer and administrator at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama for almost half a century, he helped mould the creative personalities of many of this country's most eminent practitioners.



The eldest of three children, born in Minehead in 1943, John David Langdon began his musical career as a chorister at Worcester Cathedral. While there he was initially taught to play the organ by his Choirmaster, David Willcocks. Educated at the King's School, in 1961, aged 18, he found himself reunited with his former mentor when chosen to succeed Simon Preston as Organ Scholar at King's College, Cambridge. Indeed, it was Willcocks who undoubtedly instilled in him the academic rigour that not only characterised his subsequent career, but in the immediate short term, brought him a whole raft of awards, including the prestigious John Stewart of Rannoch Scholarship in Sacred Music.

Having been elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists in June 1962, three years later Langdon moved to New College, Oxford, where he undertook specialised research into aspects of sixteenth century sacred music. His early reputation was forged with his painstaking research into the output of composer, Christopher Tye. Particularly impressive was his work on a series of anthems skilfully reconstructed from part books in the Bodleian Library. However, it was his bold realisation of the same composers seven part motet, *Peccavimus Cum Patribus*, that gave such added lustre to the distinctive 1973 recording made by Bill Ives and the Choir of Magdalen College.

In 1968, moving north of the border to Glasgow, appointed a lecturer at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, there his outlook found a particularly long, happy and expressive outlet. Amid what soon became a noted centre of excellence in music education, initially appointed to teach harmony and counterpoint as well as the organ, he later moved to assist throughout the Brass Department before finally, becoming co-ordinator of the Early Music Department. In addition to exercising a most benign influence on countless generations of aspiring students, Langdon also began playing a pivotal role in the artistic life of the wider cultural community.

Always far more than a mere theoretician, Langdon had long revelled in the unique performing opportunities afforded by piano, organ and harpsichord. Musically adventurous, precise and flawless, his virtuoso solo organ playing rarely failed to make an impact. Likewise, an equally impressive accompanist, his talents were constantly in demand by all of the city's major choral societies. Equally popular as a continuo player, here again he built an enviable reputation for musical insight and selfless integrity. Able to animate even the most austere of offerings, many a shapeless performance owed its eventual coherence and impetus to his influence at the keyboard.

Happily many of these distinctive realisations endure courtesy of a small but still highly distinctive discography. Alongside the many early King's College carol recordings, Langdon also appeared with the choir on a number of sixteenth century choral anthologies. As a continuo player, in the company of The Academy of St Martin in the Fields, he was intimately involved in many of the choir's landmark recordings of baroque repertoire, works by Handel, Vivaldi and Pergolesi. In London, he also recorded with the Clement Dane's Chorale, while in Scotland, regularly acting as an unofficial assistant to George McPhie at Paisley Abbey, he could be heard both in concert and on disc.

Attracting particular praise was their 1985 recording of Carols from Culzean Castle, with Neil MacKie as soloist. Twelve months earlier, Langdon had returned to record Robin Orr's hugely challenging *Toccata Alla Marcia*, the centre piece of a tribute LP honouring the composer and made by many of Scotland's finest instrumentalists. In 1996, he played the organ on a CD of a Service of Nine Lessons and Carols under the direction of Philip Ledger, then the Principal of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and a former Organist of King's College, Cambridge. Producing was Christopher Bishop, who had previously collaborated with both of them throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1969, Langdon also took on the role of Organist of Hyndland Church, a large imposing building on the west side of Glasgow, designed by renowned local architect, William Leiper. Its spacious high interior houses a fine three manual Henry Willis organ, situated on the north side of the wide and airy chancel. Dating from the nineteenth century, it was rebuilt in 1913 with further restoration and improvements carried out in 1954. This distinguished example of Willis's work was further enhanced by a timely overhaul in 1965. Over the next half century, until the church's closure forced by a shortage of clergy, it proved a particularly colourful palette for its distinguished custodian.

In 2004, alongside former Taggart actor, James Macpherson and fellow thespians, Dennis Lawson and Bill Paterson, all three former students, Langdon was elected a Fellow of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. Ten years later, following his retirement from what was now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, he was made a Companion Emeritus. In a moving ceremony last September, to honour his outstanding record of music making over almost half a century, Langdon was joined by his two sisters and his old friend, Dr George McPhie, to witness the President of the Glasgow Society of Organists, Dr Euan McKay, appoint him an Honorary Vice President.