SERVICE OF THANKSGIVING FOR THE LIFE OF RUSSELL BURGESS

Headmaster's Address )(rought draft)

In Saint Paul's Cathedral one can see the inscription to Sir Christopher Wren, its designer, "Si monumentum requieris, circumspice." If you seek his monument, look around. Tonight in another St Paul's, we have just heard once more Russell Burgess's monument: The Wandsworth School Choir, and the directness and the firmness which characterises the Wandsworth Sound.

The sound of the choir was matched, in the early years, by a similar sound from the school orchestra. I remember particularly,- and I know others will, too,- the brass section. Above all, the trumpets, yesterday, as today, one of strongest sections of the school orchestra. In those days in the school hall for concerts what mattered was not so much whether one was sitting upstairs or downstairs, but whether one was in line with the trumpets or not.'The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible and we shall all be changed.' Changed indeed! Jolted out of our seat, more like, by the sheer physical onslaught of it all. And who could forget the sounding brass and the clashing cymbal? (And the cymbalist is still with us this evening with the old boys) in Moussorgsky's "Great Gate of Kiev"? Or having heard the opening chorus of Camina Burana, or that sudden burst of sound which heralded the choir entry in the Coronation Anthem, Zadok, the Priest?

I first met Russell in 1959 when I joined this school and joined this choir. He'd already been here for five years, following training at the Royal Academy of Music and two years of whatI think he often thought was more appropriate training doing National Service, finishing up at a place beloved of those who have ever served in the Army, Catterick Camp in charge of instrumental music in the Royal Corps of Signals Band.

When he was first appointed, Wandsworth School was still a Grammar School, but destined soon to expand into an Inner London comprehensive school catering for all ages, all abilities and boys from all sorts of backgrounds. And the thing that struck me in the early years was the dynamism of the man and the energy that he seemed to have. He would do a morning's teaching, and then all of a sudden he would appear in the dining hall. He'd snatch lunch,- ten minutes, I suppose, for lunch,- and then back up into the auxiliary hall where the choir was waiting. Three quarters of an hour or more of singing, and then into the classroom for an afternoon of teaching, and then perhaps stay on after school for the orchestra. And what a great pleasure those lunchtime rehearsals were,- and all rehearsals, both ten,

as now, took place at lunchtime or before school or after school, or, as they still do, on Friday evenings for old boys to come back and sing with us, but never, never during lesson time.

In those days he found time to coach cricket as well. He was a lifelong supporter, living in Leytonstone, he was a lifelong supporter of Essex County Cricket Club, and how fortunate they chose this season to do so well and to give Russell so much pleasure. And of course this cricket gave him a very effective channel indeed for promoting the choir, a channel through which to approach boys, and ask them if they would join. As John Tobin has said recently: "In this way he built up one of the most musical cricket elevens in the whole of the country." Peter Eastwood, who is here this evening, was a boy in the school at the time, and he wrote to me on Russell's death, and with his permission I am going to quote part of his letter to you. He says:"I was at school when Russell joined the staff and got to know him very well. I used to practise batting in the nets during the lunch hour, and after noticing Russell watching once or twice, I asked him if he wanted to join us. He said he'd like to have a bowl and he put in many hours wheeling away at us. Later on he came to me and asked me if I would consider joining the choir. I protested that I had no musical background, but he said that if I, with my varied sporting activities, joined it would encourage others to join as well. Bearing in mind my obligation at the many overs that he had bowled at me, I agreed. Those early days in the choir with Russell did not give an indication of what was to come, but he taught me an appreciation of singing that is with me today. His technical skill was evident, and choir was essentially fun. Nothing escaped him. I remember in 'Ding Dong merrily on high' a few of us substituted an irreverent last line in place of 'Hosanna in excelsis.' We thought that Russell couldn't possibly spot this, until he came to us, with his usual grin, and asked for a gentleman's agreement that on the night of our performance we would not sing "Hosanna, Up for Chelsea." I don't know whether Doctor W.G.Grace ever sang on earth, but I should not be at all surprised if he had been asked to sing now.

The success of the choir, of course, stemmed very much from his work in the classroom. In his lessons he aimed at providing a wide musical education but with the accent always on singing,- the inbuilt instrument, as he put it. And slowly the choir was built up.

His appointment as assistant to Wilhelm Pitz, as chorus master of the New Philharmonia Chorus, led in turn to the association with Benjamin Britten, our first patron, who wrote for us 'The Children's Crusade' especially for this choir. "My favourite choir at my favourite school" Britten once wrote in a telegram to Russell. His death in 1976 was a tremendous blow to Russell, to the choir, to the school, and Russell at the time wrote "all that he transmitted to us lives on, and our pride in our association with him knows no bounds."

Sir Charles Groves, sadly unable to be with us this evening, as he is conducting 'Aïda' at the Coliseum, brought us very great pleasure indeed when he agreed to be our new patron.

Above all, of course, Russell was a professional. He was a musician's musician, accepted by leading conductors and leading orchestras as such, and just as at home on the platform of the Royal Festival Hall or the Royal Albert Hall as he was in cathedrals, churches and village halls up and down the length and breadth of this country, in which the choir has performed. He was an accomplished pianist and organist, and for a time organist and choirmaster of the parish church in Leytonstone, and his mastery of the keyboard made even the most difficult accompaniments seem terribly easy and straightforward. But more, he was a gifted teacher with a sense of humour and an infectious enthusiasm for music which, together with his persistence and his determination inspired a tremendous response from boys of all sorts of backgrounds. As Ian Kellam put it in a letter to me after his death: "a man who took the ordinary and from it ~~happened~~ fashioned the extraordinary", or as Kipling said: 'a man who could walk with Kings, nor lose the common touch.'

In his task, of course, he was supported firmly by his mother, Mrs Burgess, rarely missing from a performance of the choir, by some loyal and very devoted colleagues in the choir and in the music department and in the school, and of course by parents and by his own very close friends. Russell was an original, a 'one-off'. They don't come like Russell any more; he will be impossible would to replace. He had a rare instinct for knowing when to put the pressure on singers and when to relax it; when to criticise and when to encourage. And how we responded! us old men going blue in the face and the little boys in the front row going positively pink with the effort. In this he must have had a lot in common with Henry Purcell on whose premature death at the age of 36 the poet John Dryden said "The heavenly choir

who heard his notes from high
Let down the scale of music from the sky."
They handed him along, and all the way he thought
And all the way, he sung."

Russell took particular delight in those boys who went on to embrace music as a career, and on their behalf Adrian Thompson, now with the Glyndebourne Opera Company, will pay his own special tribute later on in this service to the man whose inspiration created the choir and whose personality electrified every performance.

Stanley Westcott was chairman of the Governors of Wandsworth School for three years, 1970-1973, and I have permission to quote from his diary, shortly before he died. "December the 15th, 1972: Music for Christmas at Wandsworth School. A great evening. It was more than a good concert. With the choir and audience face to face, and waved on by the wand of that magician Burgess, the whole show went up in a shower of sparks. It was a happening and the most exciting evening for months." For the choir too, such performances left us with a sense of elation, wherever we were singing, which lasted often well into the night specially on those occasions when, well into the night, we were still walking up and down the highway of some main road, because the coach had broken down.

In 1970 the choir and Russell were awarded a "Grammy",- the recording companies' equivalent of the "Oscar," for a recording of the Berlioz Requiem. In 1972 a resolution according civic recognition to the choir was passed by the Borough Council for the renown which it had brought to music and to the council. It was passed by Wandsworth Borough Council and it is appropriate that the Council is represented this evening by the Mayoress and by the Deputy Mayoress.
In 1975 Russell received the M.B.E. from her Majesty the Queen for services to music.

Wandsworth School, founded in the last century has, in the course of its long history, had only four headmasters. Russell Burgess, at the school for 25 years, worked with three of them, and all three are present this evening. It is my privilege to express the gratitude of these three, as well as of the London Education service, as a whole, and of the school, but particularly of hundreds and hundreds of Wandsworth boys over the years for the richness of the musical experience given

to them by Russell. He admired the boys; he loved working with them. He discussed things with them; they looked ahead to what was to come and decided often what they were going to do and how they were going to do it. He treated them as partners, and it is appropriate therefore that the money which we have received in response to the appeal in his memory, which now stands at well over £1200, should be used to promote the cause of music amongst young people.

Most of the music this evening is special to the choir in some way or another. You may remember, some six years ago now, a film made by Sir Peter Hall called 'Akenfield', the story of a Suffolk village recalled by its oldest inhabitants. One of the most moving scenes in that film was set in the local church, where the faithful few had gathered for evening worship. They rise to sing their closing hymn: 'The day Thou gavest, Lord, is ended', the great hymn which stresses the continuity and the permanence of God's creation:

'The sun that bids us rest is waking
Our brethren 'neath the western sky.'

And as the village organist fumbles slightly over the introduction, and the few figures rise to sing, so they see in their mind's eye, and we see on film the pews filling up again with the people and the faces long departed,- young men, and young women in uniform, who had gone off to fight in world wars and not returned. Older people, friends, family, who had died, and not there any longer. And as the hymn goes on, so the church gets fuller and fuller until by the final verse, the church is absolutely packed full, the singing has swelled into a mighty shout of praise and the organ leading them all with full and majestic sound. Well, the actors and actresses were the villagers of Akenfield, but the singers were the Wandsworth School Choir. The majestic organ was that of St Paul's church Augustus Road, - this organ,- for it was recorded here, and the organist, whose fingers were asked so uncharacteristically to fumble the introduction, imitating a village organist, but who, by the final verse was playing with the mastery of a true professional, was, of course, Russell Burgess. And as we sing that hymn again in a moment we too may perhaps be forgiven for looking round this church and seeking in vain the face of one whom we all dearly miss.

And then later on we shall close our service with a hymn chosen by Benjamin Britten to close his cantata 'Saint Nicolas'

which the choir has performed on several occasions and which rather more recently won for Thames Television the Prix d'Italia in Rome in 1977. Having traced the story of Saint Nicolas from birth to death, the choir sings the words

'For forty years our Nicolas, our Prince of Men, our Shepherd and our gentle guide walked by our side.
We keep his memory alive in legends our children and their childrens' children treasure still.' We keep Russell's memory alive not only in legends,-and goodness knows, there are lots of them ,- but also thankfully, on over thirty gramophone records and also on Television and film. But Russell leaves not only a legacy: he leaves a tremendous challenge, and the choir under John Tobin's very able direction is determined to continue the work which Russell has begun. We shall be here again in two week's time to sing the Fauré Requiem. In December we shall once again sing, as we have done for some years at the Commonwealth Service at St Martin in the fields in front of her Royal Highneess, Princess Alexandra. We shall sing our Christmas Carol Concert in this church in December. Next Easter we shall again take part in a St Matthew Passion under Dr Paul Steinitz with the London Bach Society. Russell has done the hardest part; now, it's up to us.

In John Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress' the time eventually comes, when after a long pilgrimage Mr Valiant for Truth is summoned to cross the river. Calling his friends together he said: "I am going to my fathers, and though with great difficulty I have got hither, yet now, I do not repent me of all the troubles I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage. My courage and skill to him that can get it. When the day he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside into which as he went he said: "Death, where is thy sting." And as he went down deeper, he said: "Grave, where is thy victory?" So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.