

Robin Holloway – a tribute

One little recollection from my years as an undergraduate will – I hope – illustrate the exceptional care and generosity of spirit Robin has devoted to his students over the last 32 years.

In the winter of 1980, bemused by my apparent lack of knowledge of modern poetry, he took me to Heffer's bookshop to set things straight. I left the store carrying volumes of Eliot, Pound, Bishop – and Wallace Stevens, whose "Snowman" moved and enchanted me when read that very same evening.

Within a short time I had decided to set this poem, and during the Christmas holidays wrote to Robin to this effect, adding how excited I was by the project. The resultant piece, "A Mind of Winter", was completed late the following spring in time for its premiere at the 1981 Aldeburgh Festival. But by then I had received a card from Robin, disclosing that he himself had set the very same poem several years before, but that he had hidden this fact so as not to dissuade me from undertaking my own version.

I was deeply touched – and remain so - by this selfless and kindly subterfuge. But there are so many other aspects of my time with Robin in Cambridge – and our friendship since – that I recall with gratitude, whether they be marathon piano duets or fantastically illuminating discussions about painting, literature and, of course, music.

The man's burgeoning creativity and incomparable cultural knowledge, added to the warmth and enthusiasm with which he shares them, has been a source of inspiration to the generations of young musicians he has nurtured in Cambridge. His retirement is therefore a sad moment, but he leaves innumerable positive traces and echoes as well as a record of devotion to teaching second to none.

George Benjamin, October 2011.