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## NEWS

OBITUARIES

## Sir Charles Groves

SIR CHARLES GROVES, who has died aged 77, was a versatile conductor but he will always be associated with British composers past and present, whose work he consistently championed — taking over from Sir Adrian Boult as their principal advocate.

Yet he was also the first British conductor to direct all the Mahler symphonies with the same orchestra, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. He did the same for Shostakovich, and he had a wide experience of opera.

A bulky, bearded, benevolent figure on the rostrum, he could become very angry and he fought for causes in which he believed.

When the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra was threatened with extinction in 1954, he sold raffle tickets in the street. The raffle raised £14,000, enough to save the orchestra and see it reconstituted as the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra under new management.

In 1973 Groves protested vehemently against the "exorbitant fees" charged by some professional musicians, and he practised what he preached — his own conducting fee at the time was a few hundred pounds compared with the thousands charged by some of his overseas colleagues. Some would say that he consistently undersold himself and that this is the reason why he is comparatively poorly represented in the gramophone catalogue.

Charles Barnard Groves was born in London on March 10, 1915. His father was killed in the First World War and his mother died when he was just 10.

Young Charles was a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral Choir School and then went to Sutton Valence School in Kent. In 1933 he entered the Royal College of Music to study piano and organ.

While a student, he was choral accompanist for Toscanini's BBC rehearsals of Brahms's *German Requiem*. This led, in 1938, to a post at the BBC as chorus master of the music productions unit; he often worked with Boult and the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

In 1942 Groves was appointed assistant conductor of the BBC Theatre Orchestra and the next year he became conductor of the BBC Revue Orchestra.

From 1944 to 1951 he was in Manchester as conductor of the BBC Northern Orchestra. While there he married, in 1948, another member of the BBC staff, Hilary Hermione Barchard.

In 1951 Groves was appointed conductor of the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra, remaining in the post until 1961. He visited Australia for the first time as a guest conductor in 1950, and South Africa in 1957-8.

On leaving Bournemouth, Groves went to Welsh



Groves: bulky, bearded, benevolent champion of British composers

National Opera as musical director from 1961 to 1963, but the post in which he attained his highest reputation was that of conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, which he held from 1963 to 1977.

During his time there he conducted the first performances of many new British works — notably Maxwell Davies's *Second Fantasia* on an *In Nomine* of John Tavener, which had been thought unplayable. Groves also broke a lance on behalf of several unfashionable English Romantics such as Bax. He also helped many young

### Benign and jovial presence at the Last Night of the Proms

soloists and fostered talents in his own field in the Liverpool conductors' seminars.

He conducted the large-scale choral works of Delius and Elgar, later recording the former's *A Mass of Life* and the latter's *Caractacus*. He was instrumental in the revival and recording of other early and neglected Elgar choral works, such as *King Olaf*, *The Black Knight* and *The Light of Life*.

Groves conducted a revival of Delius's opera *Koanga* in London in 1972 and later recorded it.

In 1967 he combined his Liverpool post with that of associate conductor of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. London, too, benefited from his enthusiasm for English music when he conducted

performances of Havergal Brian's "Gothic" and Ninth Symphonies in 1976.

In one of his last concerts as chief conductor in Liverpool, Groves conducted Mahler's Eighth Symphony in the Anglican cathedral, as he had done in his first season — memorable occasions both.

His dramatic approach augured well for his appointment as musical director of English National Opera at the Coliseum in succession to Sir Charles Mackerras, but this proved to be an unhappy episode in his career.

When he arrived in 1978, industrial trouble in the company affected rehearsal time for productions. The critics were anything but kind to him and in addition he had several bouts of ill-health.

In November 1979 he announced that he was withdrawing from the post and handing over immediately to Mark Elder. Happier experiences in London in the 1970s were his benign and jovial presiding over the Last Night of the Proms.

Groves was twice nominated as "Conductor of the Year" by the Composers' Guild, in 1968 and 1978. He was a diligent, effective and proud chairman of the council of the Royal Northern College of Music from 1975 and on several occasions conducted the students' orchestra.

His firmness and tact in committee smoothed over many an awkward situation when cuts and economies were being considered. He was adamant in his refusal to countenance any lowering of musical standards.

Groves toured Australia again, most recently in 1987,

and besides his concert appearances in London was a regular guest conductor in Liverpool and Manchester. For some years he conducted the final concert of the Leeds piano competition.

He had a triumph in Manchester in 1988 when he conducted Tippett's *The Mask of Time* after preparing the Hallé Choir for more than a year. His conducting career ended in February of this year, when he had a stroke while rehearsing the Manchester Camerata in Crewe.

Groves was always a reliable conductor, but when a work really took hold of him

### Manner concealed a sensitive nature easily wounded

he was capable of a deeply moving and enthralling interpretation, as in Elgar's *The Apostles* on many occasions.

A devout Christian and a passionate follower of cricket, Charles Groves's bluff manner concealed a sensitive nature, easily wounded; nor was he free from the insecurities and sense of inadequacy which afflict many conductors, particularly those like him who are humbly devoted to the art of music.

He was appointed OBE in 1958, CBE in 1968 and knighted in 1973.

He is survived by his wife, a son, Jonathan, who was his agent, and two daughters, Mary and Sally, the latter well-known in music-publishing for her work for contemporary composers.