

# A noteworthy career at the keyboards

Accomplished composer, performer, critic and tutor, Herald columnist **PHILIP R BUTTALL** talks to MARTIN FREEMAN about his lifelong love of classical music

**C**LASSICAL musician Philip R Buttall wears many hats, most of them associated with keyboards.

The Plymothian is an accomplished performer and sought-after teacher and former examiner at the piano. At the computer he is a respected critic and columnist. And at both keyboards he is an acclaimed composer whose work is performed around the world.

My favourite of Philip's hats, though, is a real one: a novelty piece of headgear he was given on holiday in Washington State in America.

This celebrates Seattle's role as the home of Boeing: it's an inflatable plane.

"They were giving them away but they said I could have one if I wore it – and I did," he says smiling broadly at the hat, now a little deflated, and the memory.

The point being that classical music and its makers are supposed to be serious. And Philip is, in the sense of doing what he does with careful consideration and application. He also has a quite staggering list of qualifications.

But there is an air of fun about the avuncular 62-year-old. He jokes a lot, laughs even more and is enormously proud that his most-played musical creation is a light-hearted take on a popular classic.

And yet he says: "Classical music is elitist, almost by definition.

"There is a correlation with the thought processes between academic achievement and ability, particularly maths and languages, and classical music.

"Look at the Peninsula Doctors' Orchestra – these are probably the most intelligent people you come across, and they are into classical music.

"I don't think you can be a wonderful musician unless you are intelligent."

How can that view, that classical music is produced and appreciated at a high intellectual level, be squared with Philip's breezy attitude to promoting the genre?

In short he believes we can all aspire to make and enjoy good quality music. He is certainly no snob.

For example, he has no problem with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra doing what some would call 'dumbing down'. The BSO was at the Plymouth Pavilions last night playing music from the movies. "These are great themes, from *Gone With the Wind* and the like, and I would sooner have a decent orchestra playing those than not be able to hear a decent orchestra at all."

The key, though, was his own decision many years ago to move towards teaching rather than concentrating on performing. Basically, Philip enjoys communicating, bringing people into classical music through teaching the piano, composing tunes for young people to enjoy playing or as potential audiences 'recruited' through spreading the word in his column in *The Herald*. He enjoys most of all making classical music accessible.

There is no doubt that the lad from Plymouth could have gone to the top as a performer had he wished.

At the age of 16, when he took his piano Grade 8 (the ultimate, before specialist music college study), he achieved



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Philip acts as accompanist to his mum and dad who sang duets; Philip (centre with ball) and friends at Chaucer Primary School; wearing his Plymouth Police Choir conductor's coat in the late 70s/early 80s; at the piano today; with his father Bob; pictured in 1965 inspecting his piano concerto written aged 16; at Trelawne Holiday Camp during the '70s; with his grandfather Ted Roper on the tenor horn

the second-highest performance grade in the country – on *any* instrument.

It sounds as if Philip was born to make music and he does believe that to get to the top you have to have an innate skill. In his case the music comes from the maternal side of the family, where there were soloist singers, including his mother, Sylvia.

She was from Kingsbridge and met Philip's father, Bob, a Londoner, during World War Two. He was in the South Hams training on tanks with the Royal East Kent Regiment (The Buffs) 7th Battalion in preparation for the D Day landings.

Philip was born 'by accident' in Plymouth – Sylvia was on holiday visiting a relative in the city when the baby arrived – and the family lived in London, Bristol and then Exmouth, and arrived in Plymouth in 1954, following Bob, an architect, as his job moved.

Young Philip began having piano lessons when he was five, a year before the Plymouth move. He trained with Grant Arnold and Albert Fullbrook and made quick and impressive progress, going straight to Grade 3.

He did not plan a career in music, until that extraordinary result at Grade 8.

"I was in the lower sixth at Devonport High School for Boys and I was planning to study modern languages, French and German, at university," he explains. "I decided to switch to music."

He went to Cambridge University,

but found the course there too theoretical and switched after a year to the Royal College of Music.

Philip studied under Cyril Smith who would have been one of the best pianists Britain has ever produced but for a stroke that left him without the use of one hand. "He was outstanding," says Philip. "He could play the piano better with one hand than most people can play with two."

Bizarrely, Cyril played as part of a three-handed duo, with his wife Phyllis Sellick.

There was another singular character studying at the college at the same time: David Helfgott. The Australian pianist suffered a mental breakdown and spent years in institutions before being 'discovered', rehabilitated and returning to music, as documented in the 1996 film *Shine*, starring Geoffrey Rush.

"At the college you could always hear him a mile away hammering out Rachmaninoff's 3rd Concerto," Philip recalls.

They met again years later in Plymouth when Helfgott, back performing after *Shine*, gave a concert in the city, which Philip reviewed for *The Herald*.

The resultant review, I think, says as much about the reviewer as the performance. Helfgott's return to the concert stage was treated with scorn and condescension by some critics, who were sniffy about his celebrity status and eager to highlight his shortcomings

compared to more gifted, but lesser-known, performers.

By contrast Philip said what was good about Helfgott's performance and what was not of the usual standard or style that only a person with a practised ear would appreciate. But most importantly he made a fundamental point. "Music is primarily a shared experience," Philip wrote. "Helfgott's mission is to play to those sharing his dedication for music as his standing ovation showed."

While the Australian chose performance, the Plymouth lad decided against a life on the concert stage.

"I suppose I could have had a career in performance," he says, modestly. "But I thought I had an affinity for teaching, which would be more secure."

He won the Raymond Ffenell Prize at the Royal College of Music, graduating with distinction, and went on to study at Exeter and Durham universities. He has never stopped learning since.

"I am a bit of a collector," he says of the alphabet of qualifications and achievements after his name. Take a deep breath: he is Philip R Buttall BMus (Hons), GRSM, FMusTCL, FTCL, FLCM, FVCM, FNCM, LRAM, ARCM, LGSM, ATCL, LTCL, ALCM, PGCE, FRSA.

The Fs stand for fellowship, the Ls at the start of each acronym are licentiates and the As are associates;

TCL is Trinity College London, LCM is the London College of Music, VCM the Victorian College of Music and GSM the Guildhall School of Music.

He has, basically, a degree and several post-graduate qualifications through and with Britain's most prestigious colleges in the performance, examination and teaching of music. The RSA is one of the world's most famous artistic bodies, the Royal Society of Arts, and as a Fellow Philip mixes with the leading musicians, artists, business leaders, scientists, designers and writers alive today.

To qualify, a person must play a leading role in their profession and be intellectual or creative. They also have to be able to relate to people in all walks of life – which Philip demonstrates ably every Thursday in his classical musical column in *The Herald*.

(The spare letter in the middle of his name stands for Robert. He says: "I have always styled myself Philip R Buttall, right from when I was at school. It sounds... I don't know, more musical somehow.")

He continues to teach privately – and is in such demand that two pupils make 120-mile round trips for lessons with Philip.

He taught for more than 25 years in secondary schools in Saltash, Torpoint and Plymouth where he was head of music at Coombe Dean from 1983-97.

Philip became *The Herald's* classical music writer in 1997 and, true to form,

got qualified. He received a diploma in freelance journalism this year. "I'm having a bit of a break from qualifications at the moment, but I will go back to it," he promises. "I like the satisfaction of having a qualification in anything that I am doing and knowing that I am doing it right."

He has given piano recitals through the UK and abroad but no longer performs regularly. "The competition is fantastic and you have to work very hard and spend a lot of time performing, to keep up there. Finding that time is difficult."

Does he miss being in the spotlight, especially when he is reviewing a pianist?

"I do sometimes think, 'that would be nice if that were me'. There was a sulky performer the other day and I thought 'I used to be able to play that piece better than he did.'"

If he did choose, Philip would select something from the romantic period of piano music. "If I could only choose one it would be Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* or *La Boheme*.

"I do like Italian opera, Puccini and Verdi, and Chopin and Liszt.

"I love music with tunes. I know that sounds sad. That's why I don't care so much for most contemporary classical music."

How about pop music? Does he like or listen to anything current?

"No."

Picture John Allen PL020310\_JA02

How about any classic pop – The Beatles?

"No."

He smiles. Philip has had virtually a lifelong mission making classical music popular, but he won't be populist, certainly not for the sake of it.

In fact he was once a holiday camp entertainer. No, really: in the early 1970s, while teaching in school by day he played the electric organ in a duo with Roy Saunders (drums) at caravan sites in south-east Cornwall by night. "It was quite good money," he laughs, adding, a little guiltily: "I am quite motivated by money."

They played mainly jazz and Philip does teach jazz piano.

Although he no longer performs, he composes. His Steinway Model M (a 5ft 10in 'baby grand') is for teaching while he uses an electronic piano for creating, transferring the files straight to a computer.

Philip is more than comfortable with digital technology; he embraces new media. He built his own website [www.philipbuttall.co.uk](http://www.philipbuttall.co.uk) and relishes the ease of communication with fellow musicians around the world – and selling his own work via the internet.

He wrote his first concerto as a 16-year-old. His compositions and arrangements have been performed by the City of Birmingham, Ulster and London Concert Orchestra, including at the Royal Albert Hall.

Philip's most successful works are for young people, including the phenomenally popular *Lone Ar-ranger*, his take on Rossini's *William Tell Overture* (the theme for the TV series *The Lone Ranger*). "That sells copies every day," he says proudly.

When he isn't working, Philip enjoys watching football (he has a fondness for Arsenal), is an avid collector of music – "It would take me 20 years to listen to all the music I have" – and enjoys a drive in his BMW coupe. "I have a love of all things German," he says. He still speaks the language he learned at school.

Much of his time is taken up teaching, though.

There is no secret to learning an instrument, Philip says. Concentration on scales is important and practice is vital; he recommends at least an hour a day.

But there are a few secrets to reviewing a musical performer: listen to the music of course ("you have to say if the third violin was out of tune") and to the audience ("it doesn't only matter what the reviewer thinks; I like to keep my ears flapping and know what the audience think"). Above all, Philip says, the reviewer should find something positive to say, "even if it is only that their wig suited them!"

■ You can listen to some of Philip's music, and follow the notation, at [www.sibelius.com](http://www.sibelius.com) music link