



Queens' College

The Record 2022-23

Professor P. Dickinson, DMus, FRSA (1953) aged 88. Peter Dickinson was born in Lytham St Anne's. His parents were Muriel and Frank, a pioneering contact lenses practitioner. He attended the Leys School in Cambridge and was elected to the Organ Scholarship at Queens' in 1953. He read Music. Deciding against a career in cathedral music, he left, after graduation, for the United States. He spent three years in New York, initially as a student at the Juilliard School, then as a critic for the *Musical Courier* and a Lecturer at Farleigh Dickinson University, and immersed himself in contemporary American music. He met Charles Ives who was incorporating everything from barn dance music and revival hymns to popular music into his classical compositions as well as experimental composers such as John Cage and Edgard Varèse. Returning to the U.K. he introduced the new sounds from America to a British audience, lecturing at the College of St Mark and St John in Chelsea and embarking on a career as a composer and performer. It was during his time in Chelsea that he met and married Bridget Tomkinson, herself a music student at the Royal College of Music. He became an authority on both American and British composers of the period, writing a number of books, including *The Music of Lennox Berkeley* (1988), *Marigold: The Music of Billy Mayerl* (1999), *Copland: Studies and Interviews* (2002), *Cage Talk: Dialogues with and about John Cage* (2006), *Lord Berners: Composer, Writer and Painter* (2008) and *Samuel Barber Remembered* (2010) as well as many articles, chapters and reviews. He staged conferences and concerts, drawing on his personal connections with composers such as Aaron Copland, John Cage, Philip Glass and Steve Reich. He was also a devotee of the French composer Eric Satie and did much to popularise his music. He moved from Chelsea to Birmingham University in 1966 as a

Lecturer in Music, where he established courses in improvisation and experimental music. In 1974 he became Professor of Music at Keele University. There he introduced pop and jazz music to the curriculum and is widely considered a pioneer in the teaching of popular music in degree courses. At Keele he established the Centre for American Music. In 1984 he moved to Goldsmith's College, London University, as Chairman of Music and in 1996 became a Fellow and Head of Music at the Institute of United States Studies, teaching there until 2004. He was a supportive and inspirational teacher, disarmingly modest. Meanwhile he continued to compose in many genres. He particularly enjoyed combining different musical styles into one composition. *The Judas Tree: A Musical Drama of Judas Iscariot* (1965) was performed in 1967 at Washington National Cathedral and was a great critical success. There were concertos for organ (1971) written for the Three Choirs Festival, piano (1984) commissioned by the Cheltenham Festival, and violin commissioned and broadcast by the BBC in 1987. His *Blue Rose Variations for Organ* was performed at the BBC Proms in 2009, and his *Mass of the Apocalypse* featured at the Aldeburgh Festival in 2015. He wrote *Merseyside Echoes*, commissioned in 1986 by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, as a tribute to the Beatles. His music was inspired by pop, by ragtime, by modern experimental music, by many different genres. He set poems of E.E. Cummings and Stevie Smith to music for his sister, the Mezzosoprano Meriel Dickinson, playing the piano in performances with her. He composed for full orchestra, for a variety of single instruments, especially keyboard, and for historical instruments, as well as choral works and music for single voice, in all over 100 works. As well as composing, he played the piano professionally for many years. He was a frequent broadcaster, especially on BBC Radio 3, and the interviews he conducted for radio documentaries served as the basis for some of his books. With his friend, the musicologist Bernarr Rainbow, he established the Rainbow Dickinson Educational Trust to support orchestras, choirs, festivals and local music-making groups. He was a founder member of the Association of Professional Composers and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in 1981. He was awarded an Honorary DMus by the University of Keele. Peter and Bridget had two sons, Jasper and Francis. All three survive him, as does his sister. The family eventually settled in Aldeburgh in Suffolk.