

## Eulogy given by Iain Burnside, pianist and broadcaster



The very first time I played the piano to Alex, he reacted with a noise all his pupils would recognize: part laugh, part snort, part gurgle. “Well,” he said “You’re pedantic and Presbyterian, but I think you’ve got something.”

It was a classic Alexism: a vote of confidence that quietly pulled my leg; something to make me laugh, something to get me going. I was a gawky 18 year old on his first ever visit to a Real Live London Piano Teacher. And I was terribly nervous, expecting to be told it was all wrong, to be put on a ration of gruesome exercises and sternly dismissed after precisely one hour.

Instead, here was this man with a beard, smiling at me, and telling me to loosen up; telling me that how I needed to practice was to play my piece through a few times, have a gin, then play it through a few more. In fact I was a bit sloshed when I left Gerard Road that first time, and it certainly wasn’t an hour after I went in. The lesson I’d had in the meantime was one of those windows-flying-open, Road-to-Damascus sorts of things I’d heard about but never experienced. Suddenly playing the piano wasn’t about trying to get your fingers round those nasty semiquavers on the last page: it was about sound and sensation; it was about expressing real emotion. It was just like the poem, in fact. And I couldn’t wait to get home and try it all out for myself.

The spell never really wore off. Most of all, Alex made me feel I had something to offer. 20 years down the road, I think this stands out as his greatest single gift to all his pupils: he made you believe in yourself. However much he pulled your leg, he was always on your side: always giving, always positive, always encouraging. Encouraging you, what’s more, to be yourself.

One of the first things I noticed when I went on to the Academy was that none of his pupils sounded the same. I spoke to one of them the other day. “I arrived at Alex a Haydn pianist,” he said, “and I left playing Boulez.” He’s not a pianist now; he runs the Bath Festival. Sure, many of Alex’s pupils are concert pianists of great distinction, but they’re also conductors and composers, oboists and cellists, journalists and broadcasters, doctors and civil servants. Many of them are teachers themselves. His was a wide church.

The other thing I remember from that first time at Gerard Rd was the first half hour, spent with Alison and Margaret in the kitchen. The front door had been opened by a terrifyingly intelligent schoolgirl, who’d then introduced me to her terrifyingly intelligent mother. I stayed terrified for about the next minute, time enough for them to give me my cup of tea, and time for me to work out that this was the backup team that looked after you while Alex overran wildly upstairs.

By the time I met Catriona I'd worked out too that the welcome I'd got from Alex was a family welcome as well. And just as I grew to appreciate Alex more and more both as a man and a teacher so I came to realize that I'd never really known a family quite like this before: where instead of watching the telly, they talked to one another; where they took such tangible pleasure in one another's company; and where individually and collectively they showed such extraordinary warmth and hospitality to whatever waif or stray turned up on their doorstep.

You didn't have to know Alex very well to know how fantastically proud he was, first as a father, and then as a grandfather. His family was what kept him sane in his round-the-clock, non-stop working life. If he's looking down from Heaven now, he might be surprised at this amazing turnout, at seeing so many of his extended family here. He'd be surprised, but no-one else is. He was loved not just by an amazing number of people, but by an amazing range.

I suspect, though, that up in Heaven word's got round the harp-playing community that Alex has arrived. He's probably teaching some nervous teenage angel right now, saying that yes, that's lovely, now just enjoy it more and take more time with the second subject; that he should get a bit more ping in his right hand.

I hope the angels appreciate him.