

# Jacques Vanherle (October 1948-August 2020)

Peter Broadbent

*conductor*

At any international choral festival over the last 30 years it was almost inevitable that one would see a group of happy, smiling people gathered around one particular man – sometimes in a wheelchair, sometimes standing with the help of his trusty crutches – but always radiating warmth, humour and a passion for life.

Jacques Vanherle (Jac) was a great ambassador for France, for culture and above all for choral music. His background as a teacher of Classics gave him an enviable ability to articulate his knowledge of history, his understanding of politics local, national and international, and to share his enthusiasm through ECA – Europa Cantat, the IFCM and other organisations. The word charisma is used very loosely these days, but Jac certainly possessed it. His unquenchable curiosity took him all over the world from his student days when he and a group of friends travelled Europe in a van, with little money but no fear. The instinct for learning to know a country through its people, and his ability to make friends were essential qualities when it came to spreading his love for music, believing it to be a great unifying force for good. This belief made him a tremendous friend to many, and a formidable opponent to those who did not share his views. He was able to argue with great skill to persuade politicians and businessmen to support his festivals and understood the language needed to do so – a rare talent.

In an editorial for a special edition of Europa Cantat Magazine dedicated to “Music and handicap” 10 years ago, Jac

wrote movingly and vividly about the effect that singing in a choir had on him. He was born with Hemiplegia and cerebral palsy at a time when there was little understanding or assistance for a handicapped child. His parents insisted that he should attend a normal school, where he learned an important lesson: *When you don't run quickly at school, you try to run more quickly than your little fellow pupils with your head.* At 13 he went to a religious boarding school where he was deeply unhappy, and it took him a term to learn how to defend himself against his fellow adolescents. However, there was a boys' choir at the school where a transformation took place as he discovered his voice, the extraordinary emotional and sensory power of singing with others, and a growing self-assurance. *Later, when I joined the university choir and understood that the sweet eyes of a pretty soprano were directed less towards my deformed legs than towards the charms of a young and – of course – handsome singer, I gained even a little more self-confidence and serene acceptance of my handicap.*

This awareness of what music, and particularly choral singing, could do for the individual was to dominate the rest of his life, because he wanted to inspire others, and to demonstrate that everyone could gain from the experience. I met Jac & Marie in Tours in 1992 and was delighted to be invited with the Joyful Company to a Festival he was organising in Falaise the following year. *Les Polyfolies de Falaise* packed an unbelievable amount of activities into three days, involving hundreds of amateur singers, over 2500 school children and included Eric Ericson's Chamber Choir amongst the guests. It was a great experience for the JCS, which was followed by several other trips to Normandy, and most importantly for my wife and me it was the beginning of a precious friendship with the Vanherles.



Jacques Vanherle with (from left to right) Andrea Rose, Ki Adams, Janice Adams, Victoria Liedbergius, Jacques' wife Anne-Marie Cretté, and Emily Kuo Vong

Every festival, every concert, every workshop, every event organised by Jac & Marie, supported always by their close friend Sylvain, was immaculately organised. Together with Marie's choir they became *L'Art et La Fugue*, presenting concerts, sometimes staged and costumed, always presenting music in an approachable and involving way for the listeners. They invited choirs from many of the countries they visited to join their summer festivals and developed more and more of a reputation in the Department. I am sure that all the choir directors who brought groups to any of Jac's festivals would feel as I did the pleasure of working with organisers who are also performers. When arriving at a new venue one discovered that everything discussed beforehand had been prepared, and music stands, lighting, staging were all in position. Copious amounts of chilled water (even Normandy can get hot in the summer) and food for the time between rehearsal and concert

were naturally planned. The audiences were always enthusiastic and increasingly knowledgeable, because Jac was always on hand to introduce the music and to make the performance an event.

Jac's growing reputation in the Region and beyond allowed him to develop the educational aims which had been so apparent in Falaise, and early in the new Millennium he shared with me and other friends the plans he had for an International Showcase for choirs and vocal ensembles. Inspired by the Theatre Festival in Avignon, which as well as providing a huge range of performances for a large public, was also visited by all the important Theatre Directors and Producers. Over three or four years he developed his plans, setting up Polyfollia as a non-profit company, finding the funding for a small administrative staff and an office, and contacting conductors and choral personalities from around the world to make up a committee of "Veilleurs" (Watchers) who would seek out emerging vocal ensembles from their region. I was pleased and privileged to be included in their number, and developed lasting friendships as a result. At each meeting Jac also arranged Ateliers for local choirs, so that they might benefit from the experience of the Watchers. The work of the committee was always lightened by the excellence of the hospitality and the warmth of the welcome. There were many problems which had to be surmounted by Jac and his team, but nothing deflected his great purpose.

So every two years between 2004 and 2014 twelve ensembles from different regions and different genres were invited to St. Lô to give concerts throughout the region to share gala concerts and to lead Ateliers and/or demonstrations over four or five days. The amateur singers who provided the audiences also performed their own concerts and attended workshops, serious or light-hearted, to be exposed to a large amount of new repertoire and approaches. There is no doubt in my mind that the standard and ambitions of amateur choirs throughout France were raised consistently over that ten-year period. For the

professional ensembles taking part it was a rich opportunity to meet producers, festival directors, promoters of all kinds, and for everyone concerned to make new and lasting friendships.



On Jacques' right, his wife Anne-Marie Cretté, on his left Samuel Saint-Martin and Isabelle Bazin

To plan accommodation, meals, venues, budgets, timetables, raise sponsorship, negotiate grants, deal with the politicians and performers required immense vision, patience, skill and a huge amount of energy, all of which Jac had in abundance (well perhaps not always the patience!). He worked incredibly hard and expected others to do the same, and he was sometimes very direct in his demands. But the small professional team who worked for him, and the huge number of volunteers (bénévoles) who worked tirelessly, all clearly adored him. He showed respect and warm appreciation for everyone's efforts.

Jac's love of life included a great appreciation of food, above all French food of course, and he was a considerable chef de cuisine. The only photo of Jac that I have in which he looks serious was taken when he was preparing a filet de boeuf for a wedding anniversary at our house, where Marie and he took responsibility for the meal. Despite his fantastic workload Jac never took himself too seriously, and to be in his company was always to laugh a lot. He and Marie were perfect hosts and wonderful guests. When they visited us, they always arrived with plenty of "Produits régionaux" and enjoyed exchanging humorous gifts, as well as excellent food. Marie was a constant support in every way, always making light of her efforts. They made a wonderful couple, and Jac was immensely proud of her and all his family.

Jacques Vanherle had the gift of making everyone feel special. He totally lacked self-pity but was utterly sympathetic to others. He was a life force. Along with hundreds of others I am proud to have known him. We shall all miss him greatly.



**Peter Broadbent** is one of Britain's leading choral conductors, known for his consistent commitment to contemporary music. In 1988, he formed the Joyful Company of Singers, which rapidly established itself as one of Europe's leading chamber choirs, winning an impressive list of

National and International Competitions. Performances in the UK have included most of the major music festivals, including the BBC Proms, and they have given concerts throughout Europe and in the USA. The JCS repertoire includes over 30 first performances, including works by major composers from the UK as well as composers from France, Hungary, Russia and Finland.

The JCS discography extends to over 25 CDs, and recording continues to be an important part of its activity. He has conducted the London Mozart Players, the English Chamber Orchestra, the City of London Sinfonia, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Southern Sinfonia and the BBC Singers, broadcasting frequently on BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM. He works as a guest conductor throughout Europe, giving masterclasses and adjudicating at international competitions. He was awarded the "Pro Cultura Hungarica" Medal by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Hungary, and more recently the Knight's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit for promoting and strengthening British-Hungarian cultural relations. Email: [peter.broadbent@jcos.co.uk](mailto:peter.broadbent@jcos.co.uk)