

Philip Gammon

PRINCIPAL PIANIST, THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

interviewed by Joan Seaman

Swedenborg Hall, London, 6 July 2005.

Philip Gammons started piano lessons at the age of seven and a half at his home in Chippenham, Wiltshire. His parents were quite poor with his father working long hours as a fitter at a nearby factory. His mother was a keen amateur singer and sang Gilbert and Sullivan light opera for the local church society. His parents saved up to buy Philip a piano and they asked a piano teacher who visited their neighbour's children if he would take on another pupil.

He took to his lessons straight away but he liked to have his mother with him when he was practising. At the age of 12 his school music teacher found that Philip had perfect pitch. He learnt every instrument from the recorder ensemble and there is an early tape recording of the school ensemble with Philip's voice announcing the work and composer in his childish tones "Thomas Stolzer, died in 1526."

He remembers practising the piano for hours, even when his parents had retired to bed; his mother had to make him stop so that they could go to sleep! He carried on learning with his original teacher until he was fourteen years old, when he started going up to London to have lessons with Herbert Fryer, in Conduit St. He decided that he would love to pursue a professional career as a pianist and started training with Harold Craxton in Hampstead. Craxton prepared him for a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music, only two scholarships were awarded yearly and Philip was musical enough to receive one.

In 1956 at the age of 16, Philip started at the Royal Academy. He lived in Harlesden, in lodgings arranged through his Methodist church. His uncle also lived in Harlesden so it was nice to have some family nearby. He had a piano at his digs so he could practise. At that time his ambition was to train as a concert pianist. However, the life of a solo artist can be very lonely and Philip feels that his career with the Royal Ballet has given him the best of both worlds. Philip was at the Royal Academy for five years under the tutelage of Craxton. He took lessons in harmony, accompaniment, aural training, etc. He was

awarded a diploma for piano recital in 1960, and in 1961 he won the MacFarren Gold medal. He was happy at the Royal Academy and in his leisure time attended concerts at the Festival Hall and Wigmore Hall; he also gave concerts at the Academy. He did not compose, preferring to concentrate on playing and increasing his repertoire. He particularly enjoyed playing Chopin and Liszt.

Upon graduating, Philip hoped to further his training by going abroad. In 1961, he applied for a trav-

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elling scholarship to Germany, Austria or Poland. To his surprise he was offered all three. He chose to travel to Germany as he had heard of a wonderful teacher Yvonne Loriod, the wife of composer Messiaen. He received a grant from the King Edward VII foundation which covered his costs. Germany was very different but a wonderful experience; he was very happy there and gave lots of concerts. He met his future wife Floretta there too; she had come over to Germany from her home in Greece to study singing and won the top prize at the Munich International competition. She came to Karlsruhe for a concert and that is where they met! They married in Karlsruhe in 1964 and then came back to England.

In 1964 Philip was offered a deputy teaching post at the Royal Academy which was a three month long post. While there he heard of a vacancy arising at the Royal Ballet. He needed a permanent job and was encouraged to apply by Craxton who knew both Fonteyn and Ashton. He auditioned for John Lanchberry and Anthony Twiner. As the Opera House was in the middle of renovations he went to Drury Lane for the audition. He played Liszt *Les Jeux D'eau* and then had to sight read from *La Fille mal gardée* and music by Shostakovich. He was given the job!

Philip admits that to begin with he knew nothing about ballet. He felt he was least good at improvising for ballet class, and he was surrounded by stars such as Fonteyn, Nureyev and Beriova, which was daunting. At the time there were two particularly tough Norwegian ballet teachers. One of these teachers helped him to plan ahead which music to play for class but then changed it all as the class began! He had to learn the hard way what to play, but found as time went by that dancers liked him and often chose his class even when they should have been elsewhere! His improvisatory skills were limited but he found suitable music from opera, etc., which Floretta helped him choose. For the first four years he just played for class and rehearsals. He also played at the Royal Ballet School for five weeks but found it very difficult playing for class for seven hours a day; it was very tiring.

In 1968, Philip was invited to join 'Ballet For All', an Arts Council funded programme which went on tour around the UK with four dancers and two actors. They toured around giving performances, which was very enjoyable. Later on, a series of TV programmes called 'Ballet For All' went out on ITV for seven weeks.

After this, Philip returned to the main company and started to play orchestral piano. In 1973, Philip gave his first performance as solo pianist at the Royal Opera House. This was Hindemith's *The Four Temperaments*, under conductor Ashley Lawrence. Philip recalled that Balanchine came along, sat at the piano and rattled off one of the variations.

In 1974, Sir Kenneth MacMillan created *Elite Syncopations*. For this, Philip played on stage in costume. Philip and MacMillan together chose which Joplin pieces to use, some of them being adapted for twelve-piece band by Robert Docker. There were two pianos on stage, one regular one and a honky-tonk type, and a twelve-piece band. The music was quite different from the type Philip was used to. The ballet was a huge success and has recently been revived at Birmingham Royal Ballet.

Next came Ashton's *A Month In The Country* in 1976, and coincidentally this was also Philip's last performance on June 18th 2005 at which he officially retired. As an aside, Philip wondered if, at an earlier performance of the *Month* triple bill this season (June 4th matinée) anyone in the audience noticed a crashing noise from the orchestra pit; his angle poise lamp had fallen down in the middle of playing *Symphonic Variations*!

Further anecdotes about *Month* included a memorable performance in LA in 1979 at the Shrine Auditorium, when Philip was promised the best Baldwin piano in town. As he played, a black key C# came away in his hand! He somehow managed to get through without this essential key. Philip gave us a demonstration of this catastrophe on the piano at the Swedenborg Hall to everyone's amusement! He also explained about the

famous Gammon port de bras which is found in *Month*. When Sir Fred was choreographing this work, the characters of Beliaev, Vera, Natalia and Kolia were all on stage and Philip was required to play one section of Chopin over and over again. In exasperation after many repeats Philip raised his arms up to 5th position and then dropped them to 2nd with a sigh. Sir Fred immediately gave this movement to all the dancers to finish off this sequence! Again, Philip kindly demonstrated the event to us.

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A question arose about what it was like to work with MacMillan. Philip worked with him on *Elite*, *Fin de Jour*, for which MacMillan asked him for help with the counts for the dancers. This is often different from the musical count. He played for *Winter Dreams* and *Prince of the Pagodas*. He liked the Britten music for *Pagodas* as he got to know it so well. He remembered an incident at the USA premiere of *Pagodas* in Washington, which he conducted, when someone in the audience had a heart attack, the show went on after a protracted interval.

In 1999, Anthony Twiner retired as the principal pianist for the Royal Ballet and Philip took his place. Philip has played solo piano on stage in several pieces, including *Elite*, *The Concert*, *Mayerling*, and for *Five Brahms Waltzes*.

Asked about recordings of his playing; he used to have recordings of *Month* with John Lanchbery and of *Elite*, but these are both now discontinued.

Philip entertained us with a few other anecdotes including one where he was accidentally locked into a rehearsal studio near the Opera House when he was meant to be playing the off-stage organ in *Romeo and Juliet*. He escaped and made it to his place at the very last minute, breathing heavily but managing to play.

When Philip retired, Sir Anthony Dowell wrote to him saying how Philip's playing used to lift the dancers and how difficult it would be to replace him.

Although now officially retired, Philip hopes to return next season as a guest artist to play in *Marguerite and Armand* and *Ballet Imperial*. He will be giving a concert for retired Methodist ministers soon. He also plans a long holiday in Greece with his wife.

Report by Mandy Kent, checked and corrected by Philip Gammon and Joan Seaman ©The Ballet Association 2005.