

Andrew Downes, who has recently died aged 72, was one of our foremost British composers, and we have been privileged to have him as president of the Central Composers' Alliance.

He was born in Handsworth, his father Frank a horn player in the RAF Central Band, RLPO and CBSO, and in 1965, Andrew, also a horn player, joined the Staffordshire Schools Symphony Orchestra, where Cynthia Cooper was leading the second violins, and - small world - where I was one of the string tutors!

Music Adviser Maude Smith was taking the orchestra to Czechoslovakia, in those days behind the "iron curtain", and for Andrew it was love at first sight, both for Cynthia and for Prague! And over the years so much of Andrew's music has been commissioned, performed and recorded by the Czech Philharmonia Orchestra, including 4 symphonies and two overtures on CD. On a personal note, my late wife Patricia and I were privileged to accompany Andrew and Cynthia to Prague in 2002 for the première of the concerto for 4 horns and orchestra, being conducted by Vladimír Válek. And to see the large posters advertising the concert on display all around Prague was quite something.



Nearer home Andrew's overture "Towards a New Age" had been premièred by the RPO at Symphony Hall Birmingham in 1997, while around the same time the family all went to New York for the International Flute Convention's premièring his sonata for eight flutes.

Following school, Andrew went to Cambridge on a choral scholarship, gaining an MA specialising in composition, and then in 1974 he went on to study with Sir Lennox Berkeley and with Herbert Howells at the RCM.

Andrew became Head of Composition at Birmingham School of Music (later the Conservatoire) in 1975 and then in 1990 he was invited to form the School of Composition and Creative Studies. This was the first such department in any UK conservatoire, bringing together the specialities of Jazz, rock & pop, world and folk music, creating an incredibly exciting environment, both for staff and for students. Andrew was awarded a Professorship in 1992 and retired in 2005 to devote himself to nearly twenty years more composition. In recognition of the "distinction" of his work in 2014 he was made Emeritus Professor of Birmingham City University.

There is, though, another side to the story of Andrew's brilliant life, and this is that from his youth onwards he had suffered from Ankylosing Spondilitis, an arthritic condition which gradually creeps right up the spine. He was told early on that he would be in a wheelchair by the age of 35; but Andrew had a will of iron and defied medical predictions throughout his life.

Tragically, though, in 2009 Andrew fell, fracturing his back and a hospital mis-diagnosis meant that he permanently lost the use of both legs, resulting in permanent paraplegia. But despite these life-changing injuries Andrew continued to compose some of his finest works, at the same time stimulating us all, family and friends, with his inspirational strength, positivity and humour.

He is survived by Cynthia, daughters Anna and Paula, and by four grandchildren, to them all a hero.

Kerry Milan