

Lady Barbirolli

Lady Barbirolli, who died on January 25 aged 97, was an oboist of the highest distinction and the widow of the great conductor Sir John Barbirolli; she was also a woman of incandescent charm and strength of character, with a gift for friendship which amounted to genius.

She rose to fame in her profession under her maiden name Evelyn Rothwell in an era when there were many fewer women in orchestras than there are today (and they were usually harpists). Yet she came to the oboe comparatively late (at the age of 17) and only by chance or coercion - "I didn't take up the oboe, it took me up" was how she described it.

The two oboists in the orchestra at her school, Downe House, near Newbury, left at the same time and the music staff asked her to "have a go". She did not even know what an oboe looked like, but she played it somehow, had some lessons and won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music.



Evelyn Barbirolli with her husband the great conductor Sir John Barbirolli: they were a striking and contrasted pair

There she became a pupil of Leon Goossens, the outstanding oboist of his time. He was not, she said later, a good technical teacher, but his pupils learned by listening to him and trying to imitate him. Already, though, Evelyn Rothwell was being noticed for the natural beauty of her tone.

To gain experience while a student, she applied for casual engagements in London theatre orchestras and with broadcasting ensembles such as Reginald King's salon orchestra (leader, Alfredo Campoli) and Lew Stone's band.

She played at the Lyric when Dodie Smith's play *Autumn Crocus* was running there and in Millöcker's operetta *The Dubarry at His Majesty's*. On one evening she sang among the tenors in the Covent Garden chorus at a performance of *Boris Godunov* for the sum of £4 10s.

In 1934 she and her friend Natalie James were auditioned by the conductor Fritz Busch, who

was assembling an orchestra for the first Glyndebourne season. They were appointed first and second oboe and played there until the outbreak of war. Busch gave Evelyn Rothwell a photograph inscribed "To the best of all oboe players".

Many of the Glyndebourne orchestra were members of the London Symphony Orchestra, and they invited Evelyn Rothwell and Natalie James to take part in a broadcast concert, the first women to play in the orchestra.

Evelyn Rothwell was born at Wallingford-on-Thames, Berkshire, on January 24 1911. Her father was a tea dealer in the City; her mother was a descendant of the Victorian novelist Charles Reade, author of *The Cloister and the Hearth*. When Evelyn won her RCM scholarship, she had to overcome paternal opposition to the idea of a musical career, but her mother supported her.

At the college her second instrument was the piano, but she also studied the cello and played the timpani. Among her fellow students was Benjamin Britten, who occasionally asked her to try out pieces he had composed for another woman oboist.

In July 1931 Evelyn took over from Goossens, who was away, as first oboe in the Drury Lane orchestra for Lehár's *The Land of Smiles*, with Richard Tauber singing *You are my heart's delight* several times a night. A violist in the orchestra was Peter Barbirolli. He knew his elder brother John was looking for an oboist for a six-week season at the Royal Opera House by the Covent Garden touring company, of which he was musical director. Peter suggested Evelyn Rothwell.

When she received a letter suggesting an audition, she thought it was signed "John Barkworth", whom she assumed to be an opera house official, and was astonished when she discovered that the signatory was in fact Barbirolli. He appointed her second oboe for the London season and the subsequent eight-week provincial tour.

Her first rehearsal with Barbirolli was for Ethel Smyth's opera *The Wreckers*. In her diary she wrote: "Ethel Smyth... very dictatorial. John Barbirolli is very nice, I think. Particular, though. Loses his temper quite suddenly and completely for only a few minutes."

In 1933 Barbirolli, who the previous year had married the soprano Marjorie Parry, was appointed conductor of the Scottish Orchestra, as it was then called (now the Royal Scottish National Orchestra), in Glasgow and he offered Evelyn Rothwell the post of first oboe.

In the first season she was soloist in a Handel concerto, arranged for her by Barbirolli, as were later concertos which he adapted from music by Corelli, Pergolesi and Marcello. Her artistry and their mutual rapport can be heard in the recordings of these works they made some years later - particularly in the recording of Vaughan Williams's concerto which the composer admired intensely. Several composers wrote for her and she was a noted exponent of the concertos of Martin and Strauss.

Barbirolli's marriage was short-lived and his affection for Evelyn developed apace in Scotland. He had always admired her musicianship - the surest way to his heart - and a friend noted that her playing, with its instinctive and sensitive phrasing and ravishing tone, had

always had "the Barbirolli sound".

They made a striking and contrasted pair in every way: he was very small and she very tall; he had a Latin-Gallic temperament, she was understatedly English. They shared a keen sense of humour (both were superb raconteurs) and a love of good food, wine and objets d'art.

The Scottish Orchestra had only a five-month season in those years, so in the summers Evelyn returned to Glyndebourne and to freelance work with the LSO and to Radio Luxembourg broadcasts with Fred Hartley's Quintet. In 1936 Sir Henry Wood appointed her principal oboe of the New Queen's Hall Orchestra (she is the oboist in his famous recording of Vaughan Williams's London Symphony).

In 1936 Barbirolli went to New York as conductor of the New York Philharmonic in succession to Toscanini. Evelyn Rothwell remained for a time at the Scottish Orchestra, where Georg Szell became conductor (and once proposed to her). Barbirolli's divorce was made absolute in June 1939 and he and Evelyn were married at Holborn on July 5.

Barbirolli used to describe amusingly his apprehension about her father's reaction: "I was small, a foreigner, a musician, a Roman Catholic and getting divorced - everything he'd disapprove." But they got on famously, as did Evelyn with John's Italian and French relatives. As Evelyn herself remarked: "Dear John, he was such a good Christian and such a bad Catholic."

He was in a liner returning from New York when Britain declared war. Evelyn Rothwell had been unable to obtain a visa and did not join her husband in America until October. She was with him there until their return to England and the Hallé in the summer of 1943. Among her memories of those years was that of playing chamber music with José Iturbi and the Horowitzes, with the actor Edward G Robinson turning the pages for Barbirolli's cello-playing.

Evelyn Rothwell shared fully in Barbirolli's remarkable restoration of the Hallé's fortunes in Manchester. Occasionally in the first season she played in the orchestra, though she did so unwillingly in case it should be regarded as nepotism. She also limited her appearances as soloist with the Hallé. On the orchestra's tour of Austria in 1948 she gave, in Salzburg, the first performance of the oboe concerto by Mozart which had previously been known only in its transcription for flute.

In the early Manchester days she acted as Barbirolli's secretary and driver. He relied implicitly on her musical judgment. When the Hallé played in an unfamiliar hall, she would move about in the auditorium at rehearsal to check the balance for him. At recordings he liked her to be in the control-box, knowing she would be fearlessly (but tactfully) candid about the performance.

Although still in demand as an oboist, particularly in chamber music - in her youth she had made some famous recordings with the Busch Quartet - Evelyn Rothwell increasingly subjugated her career to looking after Barbirolli as his health declined through his insatiable workload.

From the 1960s, when he added the Houston Symphony Orchestra to his Hallé post, she travelled abroad with him whenever she could, coping with the severe bouts of depression

from which he had always suffered and, in his last years, with the cardiac collapses such as occurred once on the steps of the National Theatre, Munich. She had long before accepted that asking him to take things easier was merely to invite a storm of vituperation.

They had less and less time to enjoy their mutual hobby of collecting antique glass and to entertain friends at their Salford home, John cooking the meal, Evelyn looking after everything else. Their last years were clouded by a crisis in their financial affairs caused by dishonesty and betrayal on the part of Barbirolli's former personal manager.

In May 1970 a priest friend performed the religious wedding ceremony which their register office marriage had denied them (Evelyn never became a Catholic). Barbirolli died in London two months later, on July 29.

After his death Evelyn dropped Rothwell as her professional name and became Evelyn Barbirolli, something she had been loth to do in his lifetime. She resumed playing and taught at the Royal Academy of Music, where she was "Lady B" to everyone. She revealed her gifts as a gardener, and accepted many invitations to adjudicate at woodwind competitions in Britain and in Munich and Prague, cities she loved.

As a teacher she was described as "judge, teacher, adjudicator, understanding aunt and mother confessor". She was patient with stupidity, intolerant of laziness and invariably constructive in her advice. She would also frankly tell someone when they had no hope of becoming any good.

Her pupils valued this uncompromising honesty and her interest in them as people. Many of the leading orchestral oboists today were her pupils. One whom she coached rather than taught was the late Janet Craxton, the Hallé's first oboe, whom Evelyn regarded as the finest player she had heard.

She wrote Oboe Technique and later, in three volumes, The Oboist's Companion, perhaps the definitive book on the instrument. In 2002 her charming but occasionally waspish autobiography, Living with Glorious John, was published.

She was appointed OBE in 1984.

Her loyalty to her husband's memory, while never overbearing, was the light of her life in the years after his death. She leaves a host of friends who speak of her only in terms of unalloyed affection.