

Nigel Osborne – presented by Keir Bloomer, Chairman of the University Court, Queen Margaret University on 5 July 2013

Chancellor, in the name and on behalf of Senate, I have much pleasure in inviting you to confer upon Nigel Osborne MBE the degree of Doctor of Letters.

Born in Manchester, Nigel Osborne went to school in Glasgow, and then studied music at Oxford with Egon Wellesz, a former pupil of Arnold Schoenberg. After graduating he attended the Chopin Academy in Warsaw at a time of great creativity in Polish music – led by composers such as Penderecki and Lutoslavski. He travelled extensively in Eastern Europe, making many friends and developing strong loyalties.

His career as a young composer quickly took off and he won prizes in the Netherlands, Switzerland, the USA and elsewhere.

Opera has always been important to Nigel. In 1987, a commission from Glyndebourne led him to write *The Electrification of the Soviet Union* – a setting of Pasternak's novel *The Last Summer*. It received enthusiastic reviews and has been revived several times. More recently, *Differences in Demolition* became the first opera ever to be performed in Srebrenica, the scene of the 1995 massacre. His *Naciketa* premiered in Mumbai a few weeks ago.

While continuing to compose, Nigel turned to academic music, becoming Reid Professor of Music at the University of Edinburgh in 1990, a post he held for 22 years. During his time there, he founded the *Institute of Music, Human and Social Development* reflecting his lifelong interest in links between music and neurosciences. His teaching has extended well beyond the university, involving interdisciplinary learning in schools and work with children with special needs through Tapestry, an organisation promoting creativity in education. His view of learning – like that of this university – is that it should be socially useful.

The 1992 Bosnian war was an important turning point in Nigel's life. His strong ties to Eastern Europe meant that he could not ignore what was going on. He made many dangerous trips to besieged Sarajevo, crawling through the long utilities tunnel under the airport runway to avoid Serbian artillery in the surrounding hills. He later received the Freedom Award of the International Peace Centre in Sarajevo, where he is regarded as a hero.

Since then Nigel has tried to help heal the divisions in Bosnian society. He set up the Mostar Sinfonietta, the first organisation in that city to draw members from among Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. To house the orchestra and harness the healing power of the arts more generally, he built an arts centre using a generous donation from Luciano Pavarotti.

He has worked tirelessly for children traumatised by war – in Bosnia, then in Kosovo and later in other conflict-torn places. Some of these children have seen their parents killed before their eyes. Some are totally withdrawn, too fearful to interact with anyone. Nigel joins them unobtrusively, sitting on the floor, playing his guitar and singing children's songs in their own language. Often he has to do this for hours or days before he gets any response. Eventually they realise that this gentle man singing their songs is no threat, and they end up climbing all over him. Their journey out of painful isolation has begun.

There can be few people better qualified to speak to them in their own language. I recall a meal in Jerusalem when someone produced a guitar and asked Nigel to perform. The company was mainly Jewish so he sang some Hebrew songs, then remembering the background of our host, the distinguished child psychologist, Reuven Feuerstein, switched to French, then Romanian. At this point, a man from the main part of the restaurant asked, "Do you know any songs in Czech?". Nigel did. Others came from Russia, Poland, Germany and maybe a dozen other countries. Nobody was disappointed. Finally, our shy waitress said "I don't think you will know my country or have a song for me". "You are a Ukrainian", Nigel said, "and, judging from your accent, you come from near Lviv." – and she got her song too.

The range of Nigel's talents is formidable. Apart from being an outstanding teacher, composer and instrumentalist, he is a leading expert on music and the brain. He has a medical qualification and speaks approaching twenty languages. If he were not such a modest and unassuming man, he would be quite insufferable.

Nigel Osborne is Scotland's contemporary renaissance man but, more than that, he is an outstandingly good man.