

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

The 878th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 9 April 2013. The meeting was chaired by John Cunnington who introduced Ted Watson. His subject was Music in Shakespeare.

Now retired, Ted Watson was one of the band of musicians who provide live music for the Royal Shakespeare Company's productions. He arrived in Stratford in 1966 with a nine-month contract and left forty-two years later. Quite apart from his work in the theatre, he has also had a considerable career as a composer, teacher and performer.

He entertained his audience with a mixture of history, demonstration, sound recordings and anecdote. Shakespeare was very much aware of the importance of music in the theatre, and used it in a variety of different ways. He wrote no fewer than sixty songs, and one of his most famous opening lines is for Twelfth Night: "If music be the food of love, play on".

To illustrate the breadth of new music continually being written, he played three contrasting recordings of the song "Where the bee sucks" from the Tempest, one an authentically Jacobean version written by the man who wrote the original music, Robert Johnson, one by Guy Woolfenden written for the 1978 RSC production, and one by Watson himself. He also played the very beautiful music which he had played for the statue scene in the 1992 production of The Winter's Tale, composed by Shaun Davey.

Versatility is the key to working at the theatre where composers have created music in every style from Elizabethan to South-East Asian gamelan, and Ted Watson demonstrated some of the instruments he has been called on to play. In Peer Gynt, just three musicians had to play thirty-six different instruments. He played snatches of music for penny whistle, clarinets and saxophones of different sizes, a crumhorn, and the weird waterphone, often used in Michael Boyd's history cycle to provide a sense of foreboding.

He ended by confirming that hearing Shakespeare's plays over and over again had made him realise what a great writer he was, and played a piece of music written in 1759 in Shakespeare's praise, Garrick and Dibdin's Warwickshire Lad.

After questions this immensely enjoyable meeting closed around 9pm.