

## Garth Pollard

President, Master, Distinguished Governors, Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues,

It is my very great pleasure and privilege to be able to welcome Garth Pollard as a fellow of Birkbeck College.

Birkbeck has been extraordinarily fortunate in having someone of Pollard's caliber as an independent governor for the past dozen years.

Running a successful College is very much like composing an intricate and intense opera. Benjamin Britten – a composer Pollard greatly enjoys – frequently wondered aloud what was needed to create something so enchanting that it would survive musical fads and restless audiences. When asked in 1949 why so much of his work was written for strings, Britten replied that strings best opened up possibilities for “elaborate divisi – the effect of many voices of the same kind” as well as an “infinite variety of colour – the use of mutes, pizzicato, harmonics and so forth.” He lauded musical “dexterity” and the “smaller combinations of players”, and spoke with disdain about people who prefer the “the luscious ‘tutti’ effect from an orchestra” which “tend to cut off the upper partials and give the orchestra a constant rounded, booming and ‘fat’ sound”.

Translated from the world of music in the mid-twentieth century to that of higher education in the twenty-first century, this is Birkbeck's mission. Birkbeck seeks to enrich and enchant individual lives by offering a space for complex voices, rich colours, and intimate intellectual engagement. Britten also claimed that “I don't like writing music in a vacuum. To my mind, actual contact with performance is very

important.” As our distinguished alumni have been telling us for decades, Birkbeck seeks not only to broaden individual horizons, but also to forge better worlds. Like good music, intellectual pursuits are meant to make a difference.

Like Britten, Pollard knows that success requires precise thinking and sustained labour. Before joining us at Birkbeck, Pollard was an illustrious solicitor, with particular expertise in finance, taxation, and human resources. He qualified in Ingledew Brown Bennison and Barrett, and joined Clifford Turner in 1969. His rise was dazzling. He was made a partner in 1975, became executive partner in 1991, and took up the role of Chief Operating Officer in 1999.

Then, as today, Clifford Chance is one of the world’s leading law firms. Judged by revenues, it is the largest law firm in the world, and was the first one to achieve a turnover of more than \$1 billion, mostly through national and multinational mergers and acquisitions, as well as business advice. For Pollard, his time at Clifford Chance was an opportunity to work on a global scale in a firm that was a little like the House of Atreus..... but without the poetry. What better place to hone the two skills needed when working in higher education today: a profound grasp of what needs to be done and a calmness to ensure it is carried through efficiently.

Two years after his departure from Clifford Chance in 2001, The Lawyer ruefully acknowledged that he had been an exceedingly “hard act to follow”, but Pollard was keen for new challenges. There was no shortage of takers for his formidable talents. His energies were diverted into prison monitoring, housing associations, and, of course, education (including playing a role in St Christopher’s, that progressive, independent school in Letchworth).

Most importantly, though, he joined Birkbeck as an independent Governor. While in this role, he has shouldered some of the most daunting tasks in the life of an institution of higher education, including being Chair of the College's Audit Committee, an ex-officio member of the Nominations and Remunerations Committees, and, from 2008, Deputy Chair of Governors.

To these crucial posts, Pollard has brought a remarkable intellect, decisive legal and financial acumen, and energy. There is an old joke about a solicitor who worked for Clifford Chance and could be heard exclaiming, "Thank God it's Friday. Only two more workdays this week!" I would like to suggest that Pollard's previous employment history proved to be excellent preparation for his position at Birkbeck.

But there is more to Pollard than his formidable talents in the law and education. He relishes long-distance hiking in New Zealand. He is a zealous motorcyclist – a passion (his wife tells me) he was forbidden to indulge in until he was in his fifties and his children were no longer so young.

More importantly, Pollard is a man of exquisite culture. When that literary lawyer, Prince Hamlet, was asked by Polonius, "What do you read, my lord?", Hamlet replied, "Words, words, words".

For Pollard, one might also add, "Music, music, music". Like other real-life lawyers who turned to music – Schumann and Stravinsky, to name just two – Pollard turns to music for inspiration. He is a member of the Council of Aldeburgh Music, which – this year – is hosting a year long tribute to the centenary of Britten's birth.

On the surface, what could be further away from tax audits and financial systems than the soaring dramas of Billy Budd, Prodigal Son, Death in Venice, or, my favourite, War Requiem, written for the 1962 consecration of the newly constructed Coventry Cathedral.

But, on further thought, law and opera are well paired. Music provides insights about unity and harmony. In Pollard's role as Governor, he sought not to impose a unity of voices but rather to eliminate jangling discord and ensure that each person was enabled to play their own instrument but in concord with the whole. Musical magnificence requires a harmonic gathering of the various components – text, melody, arrangement, performance. Pollard has been instrumental in helping to conduct our exquisite intellectual orchestra here at Birkbeck.

This is what Birkbeck seeks to give to all its members: a vibrant, brain-teasing composition in which all the discrete parts cohere to a beautiful and powerful whole. Without the talents, visionary insights, versatility, and range of men like Pollard, it would be a damp squib indeed.

It is a great pleasure, then, to acknowledge his life of public service and return in some small measure the debt we owe him as a College, as we welcome him as a Fellow of Birkbeck.