

## **LINDSAY ARTHUR O'NEILL**

**BMus (Adel), FRCO (CHM), ARCM, HonRSCM**

**23 October 1924 - 24 July 2002**

***compiled by his friends***

[Click here to download an mp3 \(3.8MB\) of "Praise to the Holiest" \(Gerontius\)](#)

as sung at Lindsay O'Neill's funeral service with Peter Jewkes, organ

Lindsay O'Neill, the son of Arthur and Lillian O'Neill, was brought up in Ivanhoe. The family home was in Menzie Grove, and they attended the Methodist Church in Seddon Street. Lindsay had an older sister, Joyce, who died at an early age in 1948. His father sang tenor in the church choir, as well as in the Heidelberg City Choir, and so it was in the family circle that Lindsay's musical formation began.

His first organ lessons were with Miss Florence Thurman at Cairns Memorial Presbyterian Church in East Melbourne which had a fine organ by Alfred Fuller. Miss Thurman also taught Lindsay the piano. He went on to have organ lessons at St Paul's Cathedral from the renowned Dr A. E. Floyd in the 1940s. Attending evensong daily at St Paul's in Floyd's time there (up to 1947), he soaked up every nuance of the tradition that would remain a part of him for many years afterwards.

Lindsay's first organist appointment was at the East Ivanhoe Methodist Church, Melbourne (1942-45). He moved from there to become organist at the Port Melbourne Methodist Church, followed by Wyclif Congregational Church, Surrey Hills, where he enjoyed working with a good choir and choir-mistress. His final post before moving to Tasmania was at Augustine Congregational Church, Auburn where there was a three-manual organ by George Fincham. Lindsay joined the Society of Organists in 1945, and he won an organ playing competition in the Heidelberg Eisteddfod, held at the Australian Church in 1947. His first recital for the Organ Society was in July 1948 at Augustine Congregational.

It was Floyd who recommended the young Lindsay, still in his mid 20s, for the post of organist at St John's Church, Launceston, Tasmania. This was the first of the two major appointments by which he will be remembered - each of more than 20 years - the first at St John's (1950-1974) and the second at St Andrew's Anglican Church, Brighton, Vic. (1975-1996).

Lindsay had been educated at Northcote High School and Collingwood Technical College. Upon leaving school he worked for the Western Assurance Company at the corner of Bourke and William Streets in the city, and he was transferred to their Launceston office when he took up the post at St John's. They continued to support him by transferring him to their London office when he first went there to study in the mid-1950s. He practised nearby during his lunch-hour on the Father Willis organ at Union Chapel, Islington, and was allowed to leave work early on Fridays to take organ lessons.

In the course of several trips between Australia and the UK, Lindsay soon gained the diplomas of the Royal College of Music (ARCM, 1956) and the

Royal College of Organists (FRCO, 1958; CHM, 1963). He lived at Addington Palace in Croydon, which was then the headquarters of The Royal School of Church Music. His organ studies were with Dr Harold Darke at St Michael's Cornhill, and theory/composition with Dr William Lloyd Webber (taking lessons in his spacious house and remembering the young Andrew and Julian running around). While in England, Lindsay also completed two years of the external BMus at Durham University. He took a further year's leave from Launceston in 1972, and graduated Bachelor of Music from the University of Adelaide in 1973, having gained credit for his earlier studies at Durham.

The fine Brindley-Hopkins organ of St John's, Launceston, was Lindsay's pride and joy. He was responsible for the comprehensive rebuild of this instrument by J.W.Walker & Sons, and his performances became widely known throughout the country from the early 1960s onwards through the weekly ABC radio programme 'Organists of Australia'. His repertoire was broad and imaginative, moving well beyond the works of Bach, Brahms, Mendelssohn and S. S. Wesley, with which he had been trained, to encompass such masterpieces as the Elgar Sonata, the Roger-Ducasse *Pastorale*, and works by Franck, Widor, Vierne, Langlais and Messiaen. These were all played with great panache and colourful registration, the sound filling that wonderful Launceston building. His organ students in Launceston included Rodney Ford (now Director of Music at Brighton Grammar School) and Lindsay Hutchinson, who deputised for him during his absence in 1972. Dorothy Glover had acted as organist during his trip to England in 1962/63.

Two of the rectors of St John's, The Revd Len Sutton and Bishop Henry Jerrim, were strong influences in Lindsay's life. It was under Sutton's guidance that Lindsay became an Anglican. Returning from his first sojourn in England, Lindsay was able to move out of employment in insurance. He joined the part-time music staff at Scotch College, Launceston at the beginning of 1959, and went on to build up the choral tradition there before leaving at the end of 1962 to spend another year in England. He later became Music Master, Chapel Organist and Choirmaster at Launceston Church Grammar School, 1966-74. Lindsay also directed the 'Renaissance Singers' in Launceston, a group that broadcast and gave concerts regularly. He lived in a delightful sunny flat high up in York Street, overlooking the valley, and drove around in a sporty green Fiat, which earned him the affectionate nickname '*Homus Organus Fiatus*' to the boys at the Grammar School!

Along with John Nicholls (then organist at St David's Cathedral, Hobart), Lindsay found himself involved with an LP recording *Historic Organs of Tasmania*, in which he is heard playing organs in the north of the State. Apart from this, however, recordings of his playing are rare: There is a 3-LP set of him accompanying 'Messiah' at St John's, and a number of tapes of his radio broadcasts still survive, along with tape-recordings of concerts both in Launceston and Melbourne. Lindsay continued to give recitals on the mainland in those days, including the opening of the rebuilt organ at Auburn Uniting Church in Melbourne in 1967. His recital for the Society of Organists at St Andrew's, Brighton in May 1972 will be fondly recalled.

After more than 20 years in Launceston, Lindsay felt the need to return home to Melbourne, and he accepted the post at St Andrew's, Brighton in

1975. After a time, he moved into the newly built organist's house there, surrounded by beautiful furniture, books and pictures. There were two especially cherished objects: his lovely Steinway grand piano, which he had brought from Launceston, and a fluffy, welcoming cat, simply called "Pussy". Pussy had a predecessor in Tasmania named "Clarabel", and her successor at Brighton was called "Penelope"!

The organ at St Andrew's, Brighton perhaps never quite measured up to the one Lindsay had played in Launceston, but he worked with Steve Laurie to bring about refinements and improvements. As well as continuing to give recitals, Lindsay was much engaged in teaching: his students included many in piano and theory at Brighton Grammar, Camberwell Grammar and Melbourne Grammar Schools, and organ students at the University of Melbourne. Several of his organ students have gone on to careers in music, including Mark Joyner (now at Pembroke School, Adelaide), John Rivers (now Organist at Holy Trinity Cathedral, Wangaratta) and Robert Sholl (now studying in London). As an examiner for the AMEB, Lindsay's gentle and encouraging manner helped many students through the rigors of grade examinations on both piano and organ.

Lindsay's love for travelling abroad never ceased. He was an inveterate train traveller, and enjoyed exploring the highways and byways of England and France by train. These excursions inevitably took him to marvellous churches, where he experienced the delights of playing fine organs such as the famed Cavallé-Coll in the Basilica of St Sernin, Toulouse and the Willis at Truro Cathedral. He enjoyed a full six months in Europe in 1981, when he exchanged organ and teaching posts with Dennis Hunt, the organist of St Mary Magdalen, Paddington in London. He visited friends in the US as recently as 1997, taking a 19-hour train trip in the course of his explorations.

Retirement from St Andrew's shortly after Easter 1996 was undoubtedly prompted by Lindsay's health, about which he rarely spoke. Moving to Clifton Hill, he enjoyed deputising at various churches around Melbourne until he felt unable to do so any longer. He became a parishioner at St Mark's, Fitzroy, where the restoration and installation of a remarkably intact Harrison organ became a special project for him. Built in England in 1938, this instrument was very much a part of the organ world in which Lindsay had been brought up, and he gave the opening recital in November 1999.

Lindsay served the wider church-music community especially through his longstanding involvement with The Royal School of Church Music, of which he was appointed a Special Commissioner for Tasmania in 1963. He was made an Honorary Member of the RSCM in 1977. Frequently contributing to RSCM Summer Schools, he inspired generations of younger organists and singers with his sensitive organ accompaniments, subtle re-harmonisations, and above all his masterly improvisations. These were always imbued with discipline and restraint, qualities that shone through his personality as well as through his musicianship.

The art of improvisation at the organ was one that Lindsay undoubtedly absorbed in the first instance from Dr A. E. Floyd at St Paul's Cathedral. He would invariably extemporise by starting with the gentle soft stops on the Swell. After exploring the various solo colours, he would lead up to full

organ, using a Tuba if available, and then die away to near-silence, using a soft 32-foot pedal stop. Listeners were transported to another realm!

Floyd's influence remained with him throughout his life, and it was to "his old master" that Lindsay paid homage as recently as 1997 when he edited a volume of nineteen organ pieces by Floyd under the title *Musical Miniatures*. They were published very attractively in the UK by Kevin Mayhew. Several of the pieces were carefully transcribed from ABC tapes, the work showing Lindsay's great devotion to the task and his respect for the man from whom he had learnt so much.

It was to Floyd also that Lindsay dedicated his *Simple Communion Service* (written to the AAPB text) in 1992. This was the second of two settings of the Eucharist that he wrote, along with settings of canticles for RSCM Summer Schools in 1985 and 1998. There were anthems too: *The hour has come* (composed in Launceston), and *Drop, drop slow tears* (based on Orlando Gibbons' hymn); and some hymn tunes including *Gardenvale*, which was submitted for the *Australian Hymn Book* in the mid 1970s, but never published. It was intended for the words "How sweet the name". His occasional re-harmonisations of hymn tunes and organ chorale preludes deserve to be collected and preserved as a record of his masterly art and for the use of future generations.

Lindsay will be remembered for the kindly and gentlemanly manner with which he treated everyone he met, the humility with which he regarded his own abilities, and the enormous inspiration he gave to students, listeners, congregations, choristers and friends alike. His revered master Dr Floyd stated in December 1956, in a letter to Dorothy Glover: "He has been for the last few years in charge at St John's, Launceston, Tasmania, where there is a very large and fine-toned organ. He is a remarkably fine organ-player - full of skill and exceedingly modest". Later Floyd reaffirmed that "he is so very talented and so modest; before he went to England I should almost have said 'diffident', but I think his time in England, and with you, has, so-to-speak, 'consolidated' him."

A Requiem Mass to celebrate the life of Lindsay O'Neill was held at St Mark's Anglican Church, Fitzroy on Thursday 1 August 2002. The celebrant was the Vicar, Father Tony Noble, the choir was under the direction of Christopher Luke, and the organists were Peter Jewkes and Dr Geoffrey Cox. The service was attended by more than 220 people, including many of Melbourne's musicians, and friends from far and wide. Lindsay's ashes were interred in the garden of St Mark's Church on Saturday 2 November 2002.