

OBITUARY

Professor Peter Platt, AM (1924–2000) *

As a scholar, composer and performer, Emeritus Professor Peter Platt had a unique understanding of the various branches of music and their interrelationships, which he imparted to several generations of students in both Australia and New Zealand. He was Blair Professor of Music at the University of Otago from 1957 to 1975, and Professor of Music at the University of Sydney from 1975 to 1989. Known almost universally as 'Prof' to students and colleagues alike, he eschewed the title 'Sir' he inherited from his father, fearing that it would create a barrier between him and his students. He was far prouder of his own honour, an AM for services to music, which he received in 1999.

Peter Platt was born in Sheffield on 6 July 1924. His father, Sir Robert Platt, was the first Professor of Medicine at Manchester University, and later President of the Royal College of Physicians, for which he received a baronetcy in 1959. He was a keen amateur musician who is well remembered for his habit of practicing the cello in railway compartments. His mother, Margaret, practised as a psychiatrist for much of her professional life.

Upon leaving school, Platt gained a scholarship in composition at the Royal College of Music, where he studied under R.O. Morris. Following the war, during which he served in the Royal Navy, he went up to Oxford. Here he completed a BLitt, for which he submitted a thesis on the important, but formerly little-known seventeenth-century composer, Richard Dering. His edition of Dering's work in the series *Musica Britannica* has been described as 'a model of its kind,' and Platt remains to this day the foremost world authority on Dering. Following an appointment as Lecturer (later Senior Lecturer) in the newly founded Department of Music at the University of Sydney in 1952, he became Professor of Music at Otago University. As a young child growing up in Dunedin, I remember vividly his contribution to the musical life of that city, particularly as a conductor and mentor of local musicians. He returned to Sydney as Professor of Music in 1975 where he continued and expanded the ideals of his predecessor Donald Peart, fostering a department which, although small, encompassed an astounding range of interests and which, under his leadership, established a formidable academic reputation.

* This obituary first appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Platt always insisted that the well-rounded musician in any branch of music must have an understanding of the others. He would expect, for example, that a performer should not only master his or her chosen instrument, but should also acquire an understanding of the historical and social contexts in which the repertoire was created, of the scholarly processes by which musical editions were produced, of contemporary musical composition and, particularly for someone living in this region, some understanding of indigenous music and the musical traditions of Asia. His musical life was one of deep enquiry and innovation, whether in the field of composition, performance or scholarship. He was a fierce advocate of new music—his particular love was Stravinsky—and he established the contemporary music ensemble The Seymour Group in the early 1980s. He performed on a number of instruments including the Indian sitar. Indeed, he had a deep and abiding interest in Indian music, which was connected to a broader enquiry into modality.

Like Indra, the original world-creator of Indian mythology, he spent his life creating a network of connections between people and music, and at every intersection there was a jewel. His last public lecture, 'Only Connect' (to be published shortly in the journal *Musicology Australia*, the journal of the Musicological Society of Australia, of which he was a former editor), emphasised not only the connections between different types of music, but also the way that music connects people, and this is perhaps the key to understanding his contribution. It was his deep and abiding interest not just in music, but in the musical lives and aspirations of his students and colleagues as well that made him such a great teacher and mentor.

It was he who in the 1950s started Mervyn McLean, the world authority on Maori music, on his chosen path, and first cultivated Trevor Jones (later Professor of Music at Monash University) in his pioneering work on Aboriginal music. Many others acknowledge deep intellectual and musical debts, including Richard Charteris, now the leading authority on the music of the Gabriellis, and Winsome Evans, whose Renaissance Players makes such a distinctive contribution to the musical life of Sydney. Alan John, the composer of *The Eighth Wonder* (currently being performed at the Sydney Opera House) told me recently that he senses a mysterious connection between his opera and his experience as a student of 'Prof' in lectures, sitting shoeless on a desk playing the sitar and demonstrating the overtone series and its relationship to modality. A colleague writing about him twenty years ago summed up Peter Platt thus: 'His personality is one of great youthfulness of spirit, energetic initiative, down to earth humanity, exceptional sense of humour and unostentatious wisdom.' These words were as true at the end of his life as they were when they were written. He is survived by his wife Jean, his children Maggie, Martin and Kate and numerous grandchildren and great grandchildren.

ALLAN MARETT