

PETER GODFREY MEMORIAL SERVICE AT WELLINGTON
CATHEDRAL OF ST PAUL 12 NOVEMBER 2017

ADDRESS BY PETER AVERI

It is a privilege to be invited to speak on this occasion. My friendship with Peter Godfrey began over 50 years ago so there are many memories to treasure. I could not traverse his long career in the few minutes I have, but all of us are here today because in one way or another Peter has touched our lives. We all have our reasons to be grateful for him through music. Someone said to me recently that we all felt that we owned a little piece of Peter Godfrey. But perhaps it was the other way around, Peter Godfrey owned a lot of us. Who could ever say “no” to him? Maybe it was being asked for more rehearsals, or perhaps adding an extra piece of music at the last minute, or an organist requested to transpose at sight in the middle of a service, whatever it was, he demanded in such a nice way it was impossible to refuse.

My first encounter with Peter happened when I was engaged for a concert by the Dorian Choir in Auckland. Peter invited me to call and see him. It was a Saturday afternoon, and this was no formal introduction. I found him in his gardening clothes, digging the garden he created at 448 Parnell Rd, where the Godfrey family moved to when they arrived from England in 1958. St Mary’s cathedral was then on the opposite side of the road until it was moved over to link up with Holy Trinity cathedral just about where his garden was. The house and Peter’s garden have long gone. Peter was working hard and it was a hot day so I think he was glad to have a break. We went inside, Sheila made a pot of tea and we sat in his study to talk about the music. That was the beginning of a wonderful friendship which has endured all these years.

Peter often said that people who sang in choirs made life-long friends. How very true, many of us here today would agree that the pleasure of choral singing is enhanced by the friendships we make which last forever.

There was a piano session with the Dorians before the final rehearsal with the organ and that was when I saw him for the first time directing a choir. My experience accompanying choirs in Wellington was sounding the notes for them and I started to do it at that first rehearsal but Peter called out not to give them any help. “They must learn to pitch the notes in their heads” he said, and I saw then how his choral training methods worked.

We met frequently after that, it was not long before he invited me to join the Auckland branch committee of the RSCM, whose principles he strongly supported. His transformation of St. Mary’s singers from parish choir level to become a world class cathedral choir is now a fact of history. He insisted on standards of discipline, attendance, and an age limit which upset a few at the time, but the results of course were outstanding. So began the Godfrey magic, lifting choral music in this country to new heights.

Looking back over Peter's life, his inexhaustible energy and encouragement never lost momentum. His commitment to Auckland University, where he eventually became Professor of music ultimately led him to resign from the cathedral, but he took the Dorian choir overseas, winning the best mixed-choir award in the European Broadcasting Union competition Let the Peoples Sing. He established the Auckland University Singers and they also toured with great success. An all-comers University Choral Society was another popular activity during those years. And somehow in the midst of all that he found time to conduct the Auckland String Players which he expanded into the Auckland Symphonia.

In 1977, when Peter was in England with the Dorian Choir he had a conversation with Philip Ledger, at that time Director of Music at Kings College. They discussed the idea of an exchange, with Peter taking over at Kings for a term while Philip Ledger came to Auckland. It all fell into place, they swapped houses, and for Peter it was a magical return to the place where his musical training had begun. He had the distinction of being the first musician since the 16th century to be a chorister, then a choral scholar and finally, director of music..

Can you imagine what must have been in Peter's mind when he conducted the choir, on the same spot where his famous mentor Boris Ord had stood.? Peter would have looked at the front row trebles and remembered when he joined as a chorister at the age of 9, then after a few years moving along the row as Senior Chorister sitting next to Boris Ord. Then further to the back rows he would have looked up to see the choral scholars to which he had been appointed at the age of 18, and finally standing there as conductor of that famous choir.

The formation of the National Youth Choir in 1979, achieved Guy Jansen's vision of a choir made up of the best young singers around the country. Peter Godfrey joined the Board of Management, was guest conductor for the first three years and ultimately musical director until the monumental tour in 1988 in which the choir won the Best Choir award at the International Festival of Youth and Music in Vienna. John Rosser is going to talk about that shortly.

In 1983, Wellington beckoned through a sequence of changes on the musical scene, and the lure of resuming his life-long love of the cathedral tradition, led him to this Wellington Cathedral. At the same time, the Orpheus Choir needed a Musical Director. Peter once said that his life had been full of coincidences and amazing opportunities. That was certainly demonstrated when he moved to Wellington take up both positions.

But that was not all. The Godfreys needed somewhere to live and a house in Waikanae was on the market. Perhaps at first hesitant to live so far from the city, Richard Prothero settled it when he remarked to Peter that all the gardeners live in Waikanae, "it is a gardener's paradise" he said. That was all it took and the house at Karaka Grove became their home. Peter was especially pleased because there was space for the grandchildren to ride their bikes. More rooms were added to the house and it became a showcase, even

being filmed for some television commercials. Peter had a splendid garden and he worked hard to make it beautiful. His display of roses was legendary, and how many of us were recipients of bags of shelled walnuts or vegetables and flowers he had cultivated.

The cathedral apartment in Hill St became a second home for Peter and Sheila. When I drive down Hill St on my way to the cathedral I still glance up and look at it with good memories of their time there. Sheila once told me she kept a check list of everything that had to be brought down from Waikanae, because it was too far to go back and collect anything missing. This included the meals she prepared for the choir on Thursdays, when after Evensong, there would be soup and rolls for everyone before choir practice at 7.00.

Peter Godfrey brought fresh life into the music of Wellington Cathedral. He insisted on raising the choir to full cathedral status, he introduced new services, broadened the repertoire of anthems, and not the least, managed to convince the clergy and congregation that the Psalms were best chanted by the choir. The young Choristers choir was developed to the stage where they could sing an entire service. As he had done years earlier at Auckland cathedral, Peter changed what was virtually a parish choir into a splendid body of singers which set the benchmark for the high choral standards Wellington Cathedral is renowned for today.

During his eight years as music director of The Orpheus Choir, Peter steered that choir through a period of major development. He established a chamber choir within the ranks, challenged the singers with new repertoire, and raised performance standards.

1985 was the year when the Choral Federation was established, and John Rosser will talk about that.

Two special musicians were involved here with Peter, and I have received messages from them. The first is from Katherine Dienes-Williams, and the second is from Philip Walsh.
(attached)

Katherine ended her letter by quoting the words of *Jesu dulcis memoria*, but instead of me reading them, how much better to hear her musical setting, sung by the Cathedral Choir. Michael Stewart, director of music in this cathedral, is a former member of the National Youth Choir, and he is currently Deputy Music Director of the New Zealand Youth Choir.

CATHEDRAL CHOIR SINGS

Katherine was appointed organist and Director of Music at Guildford Cathedral in 2008, and she is the first female musician to hold this position in an Anglican cathedral in England.

Now to the message from Philip Walsh..... (attached)

The cathedral choir is going to sing a short motet composed by Philip during his time here.

Peter Godfrey retired from the cathedral in 1989 when another tempting opportunity was offered to him. This was to establish a choral foundation at Trinity College in Melbourne, which he did with considerable success. A University choir of 150 singers also came under Peter's direction, when he conducted the Verdi Requiem for the first time in his career.

In 1991, when Peter was at an age when retirement could have been a comfortable option he embarked on what was to be over twenty years of incredible activity on the Kapiti Coast. Three choirs blossomed under his direction. First, the Kapiti Chamber Choir was formed through the efforts of Patrick Barry, a well-known singer and Paddy Nash, who was administrator of the National Youth Choir for several years and worked with Peter Godfrey. It is recorded that Paddy made the approach to Peter and she said "we can't have you sitting about here doing nothing. We would like to start a chamber choir for you to conduct". About 25 singers auditioned and the choir was launched. By the end of 1992 the choir had become a significant feature of the musical life in the district. Peter brought the choir to a very high standard, with his careful choices of repertoire and for 14 years the Chamber Choir prospered under Peter's inspired leadership.

The other choir was the Kapiti Chorale which enticed Peter to take over after a community choir performance of Messiah in 1992.

So he had two distinctly different choirs under his direction. The Chamber choir of auditioned voices, and the Chorale which was an all-comers choir with a membership that reached 100. Peter wanted to make it an enjoyable experience for those who loved singing but in many cases had never had any vocal training. His patience was inexhaustible. He set up classes to help singers learn how to read music, he coaxed, teased, encouraged his singers, and insisted everyone came to rehearsals with a 2B pencil.

The repertoire they performed was amazing. Peter would often visit my home to discuss his programme ideas, driving up with his little dog Dotty in the car. Peter knew how far he could extend the choir and each concert would add a little further challenge to the singers. I was so privileged to play the organ for most of those concerts, and that was a challenge for me as well because so many of the works were for orchestral accompaniment which I had to adapt for the organ. One concert that I fondly remember was the Brahms German Requiem. This was special because Peter obtained the piano duet version of the orchestral score. I recall that NZ Bass Martin Snell who was in Germany at the time had a hand in locating the score. And so we gave what may have been a New Zealand first, the German Requiem accompanied on two pianos, playing not an arrangement by someone else but the beautiful piano writing of Brahms himself.

After some concert activities in Waikanae, surplus funds were made available to set up an award in Peter's name. The objective was to give encouragement and support to young

musicians embarking on training to be conductors. We did a lot of research and finally vested the funds in Choirs Aotearoa as administrators of the Peter Godfrey Scholarship. I understand that already there have been two awards made to promising young members of the NZ Youth Choir.

Peter's third choir was in Waikanae where he fostered a parish choir at St. Michael's church. Choral evensong once a month became a much-anticipated service, in which the best music of the Anglican tradition was sung. Peter regarded this choir in no less a role as he had with his cathedral choirs years earlier. His meticulous rehearsals of the Psalms and canticles were obligatory. His own settings of the responses were often included and anthems were always chosen with his deep knowledge of suitable repertoire. Not surprising that this choir reached a membership of 40 voices, loyal singers who relished the experience of having such a distinguished musician as their director.

But Peter was not finished yet! In addition to the "Three Choirs of Kapiti", there was a fourth one..... The Parkwood Singers. When Peter moved into the retirement village in Waikanae he was unwilling to consider himself as retired. So he organised a singing group and it is significant to record that the last time this great musician conducted in public was a concert by the Parkwood Singers last April.

When his health gradually began to decline Peter relinquished his role as conductor and organist, but he sang with the tenors until very recently. And although memory loss was taking its toll, his incredible ability to continue singing was an inspiration to us all. It is fitting to conclude my tribute to him by acknowledging that music was his life and breath until the end.

The title of Elizabeth Salmon's biography of Peter Godfrey is The Father of New Zealand Choral Music. A well-deserved honour for a man who came to this country and not only lifted choral singing to new heights but opened the way for so many who did not realise that they could actually sing to become enthusiastic choristers.

We honour him today with gratitude for his vision, dedication, musicianship, and being the friend which endeared him to us. What a great legacy he has left for us.

