

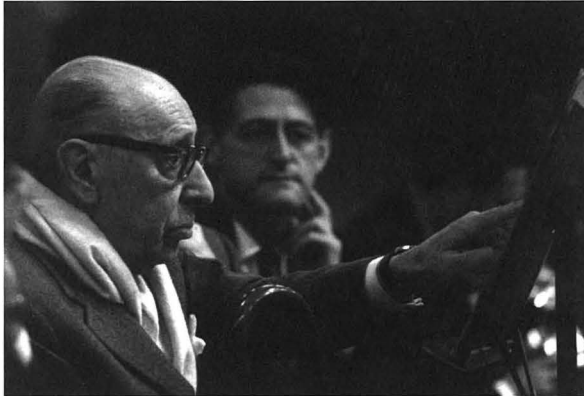
Alex Lindsay: The man and his orchestra

by Adrienne Simpson and Geoffrey Newson.
School of Music, University of Canterbury 1998.

No. 9 in The Canterbury Series of Bibliographies, Catalogues and Source Documents in Music, 165pp. \$22, available from the School of Music, University of Canterbury, Box 4800, Christchurch. A special package of the book and a CD of New Zealand music performed by the Lindsay Orchestra is also available at \$33.

IN THIS BOOK Adrienne Simpson has continued her admirable work of exploring and documenting important and often neglected aspects of New Zealand's musical history. She and Geoffrey Newson are joint authors, though one imagines Adrienne Simpson did the bulk of the writing while the latter, long-time administrator of the Alex Lindsay String Orchestra as well as its principal double-bass player, provided the prodigious memory.

And what a tale it is. It is remarkable that after the turmoil of the Second World War a small nation of limited musical means produced not only a national symphony orchestra but also a separate private enterprise string orchestra. In these days of hefty if



Igor Stravinsky and Alex Lindsay discuss the score in preparation for the composer's one concert with the NZBC Symphony Orchestra, Wellington

Town Hall, 1961. Photo Tom Shanahan.

capricious corporate sponsorships it is salutary to reflect how the Alex Lindsay String Orchestra arose with little but its founder's vision, gave a staggering number of concerts and broadcasts, went on tour under primitive conditions and functioned as Wellington's service orchestra for opera and choral concerts for 25 years. While lurching from one financial crisis to another, it main-

tained artistic standards hard to match today. The 50th anniversary commemorative CD issued in conjunction with the book shows just how good the Lindsay Orchestra's string playing could be, displaying a unity of style and purpose obviously stemming from Lindsay's inspirational leadership in what must surely be definitive readings of the New Zealand compositions mostly written

especially for it. How many musicians today would, for such scant wages, play with a dedicated idealism which recognised the musical cause as greater than the individuals concerned?

That Alex Lindsay was willing to play works by New Zealand composers in turn allowed Douglas Lilburn, David Farquhar, Larry Pruden and others to write for string orchestra in the reasonable expectation of not just one but repeated performances.

The importance of the Lindsay phenomenon to New Zealand music can hardly be overstated. And yet the pride and admiration one experiences on reading of the orchestra's achievements are tempered with sadness at what we

have lost. Without a state radio system which could virtually guarantee broadcasts and recordings, with their attendant fees, as well as allow access to its extensive music library, none of this could have happened. Such a benign state paternalism is anathema to today's market-driven desperadoes. We have allowed successive political regimes to bully and all but geld our proud public radio which had to sit and watch helplessly as its very studios were spitefully demolished to make way for a grandiose parliamentary building which was never to be. This shameful saga would make another good book for Adrienne Simpson to write ...

The authors have assembled copious documentation of source materials, concert repertoire, works by New Zealand composers performed by the Lindsay String Orchestra, orchestra personnel, guest soloists and conductors as well as the usual bibliography and indices. This will undoubtedly provide useful material for future researchers, though the loose-knit nature of the orchestra and its functions must have made this an exacting task.

As an account of Alex Lindsay himself the book is perhaps less revealing than it might have been. There is a wonderful remark by

John Ritchie in his introduction that Lindsay was 'a mixture of Denis Glover and Dan Davin' and, as in a novel, it would have been good to be shown this rather Élan just told. Of Lindsay's consummate violin



*Ink drawing of 'The conductor, Alex Lindsay', 1955?,
by A.J. Waghorn, 1898-1987.*

ATL B-017-041, by kind permission of
Mr T. J. Waghorn of Wellington.

playing, musicianship and his inspirational personality as a conductor there is no doubt. Of his colourful private life, heroic drink-
ing and amorous susceptibility

there are tantalizing hints. The impression is that there are more good yarns waiting to be told without offending the living or descending to the sensational.

Adrienne Simpson is, of course, a wonderfully lively writer, though here she is rather restrained. Geoffrey Newson, the discreet public servant, was more forthcoming in his conversation with William Dart (*Music in New Zealand*, Summer, 1998, pp44-49).

My other misgiving is the drab format of the Canterbury series, worthy but hardly gripping titles, academics writing for academics. This book could surely, without costing the earth, have been made more attractive and the photographs better reproduced. As it is it appears fated to life on a university bookshelf rather than to find its way to the general musical reading public such a good and important story deserves.

Apart from a few punctuation slips the only flaws picked up were spellings of Glenorchy (Glen Orchy) and the Manawatu town of Fielding (sic), but this is a word which might well defy a spell-check.

ROGER WILSON, *an opera singer and concert soloist, is also a writer and broadcaster.*