

Simon Lindley – Remembered and Celebrated

A talk by Ian Curror, Chairman of the Church Music Society 1995-2011, at the Annual General Meeting of the Society on 4 October 2025



I expect some of you will remember a periodical called *Readers' Digest*, popular in the 1960s and 70s, in which a regular feature was called *My Most Unforgettable Character*. This could easily be the subtitle for the person I am going to speak about today, Simon Lindley, a name well known among Church Music Society members and the church music world in general. He served as the Society's Honorary Secretary from 1991 until 2023. Someone larger than life and someone whose seemingly unending energy enabled him to achieve so much. He and I were friends and colleagues from student days so I am hoping to combine personal reminiscence and appreciation with biographical detail. In preparing this talk I have had interesting conversations with several others who knew Simon well and I acknowledge with gratitude contributions from Richard Lyne, Vicky Highet, Quentin Browne and Philip Meaden. Simon came from a very interesting and unusual family and I am also most indebted to his sister, Ruth Woolfson, for supplying me with some family details that did not find their way into the obituaries. It's fascinating to see how very varied family influences found their way into Simon's character and talents.

Simon and Ruth's great-grandmother was the prominent mezzo-soprano Marie Brema, friend of Cosima Wagner, the first British singer to appear at Bayreuth and the first Angel in Richter's performance of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* in 1900. Their grandfather was the Belgian writer and poet Émile Cammaerts, whose daughter Jeanne was

Simon's mother. Elgar collaborated with Émile and set some of his poems. Jeanne had been brought up in a family of radical thinkers with a passion for politics and democratic debate. She remembered cheering on the Jarrow Marchers as they passed through Radlett in 1936. Jeanne later served as a log reader at Bletchley Park from 1943 to 1945, where she specialised in trying to ascertain individual psychological traits of the German message writers. The war story of Jeanne's two brothers, Pieter and Francis, is related in an engaging children's book *In the Mouth of the Wolf* by their nephew Michael Morpurgo – Simon's cousin.

Simon's Yorkshire-born father Geoffrey served in the army during WW2 and was ordained in 1947. He had a huge enthusiasm for the role of music in faith and the ecumenical movement, becoming close to the Methodist movement and the Roman Catholic Sisters of the Work at Littlemore. After serving as parish priest in the Dioceses of Oxford and Southwark, he retired to Oxford and spent a year as Chaplain to two mental hospitals. Ruth recalls the occasion of a childhood Sunday lunch, where the family were joined by a visiting preacher who happened to mention the difficulty he was experiencing in finding an organist for his nearby church. "I'll do it", piped up the 9-year old Simon. And he did.

I first met Simon some time around June 1968, when he was working out his last few weeks as Assistant Organist at Holy Trinity, Sloane Street and he and the Director of Music were looking around for a replacement. I was invited to meet the team and play the organ. It must have gone OK because I was offered the post but the most memorable part of the event was hearing and watching Simon play the wonderful 4-manual Walker organ in that stunning acoustic. I had never before seen anyone play with such energy, drive, colour and excitement – and he inspired me to liven up my own playing in a similar way. The same qualities were apparent when Simon was away from the organ – with the benefit of hindsight, I think the common theme was his ability to inspire action in others – a sort of musical Pied Piper.

I continued to see Simon frequently as we were both students of John Birch at the Royal College of Music, Simon a year ahead of me. His next appointment was Assistant at the very high-church St Cuthbert's, Philbeach Gardens, a post that suited his churchmanship to a tee. Somehow he managed to combine this with several other posts

simultaneously, a tribute to his energy and enthusiasm: most of them were in the City of London and their musical requirements were thus concentrated on weekdays. I remember several Thursday lunchtimes in the RCM canteen during which Simon would circulate among the organ students like a whirlwind, appointing this week's deputies with the air of a Victorian pluralist parson on speed. Being impecunious students, we all appreciated the fees! As an aside, Simon must have been the only student at the RCM who had a collection of various headed notepapers, always of high quality and bearing his latest batch of post-nominal qualifications and church appointments.

During his time at the RCM he was much in demand as a continuo player and accompanist, notably for Denys Darlow's Tilford Bach Choir. Throughout his life Simon was adept at playing on the organ large portions of the standard repertoire oratorios too, delivered with great flamboyance and colour, a skill he maintained all his life. Many money-stretched choral societies must have grateful memories!

Around that time Simon made friends with Nicolas Kynaston, the organist at Westminster Cathedral, now sadly departed. This led to him playing for some services as an unofficial Assistant Organist, and networking with some of the finest singers in London. I remember Simon especially admired the tuneful post-Vatican 2 compositions of the Director of Music, Colin Mawby, something that possibly fed into his later role as compiler of *New English Praise* in the early 2000s. I turned pages for his début recital in the Cathedral in 1969, which included a thrilling performance of Guilmant's first Sonata. I have never heard it played with more commitment and drive – an astonishing display of Gallic fervour. Were the Belgian genes at work during his equally enthralling account of Jongen's *Sonata Eroica*?

Simon graduated from the RCM in 1970 and was appointed Assistant to Peter Hurford at St Albans, a post he combined with being Director of Music of St Albans School. He was a popular figure among the students and, together with a young John Rutter, Simon composed several pieces dedicated to the school's choir. Though I never personally saw Simon in action at St Albans School, he clearly made a remarkable impact on its students and raised the musical standards at a time when his boss, Peter Hurford, had established excellence at the Abbey. The International Organ Festival was a major feature of the country's musical life by this stage and must have had an influence on Simon's musical horizons as his career developed. My wife Anne-Marie

and I were thrilled when he managed to fit our Wedding into his St Albans schedule in July 1971, seeing us off with Marcel Dupré's *Prelude and Fugue in B major* and composing a special choral setting of *I sat down under his shadow*, a piece that is very sadly lost.

A few years later he appeared in the 1975 Proms in a colourful and exciting performance of the Elgar sonata. This is still available on YouTube under Archive Organ Performances.

Simon's exuberant style of organ playing owed much to the influence of our teacher, John Birch, who had himself been a student of the almost Edwardian John Dykes-Bower. There was insistence on a singing, legato line, shaped by minute lengthening and shortening at phrase-peaks and combined with an inexorable sense of rhythm and momentum. John's teaching served well for the Romantic repertoire in which Simon excelled but, I think, proved to be less appropriate in earlier music. Simon's 1996 recording of Handel Organ Concertos by Naxos demonstrates his later awareness of more contemporary approaches to touch and articulation. The performances stand out for their vivacity and spontaneity, almost as if they were being improvised. Here he is, playing the 1st movement of Opus 4, no. 4, with the Northern Sinfonia, conducted by Bradley Creswick.

AUDIO EXTRACT

NAXOS Organ Concertos – Handel (Naxos 8.553835)

TRACK 13

Apart from a few brief meetings it was not until 1976 that our next musical collaboration happened, when Simon invited me to be the organist for an RSCM Residential Course at Chichester Cathedral. This consisted of a week of Choral Evensongs and included a Radio 3 Broadcast and a concert on the final Saturday. This intense and concentrated activity was meat and drink to Simon, who threw himself whole-heartedly into every aspect of the enterprise. In fact the rehearsals were so driven by Simon's infectious energy that the boys often sang a bit sharp but, despite this, the singing was lively, colourful and deeply enmeshed in the liturgy – always a significant characteristic of his music-making. Simon could be a bit gung-ho with administrative detail – he miscalculated the timings of the live broadcast, leaving me to play almost the whole movement of a Vierne Symphony rather than my allocated first page or two. I ensured that it was Simon's turn to buy the drinks that evening.

It was in the mid-1970s that Simon and I each began our long professional tenures, he at Leeds Parish Church and I at the Royal Hospital Chelsea. Perhaps now is the time to step away from chronology and look at Simon's qualities and achievements in the round. Before we do this let's listen to him playing at Leeds (then) Parish Church in 1991: it's the opening section of Guilmant's *Grand Choeur in D "Alla Handel"*.

AUDIO EXTRACT

NAXOS French Organ Music (Naxos 8.550581)

TRACK 1

Simon had excellent interpersonal skills. He had an easy and relaxed manner with people, combined with a prodigious memory. This made him a popular and successful figure in his presidential roles with the Royal College of Organists (2000-2003), Incorporated Association of Organists (2003-2005) and his Secretaryship of this society between 1991 and 2023. He came into his own at the many AGMs like this that he helped to organise, making sure that members were welcomed by name and ensuring that the meetings ran smoothly, often despite the then Chairman's ineptitude. He successfully masterminded the Society's Centenary AGM at St Paul's Cathedral in 2009, an event requiring efficiency and tact. Whatever the venue and whoever the invited speaker, Simon was always on the ball. He had a knack of treating everyone with warmth and humanity and I know that he took the pastoral element of his Secretaryship very much to heart. Many here will remember Simon remembering you, even after a gap of several years. Not only that but he could remember in which church you played and probably the names of your partner and children.

Speaking of families, it is a disappointment that I never got to know really well Simon's wife, Carel, and their children, Rebecca, Benedict, Dominic and Nicolas. This was part of his life that he seemed to want to keep separate, though I may be wrong. However, I did stay overnight chez Lindley once, I think when giving a recital at the Parish Church in the late 1970s. I remember, bizarrely, my trouser seam splitting during a practice session and Carel insisting on sewing it up while I sat opposite, demurely preserving my modesty with a strategically placed sofa throw. For some reason she found this hilarious!

Simon's time as RCO President was significant as the College was at that time re-inventing itself after leaving its traditional home in Kensington Gore in the early 2000s. Among other things Simon was instrumental in recasting the examination diplomas to become more transparent and accountable. Published marking criteria became available to candidates for the first time and examiners undertook training and moderation sessions. These were all necessary innovations in the context of contemporary Higher Education and it needed a Simon to persuade some of the old guard that change was a necessity to survival.

Up to the time of his death, Simon was chair of the Ecclesiastical Music Trust, a grant awarding body that has given invaluable support to UK musicians. Gordon Giles reports that Simon took "personal interest in all of the applications...and kept in touch diligently and authentically". When I read this in a recent Organ Club Journal, I was much taken by Canon Giles's perceptive use of the word 'authentically' – there was nothing fake about Simon's interface with his fellow humans and many speak of his genuine concern for others. He could sniff out pretentiousness from a mile away, generally treated it with good humour but was never taken in by it. Classic Yorkshire – it was in his genes. To his many friends he was loyal and generous: on my retirement from the Royal Hospital he travelled down from Leeds especially to take my wife and me for a celebratory and very enjoyable dinner at the Ritz.

I believe Simon's awareness of his own talent generated a strong sense of vocation and service, grounded in a quiet but deeply-rooted faith. Thus it was that he was perhaps too easily persuaded to take on committee and leadership roles which occupied so much of his time. When you think that, during his time at Leeds Parish Church and Town Hall, he also, at various times, directed the Sheffield Bach Choir, Doncaster Choral Society and St Peter's Singers – and was Chorus Master to the Halifax Choral Society and Leeds Philharmonic Society, it is difficult to imagine him sitting down to relax. It has to be said that, when other duties and deadlines collided, Simon had to pause other commitments. I believe this is what accounted for those fallow periods when he seemed to disappear for a while. However, Simon always came bouncing back and would hurriedly catch up on neglected tasks – and friends - until he had caught up with himself.

Somehow, in the earlier years Simon managed to include ABRSM examining as part of his varied portfolio career. He and I once spent a pleasant morning listening to and assessing the choristers of St Paul's Cathedral playing and singing their exam pieces at the Choir School. It was meant to be a moderating day but, as the standards were so consistent and high, there was little to discuss. Distinctions and Merits all the time! Simon completed his mark forms in his immaculate italic hand, using a fountain pen with a very thick nib and black ink. As the boxes on the mark form were quite small, Simon filled them up very quickly but always with a pithy, perceptive and sympathetic comment. I think it was around the same time – late 1980s perhaps – that Simon started to wear a black jacket combined with morning dress pin-striped trousers, all in heavy wool. I never quite worked out what that was all about but it certainly made him a distinctive figure – and kept him warm no doubt.

Perhaps now is the time to say how fortunate Simon was to have the administrative and moral support of his friend and helper, Vicky Hight. They got to know each other in the 1970s and 80s when Vicky would sometimes drive over to Leeds with Roger Bullivant, conductor of the Sheffield Bach Choir which Simon accompanied. Vicky mixed easily with Simon's group of stewards and helpers and soon became part of the team of 'holy women' who enabled Simon to do so much. When Vicky's husband died in the early 2000s she moved to a house near Simon's in the Moravian community of Fulneck and continued to support him through good times and bad until his death. We all owe you a huge thank-you, Vicky.

Simon once described himself as a 'General Practitioner' of music, a stated aim of the RCM's Graduate (or GRSM) course. Nearly every musician begins by engaging with one particular instrument – playing and musical skills arise out of that engagement. For some that is the end of the matter and life will revolve around that corner of the musical world. For organists however, mastery of the instrument is only part of the story – as the instrument will usually be situated in a church, other elements come into play immediately – often dictated by the liturgy. The ancillary skills of transposition etc and the need to direct a choir are unique to the player of the organ. Less frequent but equally necessary is the requirement to conduct an ensemble or orchestra. Philip Meaden speaks of his exquisite piano accompaniments for a visiting soprano soloist. All these things Simon accomplished with great confidence and bonhomie. Although not

prolific as a composer he did produce some beautiful gems – let’s listen to the Huddersfield Choral Society singing Simon’s *Ave Maria*, one of my favourites.

AUDIO EXTRACT

HYPERION MP3 DOWNLOAD (track from SIGCD108)

Lindley, Ave Maria

I have sometimes wondered what would have happened if Simon had applied his considerable intellect exclusively to the academic world. He was a confident and fluent public speaker who would easily have held the attention of students. For a time during the 1970s and 80s he held the position of Senior Lecturer at the Leeds Polytechnic which later became Leeds Metropolitan University. Here he lectured in music history, taught piano and singing and led the Leeds Polytechnic Choral Society. His former student, Julie Kilburn, remembers him also teaching keyboard harmony and counterpoint. He was justifiably proud of his honorary Doctorate, awarded by the university in 2001 for musical and civic services to the City of Leeds.

During my last few years at the Royal Hospital Simon and I organised three collaborative services. On two occasions Leeds Minster choir included Chelsea as part of their summer tour, joining the Chapel Choir for the weekly service of Choral Matins. I fondly remember lusty accounts of Stanford’s B flat *Te Deum* and Vaughan Williams’s *Lord, thou hast been our refuge*. These joint ventures were followed by a convivial lunch – the Royal Hospital’s chef always produced fish and chips which became something of a legendary highlight for the Leeds boys. In turn we were invited to Leeds for Saturday Evensong where we had the rare opportunity of singing Balfour Gardiner’s hefty *Evening hymn*, followed by a hospitable Yorkshire tea – fruit cake with Wensleydale slices! I think my London professionals were impressed by Simon’s easy but authoritative manner with the boy choristers – also rather bemused by his Dickensian way of addressing them by “Mister” followed by their surname. Anyway, we all mixed readily with each other – really seeing how the other half lives.

Simon was a committed and faithful Freemason. For 20 years he was Provincial Grand Organist for the Masonic Province of Yorkshire, West Riding, and held the top national post of Grand Organist to the United Lodge of England for a period of 2 years. He continued playing for the Masons until the end of his life.

Following Simon's death earlier this year, many obituaries appeared, reflecting the many people and organisations he had been associated with. One of my favourites was the eloquent and affectionate tribute from Quentin Brown, chair of the St Peter's Singers, a choir Simon founded in 1977 and directed until 2021. This is a choir whose unofficial motto was "Never knowingly over-rehearsed." Let me quote a section from it:-

...there appeared to be little or no distinction for him between amateur and professional musicians. What counted was how you responded to the music...and he had an extraordinary gift for recognising and encouraging innate musicianship. He was a wonderfully instinctive musician for whom no two performances were ever the same, but every performance bore his hallmark: a live and highly musical interpretation, full of passion, energy and feeling.

The author goes on to describe being drawn into spur-of-the-moment, unrehearsed responses to the music, often producing spontaneous and fresh performances; the championing of the music of his friend Francis Jackson; his unexpected, impromptu playing of some piano music by Ravel at a Lay Clerk's funeral in Huddersfield. Also a memory of 'humorous rebukes for singers' – *Well, tenors, I'm glad you are not guiding me around the dance floor. Come on basses, it's not Lutosławski.* Simon had a way with words!

I remember him once gently upbraiding me for 'overthinking' choral rehearsal plans – he would say, "Much better to learn new music while your choir learns it" – still a dangerous maxim if you ask me, but it speaks volumes for Simon's intuitive approach and his low aversion to risk-taking. Ruth speaks of her brother as having entered the world playing the organ – he certainly had the air of a natural player and performer. It seems to me that many really gifted musicians have not needed to practise much – they leave out that intermediate stage which we lesser mortals grapple with. I heard Simon prepare for recitals many times but he usually practised only the tricky bits or was testing registrations and balances.

Philip Meaden, Simon's boss at the Leeds College of Music, remembers once having to deal with Simon in a stern managerial fashion due to a certain reluctance to engage with some of its institutional requirements. However, he also remembers what he describes as the

“magic dust” Simon would come and sprinkle on performances at the last minute and many acts of generosity, including occasionally paying for orchestras and soloists out of his own pocket. Philip’s opinion, I think well-founded, is that Simon could have coped with his extraordinary workload only by being a consummate improviser, both musical and otherwise.

I am aware that I have flitted around rather in this talk – it is difficult to structure a description of so mercurial and multi-faceted person as Simon. He was, I believe, extremely gifted and able – to the point of genius. He could be infuriating at times but a warm and generous beating heart underpinned his extraordinary life and achievements.

I think it is fitting that we should end by listening to Simon’s lovely descant at the end of the American hymn *Come, labour on* by Thomas Tertius Noble. This is included in the Society’s publication *Four Extended Hymn Settings* and sets words by the 19th-century writer Jane Laurie Borthwick. It will serve as a joint tribute by Richard Lyne (Honorary General Editor from 1986 until 2019) who produced this recording and harmonised verse 2 - by me, playing the organ of Rochester Cathedral, and also our Trustee Sean Farrell who kindly supplied the venue and conducted the choir. I’ll read out the words first – it is a beautiful poem in its own right. There are four short stanzas.

Come, labour on!
Who dare stand idle on the harvest plain,
While around us waves the golden grain?
And to each servant does the Master say,
‘Go, work today!’

Come, labour on!
Away with gloomy doubts and faithless fear!
No arm so weak but may do service here:
By feeble agents may our God fulfil
His righteous will.

Come, labour on!
Claim the high calling angels cannot share.
To young and old the Gospel gladness bear;
Redeem the time, its hours too swiftly fly.
The night draws nigh!

Come, labour on!
No time for rest till glows the western sky,
Till the long shadows o'er our pathway lie,
And a glad sound comes with the setting sun,
'Servants, well done!'

Simon, well done, indeed.

AUDIO EXTRACT

Te Deum Laudamus (Lantern Productions – LP CD2)

Come, labour on!

TRACK 19

Ian Curror

Simon's maternal family line

Marie Brema (1856-1925)

Émile Cammaerts (1878-1953) married Tita Brand (1879-1964), children:-
Francis, Nancy, Pieter, Catherine, Jeanne (the youngest) and another sister

Catherine was Michael Morpugo's mother

Jeanne was Simon and Ruth's mother