

EULOGY
On the Death of Geoffrey Tozer
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St Patrick's Cathedral
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Geoffrey Tozer told the executor of his will that in the event of his death only Paul Keating should deliver the eulogy. Paul Keating's funeral oration is a story of Geoffrey Tozer's life, emotionally mixed with admiration, artistic acknowledgement and indignation at his ultimate treatment by Australia's music establishment. Paul Keating ranks Geoffrey Tozer as Australia's greatest pianist. He puts him in a class of accomplishment with Nellie Melba, Percy Grainger and Joan Sutherland. The eulogy underlines Paul Keating's profound respect for truly subliminal artistic ability and his obvious grief at its sudden loss with Tozer's passing.

Geoffrey Tozer's death is a national tragedy.

For the Australian arts and Australian music, losing Tozer is like Canada having lost Glenn Gould or France, Ginette Neveu. It is a massive cultural loss.

The national run rate for artists of Tozer's accomplishment is about one in every hundred years. In fact, if you think of our greatest artists, those who are so regarded in world terms, three come to mind: Nellie Melba, Percy Grainger and Joan Sutherland. In terms of sheer artistry and musical power, Geoffrey Tozer could well be the credible addition to that triumvirate.

Tozer belonged to a small and rarefied stratum of world pianists. He was certainly of a calibre of greats like Emil Gilels, Arthur Rubenstein, Sviatoslav Richter, Ferruccio Busoni and Artur Schnabel, the latter two whose music he championed.

In terms of musical comprehension, intellectualism and facility, Geoffrey's talent was simply off the scale. He could read an orchestral score, hear the entire work in his head and then play a piano transcription of it at sight. He could transpose anything put in front of him into any key and give a perfect performance of it. He could arrange, orchestrate, compose and improvise; indeed, improvisation was one of his specialties, weaving other melodies through the larger works of composers like Liszt.

The remarkable thing about Geoffrey Tozer was that in these last 25 years we were witnessing an artist with a level of musical understanding and repertoire you would have expected to witness in the last 25 years of the nineteenth century or the first 25 years of the twentieth, when classicism and scholarship in music was at its zenith.

Geoffrey would not have been out of place in 1920s Weimar Berlin in the company of people like Erich Kleiber or Otto Klemperer or Igor Stravinsky. Or with pianists like Rudolf Serkin or Claudio Arrau, who were playing there then.

Geoffrey made his international musical debut at the age of fifteen, playing Mozart's Concerto No. 15 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Colin Davis at the Royal Albert Hall. The *Daily Telegraph* critic wrote that 'Geoffrey Tozer played Mozart's Concerto in B Flat with agreeably crystalline touch, faultless technique and good sense'. The Times critic considered that Geoffrey 'played in a way that many an artist twice his age might envy'.

Following his debut, in Belgium in November 1970 in which Geoffrey played an enormous program of Bach, Beethoven, Haydn and Chopin, the Antwerp-Stadt reported that Geoffrey Tozer 'has become one of the great revelations to astound the musical world . . . he showed that his technical skill is merely a means to clarify the complete and often celestial way he plays, feeling the deeper meaning of everything he performs. Geoffrey Tozer will become one of the great pianists of the world'.

The following year, in 1971, the great composer Benjamin Britten invited Geoffrey to stay with him for several weeks, inviting him to also perform at the Aldeburgh Festival, where he accompanied the master Russian cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich.

Geoffrey could play anything written for piano from any period in history right up until now. He had virtually played and mostly knew anything of any substance written for the piano. His repertoire included over 200 concertos; for instance, it included 24 of the 27 Mozart concertos. Geoffrey had the ability not just to put himself into the head of a composer, he also had the ability to understand the milieu within which a composer worked, the musical influences at the time, the tastes, the comprehension of the whole.

When the pianist Tatiana Nikolayeva, a mistress of Shostakovich, came to Australia in the 1990s, she said to her tour promoter, 'I want to hear the one who plays like a Russian'. And, of course, she meant Geoffrey. But if Geoffrey was playing Purcell he would bring an English feeling to the work or Liszt a more obviously Hungarian or middle European one.

He was unbelievable.

Born in the foothills of the Himalayas, Geoffrey's infant years were filled with music. His earliest memory of the piano was when, as a three-year-old, he began to play Beethoven's Appassionata Sonata, music he had just heard his mother teaching to a pupil.

Musical genius flowed through Veronica Tozer's family and she realised at once that her son was possessed of vast musical ability. Just how rare it was became clear when she began to teach him music of Bach, Bartok and Beethoven.

By 1958, when Mrs Tozer brought her two sons to Australia to settle in Melbourne, Geoffrey was already immersed in music, playing, singing, reading and listening to music on a wind-up gramophone.

It was here, in Melbourne, that the world first discovered the young boy who was quickly dubbed a 'musical genius' by Australia's foremost musicians. Within five years of his arrival in Australia, Geoffrey's life as a professional musician began in earnest. This was an extraordinary period of his life, one during which he began to receive the patronage and recognition that would enable him to develop the full range of his virtuosic abilities, and become a concert pianist of the highest standard.

In 1963 when Geoffrey was eight, Dr Clive Douglas auditioned him for a concerto performance for ABC television. The performance, with Geoffrey playing Bach's Concerto in F Minor was filmed in February 1964 with Dr Douglas conducting the Victorian Symphony Orchestra. On April 11 of that year, Geoffrey made his public debut in the Nicholas Hall playing the same concerto, this time under George Logie-Smith. Later the same year he gave at least eight more performances, playing concertos of Bach and Mozart with the orchestra in Melbourne and Ballarat. The phrase 'musical genius' was applied to him right from the beginning.

Geoffrey's introduction to Eileen Ralf was the most important event in his musical development. She lived in Hobart. So, in order to foster Geoffrey's prodigious talents, TAA announced that it would fly the young musician every week to Hobart and back free of charge, so that Geoffrey could have lessons with Eileen. Let's hear what Geoffrey himself had to say about her influence and his lessons in Hobart during those early years. I am quoting from the text of Geoffrey's lecture on the great pianist Artur Schnabel which Geoffrey delivered at the Berlin Festival in September 2001 in the presence of the entire Schnabel family:

By the greatest of good fortune I found a teacher who was the living, breathing embodiment of all the vitality I was getting from the recordings of Schnabel. This was the Australian pianist Eileen Ralf. She opened up for me a world of serious, probing musical thought I knew must exist but I had never experienced. Her teaching was the greatest musical gift given me.

For the next five years Geoffrey performed a vast amount of music in public performances, both in recitals and concerts. By the age of thirteen his concerto repertoire included all five of the Beethoven and nine of the Mozart as well as concertos by Bach and Haydn, and he later added more than 200 pieces to his solo repertoire. Geoffrey also recorded the first movement of the Brahms Second Concerto with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in a studio performance arranged by Reuben Fineberg, the man who would manage Geoffrey's career until his own death in 1997.

How was Australia to develop such a rare and prodigious talent, one that was already nationally recognised? The solution came when the committee of the Churchill Fellowship decided to lower the minimum age by five years and award Geoffrey a Churchill, extending it to two years instead of the usual one. Four years later the committee awarded Geoffrey a second Churchill as he began to make the difficult and, for many gifted teenagers, usually impossible transition from child prodigy to fully mature artist.

In 1969, the first of Geoffrey's Churchill Fellowships enabled him to travel to England with his mother. That year he entered the Leeds Piano Competition and became the youngest semi-finalist. The same year he won the prestigious Alex de Vries Prize, making his debut with the English Chamber Orchestra soon afterwards. In May 1970 he won First Prize out of 157 contestants in the Royal Overseas League competition and was presented to the Queen.

And as I said earlier, on 17 August 1970 Geoffrey made his debut at the Royal Albert Hall playing Mozart's Concerto No. 15 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Colin Davis.

In 1971 Geoffrey returned to Australia to begin the next phase of his career; the difficult years of transition when the musical world had to decide whether he was just another prodigy, albeit one of seemingly superhuman ability, or whether, like Mozart, he was in fact a great musician whose artistry would continue to develop and improve as he gained maturity.

At least once a year throughout the 1970s he toured Australia playing concertos with all the major orchestras around the country, while frequently travelling to America, Britain and Europe for concert appearances.

During this period he hugely expanded his repertoire and toured Japan and New Zealand, also giving recitals in Israel, America and England where he resumed lessons with Maria Curcio, a pupil of Schnabel. In Israel, in 1977, Geoffrey won the first of his two Rubenstein medals, being awarded the prize personally by Arthur Rubenstein who described him as 'an extraordinary pianist'. Many of his performances during this period were recorded and broadcast by the ABC as had been done in the 1960s. They included numerous concertos and recital performances and, sometimes, vocal performances. In 1978, for the ABC, Geoffrey gave the Australian premiere of the Medtner Vocalise with the soprano Loris Synan. This reflected his deep love of the vocal-piano repertoire as well as his ongoing relationship with the music of Medtner.

Geoffrey was already breaking convention by not fading from view like many prodigies before him and by his preparedness to explore new musical territory. He also knew that the vocal repertoire was a vitally important part of his future. The last recording he made for Chandos, released in 2004, the fortieth anniversary year of his career, was of the Medtner Vocalise sung by soprano Susan Gritton. It was a recording which earned Geoffrey one of the best reviews of his career in Gramophone magazine.

In 1980 he travelled to Israel to compete once more in the Rubenstein competition. This time he won the Gold Medal, returning to Australia for a celebratory tour. There, among several superlative reviews, he received what he considered to be one of the greatest compliments of all from the critic Ron Hanoch: 'Geoffrey Tozer . . . is not only a great pianist, but also a great musician'.

The 1980s were halcyon days for Geoffrey. In 1983 he decided to base himself in Canberra. He was briefly on the staff of the Canberra School of Music until it became clear that his national and international touring engagements were as incompatible

with such a position as some other aspects of institutional life. By now Geoffrey had become immersed in the music of Liszt. He toured Australia and New Zealand at least twice a year playing concertos and recitals, while constantly expanding his international career. He made debuts in many parts of the world, including Hungary, Germany, Finland, Ireland, Switzerland, Canada, Holland, Denmark and Austria, returning also to Russia for his debut with the Moscow Symphony Orchestra and also touring in Japan.

During the 1980s he began his commercial recording career. Although Geoffrey had made numerous recordings since as early as 1964, none had been commercially released. In 1986 he made his first commercial recording, the John Ireland Piano Concerto in E Flat with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, a recording that is still ranked by most critics as the best recording available of that music.

The same year, in recognition of his ability, Geoffrey was one of a handful of musicians around the world to receive the Liszt Centenary Medallion awarded by the Hungarian government. The following year he made his second commercial recording, an LP entitled Geoffrey Tozer in Concert, on which he played the music of Liszt, Brahms, Haydn, Weber and Chopin. In 1989 he joined Peter Sculthorpe to record Landscapes, a disc of Sculthorpe's compositions for piano and strings.

Geoffrey had spent the 1980s performing around the world while based in Australia. He loved Australia and believed that the time had come when an Australian of international standing could build and sustain an international career from here. This involved substantial costs and, while he could generate a living from his touring engagements, once he had covered the costs, there was very little left. So it was then that he accepted a job at St Edmund's College, Canberra to help him pay the rent. To its credit, the school allowed him great flexibility so that Geoffrey could continue to perform in many parts of the world while remaining on the staff.

It was owing to his decision to work at St Edmund's that I first heard Geoffrey play. He was playing two works, one by Scriabin and the other by Liszt, for the school's end-of-year pre-Christmas break-up. The playing was breathtaking. When the formalities ended I made my way over to him to inquire of his playing and career. It was then that I understood the under-realisation of Geoffrey's international standing and of his straitened circumstances; earning \$9000 a year at St Edmund's, relying on a bicycle for his transport.

It was Geoffrey's power and poverty that caused me to realise how little Australia valued artists of accomplishment, especially those in mid-career: in his case, the explosive power of his playing, yet his meagre capacity to afford the basics of life.

This sharp reality caused me to study the circumstances of other Australian artists who, while accomplished, found themselves marooned in mid-career. The novelty of their earlier work having faded, being left to fend for themselves, doing things that had naught to do with their art.

This was the inspiration for the Australian Artists Creative Fellowships, a Commonwealth-funded program paid to artists at about one-and-a-half to two times the average weekly earnings and paid for periods of one to five years. The

inspiration for them came from Geoffrey's greatness and his circumstances. It is not that many other artists were not also great but Geoffrey was one so obviously so and the one I actually ran into.

A country's indifference to such accomplishment says something about it. When there is no obvious premium on this level of accomplishment, one has to ask, where and when does such a premium apply?

As it transpired, 63 other artists were awarded fellowships under the program and most did something substantial and valuable with their term awards.

In Geoffrey's case it gave him a chance to develop works in parts of the piano repertoire beyond his great staples like Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Liszt and Brahms. The musician in Geoffrey Tozer fell in love with beguiling compositions that had either rarely or never seen the light of day. One such composer was the Russian Nikolai Medtner, who composed three dramatic and complex piano concertos, only one of which had ever been recorded, and then, during the 1940s in London. Geoffrey began working up these concertos as he did the formerly unrecorded piano concerto of Ottorino Respighi and other compositional works by composers like Rimsky-Korsakov and Busoni. But he had nowhere to perform them; certainly no program to perform them.

So, in 1988, as Treasurer, I made my way down from London to Colchester in Britain in the High Commissioner's car to engage the founder and managing director of Britain's foremost recording company, Chandos Records. That person, Mr Brian Couzens, said, 'why on earth would someone like you be making an appointment with someone like me?'

I said, 'I have come to introduce to you one of the greatest pianists of world' and he said, 'Who is that?' and I said, 'The Australian, Geoffrey Tozer'. He said, 'Yes, I have heard of him but not recently. Has he done anything I can listen to?'

I immediately brought forth a number of audio tapes for his listening. But Couzens said, 'Audio tapes are often compositions themselves, many artists break down and can't complete a full work across the dynamic range of the composition'.

I said to Couzens, 'Well, I will get him over here. He will astound you'.

Well, Geoffrey did get over there. Couzens rang me to say he was unbelievable. He said not only can he play anything; he actually prepares the orchestra and individual players for you. The first thing he recorded for Chandos were the three Medtner piano concertos with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Neeme Jarvi. They hit the world of recorded classical music like a thunderclap and that year won for Chandos the world's highest prize for classical music, the French Diapason D'Or. In the same year, the recordings were nominated for a US Grammy Award for Best Classical Performance—Instrumental Soloist with Orchestra. Geoffrey and Chandos missed winning the Grammy by one place, to the American cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

France's top classical music critic, Alain Cochard, wrote of the Medtner recordings, 'All that Medtner demands, Tozer possesses. This is the playing of a grand master; there is no doubt about it. This is a landmark in recording history'.

Geoffrey went on to make 36 recordings with Chandos, which for any pianist is a major recorded legacy. Indeed, he left behind more recordings of modern listening quality than were capable of execution by the pianists he most admired: Busoni, Schnabel and Rachmaninoff.

But Geoffrey's great international success with orchestras like the London Philharmonic, the Swiss Romande, the Scottish National Orchestra and the Bergen Philharmonic was not replicated in Australia. Geoffrey gave his last performance with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra fifteen years ago, on 5 June 1994, with the Emperor Concerto in a sold-out performance at the Town Hall. About fourteen months later, he played his last concert with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

From those performances, and for the rest of his life, he received nothing further from any major symphony orchestra in Australia. Indeed, in 1996, in one of the most stupendous performances of his career, he played Brahms' Second Concerto with the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra under Roland Peelman. In the impossibly difficult passages towards the end of the first movement, we hear Geoffrey Tozer outdo Vladimir Horowitz.

But for all that, he could not make the cut with the latter-day Melbourne and Sydney Symphony Orchestras. Their indifference and contempt towards him left him to moulder away, largely playing to himself in a rented suburban Melbourne house. The people who chose repertoire for those two orchestras and who had charge in the selection of artists during this period should hang their heads in shame at their neglect of him. If anyone needs a case example of the bitchiness and preference within the Australian arts, here you have it.

Geoffrey was not just a musical genius; he was also an explosive performer. Some of these people felt this put an onus on them to engage him, which then, out of some kind of inverted snobbery, they resisted, choosing lesser artists they felt more comfortable with. Or agents they could do deals with.

This malevolence more or less broke Geoffrey's heart. After all, all he wished to do was to give out. In a famous interview for a Melbourne newspaper, he said, 'it's a waste to have someone like me here, not being used'. Artists like Tozer secured the psychic income through sparkling performances and by mesmerising audiences. It was never about money. He only ever wanted enough to keep going.

The last time I saw him play was at the Australian Institute of Music in Sydney in 2005 in the company of Miriam Hyde and her daughter to an audience of about fifteen people. He played Miriam Hyde's massive piano concerto, a concerto she told me needed someone of Geoffrey's power to play. She had always made a good fist of it herself but Geoffrey ate the piece. On his program, he also had pieces by Sibelius and Scriabin, played with such fantasy and facility you knew you were in the presence of someone extraordinary. In reality, he was simply mucking around with

our heads, and he knew he was. But in his humility he threw off these works, self-effacingly, like a stroll in the park.

But he did get to do other things outside of Australia. In 2001, with the support of close personal friends in Melbourne, Mr and Mrs Wu, he undertook a concert tour of China at the invitation of the Ministry of Culture, playing the Yellow River Concerto to a massive television audience. That was the year he performed the Schnabel Sonata for the Schnabel family at the Bergin Festival and then at the Festival En Blanco y Negro in Mexico City. Also, in 2001, on the anniversary of Medtner's death, he gave the most transcendental recital of his career in the assembly hall here in Collins Street. Though the program was a sell-out and the playing was for the gods, there was not one review of the performance in the media, print or broadcast. This cut Geoffrey to the core.

His last grand tour of Australia in 2004 was a privately promoted one, where he gave over twenty performances around the country, including to a sold-out recital at the Sydney Opera House. The tour was promoted by Jim McPherson, who did Geoffrey the honour and the country the favour that the established orchestras had long denied him and it.

Peter McCallum, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* music critic, had this to say about the performance:

'Tozer plays as though he is trying things out, playing for himself with everything being imaginative and free. Then suddenly . . . something quite extraordinary emerges—a moment of special inspiration, special because it was unplanned, perhaps not fully even noticed or comprehended.'

McCallum went on to remind his readers that Liszt first devised the piano recital. He went on to say 'Tozer here revived something of its original spirit: a great Australian musician and a true original'.

His early death at age 54 reminds us of the death of Maria Callas at the age of 53. Performing all their lives, both artists finally reached the stage of wondering what it is all about. After operating constantly at a level of high achievement they needed the spiritual sustenance of audiences and friends. They needed the acclamation to stir the genius in them. When the acclaim stopped, both of these people turned towards an inner, more human life, with a lower premium on the art and on longevity. Geoffrey had had a bout of hepatitis. He lived by himself, didn't look after himself and his health suffered accordingly. In the end, his liver failed.

But I have to say we all let him down. Franco Zeffirelli, Callas's great collaborator, said much the same thing following her death. He said 'we thought she was all right in Paris, that she had the intellectual resources to hang on, if even in semi-seclusion'. But as it turned out, she didn't. We should have cared more and done more. He could have been speaking for us about Geoffrey Tozer.

That said, it's also worth saying that Geoffrey had many who cared deeply for him. Most of all, his mother and teacher, who put pressure on him but also loved everything about him, Reuben Fineberg, his mentor and manager, whom he lost in

1997 and Peter-Wyllie Johnston, the executor of Geoffrey's estate, who took up where Reuben Fineberg left off and gave Geoffrey succour and support at important periods over the last decade.

Geoffrey is survived by his brother Peter and members of his extended family.

Geoffrey Tozer's last public performance was here in Victoria with David Pereira in Bendigo, an artist whom he held in the highest esteem and finally, more privately, for the nuns and brothers at the Presentation Convent Chapel in Windsor.

When one has been touched by the stellar power and ethereal playing of a sublime musician, one is lifted, if only briefly, to a place beyond the realm of the temporal. Geoffrey Tozer did this for many people. His remembrance is the small recompense we give him in return.