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## Douglas Lilburn's Piano Music

### Some Suggestions for Teaching

By Rosemary Miller Stott and Vivienne McLean

"Lilburn's solitude. . . Alone he paces  
an empty beach, creating in his head  
bare harmonies of sand and wave... Wild honey"

Extract from Alistair Campbell's poem, Wild Honey  
(OUP, 1964)

Douglas Lilburn's interest in the piano was lifelong. He studied as a young man with the legendary Christchurch piano teacher, Ernest Empson, chose to write a piano sonata as his first serious composition, and continued to play the piano for pleasure until almost the end of his life.

#### Rosemary Miller Stott

I have enjoyed teaching many of Douglas Lilburn's piano pieces over the years and they have never lost their freshness and appeal. They have a unique New Zealand quality, which often evokes the stillness and beauty of a New Zealand landscape and, at other times, the lonely haunting atmosphere of a seascape. I mention a few favourites from the Occasional Pieces for Piano and describe the two Sonatinas to persuade all teachers to include this lovely music in their teaching repertoire.

*The Occasional Pieces* are a collection of early writing (between 1943 and 1973) and they are all quite short and accessible.

#### Four Preludes 1942-44.

I usually teach these as a set.

*Allegro Grazioso* – a charming 'one in a bar' waltz. It is good to teach a piece in F sharp major.



*Allegro Deciso* – This is more harmonic but there are also lines to follow. The structure is clear, mostly two-bar, and an exciting *ff* climax comes near the end.

*Sostenuto e quasi lontano* – Probably the least difficult of the four (perhaps Grade 3), this is my favourite. It uses both pedals, has demanding tonal levels within a very soft range, and the repeated notes create a bleakness that is undeniably New Zealand.

*Allegro* – a great contrast, virile in rhythm with explosive accents. And it has a key signature of six flats!

#### Rondino 1952



Just two pages long, this piece would be enjoyable for a Grade 5 pupil. It has the intrinsic Lilburn harmony and there is interest in the rhythm of the melody (which again features repeated notes). Lilburn once said, "Rhythm is the only thing that gives life to a melodic line."

#### Two Sonatinas

For more advanced students, Grade 8/Diploma these are satisfying to study.

#### Sonatina 1 1946

*Vivace* – This is a joyous movement with fanfares, lively rhythm, clear structure and jubilant chords. *Brillante* is indicated in two special places.

*Poco Adagio espressivo* – Tenuto lines mark the inner melodic sense within the chord progressions. In the middle section the left hand leads with a melody which develops into the climax. It ends with an extended reprise of the opening section.

*Allegro* – A restless interplay of intervals tossed between the hands creates the 'inquieta' indicated. Long sustained bass notes that follow anchor the ideas. There is freedom in the tonality as no key signature is used.

#### Sonatina 2 1962



By this time Lilburn was firmly established as the country's premier composer.

1. Familiarity with Debussy's language would be helpful in performing this movement. The texture is layered and sensitive use of the pedal is needed. Flurries of sound lead to moments of rest on widely spaced chords which often stretch across barlines.

2. If the first movement is fast the second is only a little slower. The tempo is explained only by metronome markings. Fluid rhythm and reliance on the sonority of the pedal are again characteristics. An allargando and long pause leads directly into the final movement.

3. This, the slowest of the three and serves as a beautiful coda to the whole. Marked with freedom and subsequently *lontano*, it is reminiscent of the earlier musical ideas.

This music is our heritage and it is a privilege to claim it as our own.

**Rosemary Miller Stott** is a piano teacher and pianist working in Christchurch. She studied at the Royal Academy of Music, has taught Musicianship Skills and Piano Performance at the University of Canterbury, and more recently was an International examiner for the ABRSM. Rosemary is also the pianist in the Tresoli Trio.

### Vivienne McLean

I have enjoyed studying and teaching Douglas Lilburn's piano pieces found in the Occasional Pieces and his two Sonatinas. In addition, the Waiteata Music Press has published a large number of short pieces since Lilburn's death in 2001. These were largely gifts to his friends and colleagues and are now lodged in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Most are piano solos, with a few for four, or even six, hands, often for particular occasions. A few are incidental music for theatre or film productions.

Composed mainly between 1941 and 1951, these works reflect his Search for a Tradition as expressed in his lecture given at the first Cambridge Summer School of Music, January 1946. In the lecture he described taking the night train from Wellington to Hamilton and seeing Mounts Ruapehu and Ngauruhoe by moonlight, realising, "At that moment the world that Mozart lived in seemed about as remote as the moon, and in no way related to my experience."

However, throughout his life Lilburn played the piano music of Bach, Haydn, Beethoven,

Schubert, and Chopin. His compositions still reflected European traditions, and the teaching he received from Ralph Vaughan Williams. The New Zealand influences he acknowledged are well recognised: the spacious land and seascapes, the clear bright air, a brooding mist on hill or a calm sea, the darkness and loneliness of native forests, the flight and cry of seagulls, a hawk or the chatter of small native birds.

From the collections of early piano pieces published in 2004, I have chosen two books with several pieces from each to recommend for teaching and enjoying.

**Preludes and More** – I recommend these for a mature Grade 6 student and above. Hands need to span 4-note chords over an octave.

### Three Preludes 1943

*Andante ma con moto* – Lyrical but with dramatic contrasts of key and dynamics. Reminders of Schubert with major third harmonic shifts here from E flat to G major in the opening line. Also contrasts of major and minor with poignant effect.



*Allegro con brio* – More sombre and dramatic with bursts of energy. Perhaps picture a dark stormy sea.

*Adagio ma non troppo* – A solemn piece, main key centres contrast E flat and C majors. Modal harmonies are evident.

### Prelude 1948

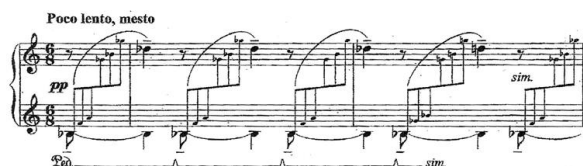
*Con moto* – A sense of isolation and sadness, with repeated rhythmic figures.

### Prelude 1950

Quickly with rather free rhythm. Fresh quirky rhythms in brisk 7/4 time. G minor with ambiguous ending.

### Prelude 1951

*Poco lento, mesto*. A favourite of mine. Many repetitions in practice help explore varied tone colours. Listening to Margaret Nielsen's performance started my interest.



And do explore the last one, *Moths and Candles*.

### **A Christmas Offering 1944**

*Flourish* - *Allegro maestoso*. Brilliant and brassy.

Four Preludes 1944 – Includes pieces already published in *Occasional Pieces*, plus a new opening.

Three short pieces of contrasting moods I recommend are:

*Vivace* – a delicate staccato semiquaver motif is balanced by crotchet movement in thirds.

*Two Diversions* – Lilburn, as usual, gives clear directions for articulation, dynamics, accents which need to be observed meticulously for the full effect of his humour.

Interpret *lugubre e giocoso* as you like in the first Diversion, and enjoy the child-like teasing in the second.

A final piece, *From the Port Hills*, from his Bagatelles was greatly loved by a Diploma student of mine.

Douglas Lilburn has left a rich legacy of music for us to explore and share with our students.

### Recommended reading and listening

Margaret Nielsen, *The Piano Music of Douglas Lilburn*. Massey University Music Edition, published by Prometheus Editions. A booklet. Available on loan from SOUNZ (Centre for New Zealand Music) library [www.sounz.org.nz](http://www.sounz.org.nz). An excellent introduction if you can obtain it.

Philip Norman: *Douglas Lilburn His Life and Music*. Canterbury University Press 2006. A book to last a lifetime.

Piano Music played by Margaret Neilsen. CD recordings available from SOUNZ ([www.sounz.org.nz](http://www.sounz.org.nz))

Douglas Lilburn. *Complete Piano Music* (in 3 Volumes to date) performed by Dan Poynton. Trust Records.