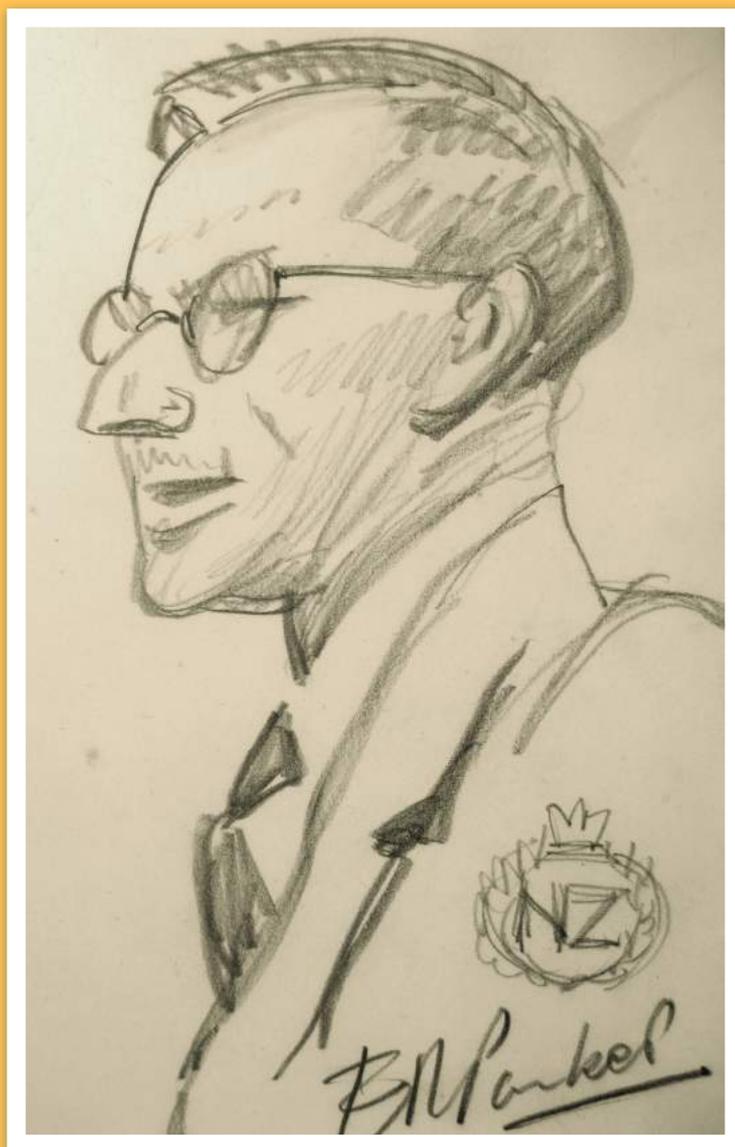


# THEO STAPLES



A Life in Music



# Theo Staples

## A Life in Music

Photo: a young Theo Staples surrounded by his private students, 1936

**On the exact same day that Theo Staples was born in Ashburton, New Zealand, the composer Gustav Holst's epic work *The Planets* was premiered in the Queen's Hall, London, England. The scientific theory that a single occurrence, no matter how small, can forever change the course of the universe, also known as *the butterfly effect*, certainly seems applicable to the life of Theo Staples.**

Immersed in music his entire life, Theo himself however feels that he has "simply been very lucky". He had no intention of his life turning out the way it did. At the age of 96, looking back he still says modestly: "It just presented itself like that. I met the right people at the right time."



Tiny Theo with his father, who died of tuberculosis when Theo was only 5-years-old

Theo Staples would never make it to the Queen's Hall in Langham Place, London, because an incendiary bomb destroyed it during the London Blitz of 1941, and the government refused to rebuild it. By the time Theo arrived in London in 1950, the concert season was held in the Royal Festival Hall, and musical functions such as the Proms in the Royal Albert Hall. That was where Theo would attend a number of excellent concerts, while studying at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He would also have tea in Windsor castle. But we are jumping ahead.

Theodore Edward Staples was born on Monday the 30th of September, 1918, in the last month of the First World War. He was the only son, the third and final addition to the family of Maria Hannah Staples (nee Wright), a housewife and gifted amateur musician, who had married Edward James Westfield Staples, a blacksmith. Theo grew up with his two older sisters, Mabel and Doris, in a Presbyterian household on the east coast of the South Island of New Zealand, in a town called Ashburton.

Theo was only a few days old when New Zealand was struck by an influenza pandemic - the lethal epidemic that killed previously healthy young adults and decimated the world's population, reducing it by around four per cent. It was the worst outbreak of disease New Zealand has ever known. In Theo's birthplace Ashburton, 25 people died from this Spanish flu, eight per cent of the entire population of 3,109. By the time Theo was two months old the pandemic was over.

## Always music in the house

Theo has an early childhood memory of a train journey late in the spring of 1923, a time when



Theo in 1929, 10 or 11 years old.  
"There was always music in the house"

trains still had lengthways seating, and passengers would sit with their backs to the window. The family must have been returning from a short holiday or visiting relatives, and Theo recalls his father lying stretched out on the train seat, because he wasn't feeling at all well. Back home, a junior doctor was consulted. He enquired what his father had been eating and prescribed that his feet be kept warm with hot water bottles. But Theo's father's condition rapidly deteriorated and a senior doctor was called in; he sent the patient straight to hospital, from where he would never return. Theo's father died that same night, at 9pm, from the complications of tuberculosis. He was 40 years of age. Theo was only 5 years old.

Little Theo had been fond of his father and always a feeling of deep affection for him remained. "I never forgot about him and I used to cry a lot as a kid, but my mother and sisters and I all worked together as a family. Father's death brought us closer."

There was always music in the house. "My mother had learnt the piano as a girl, but had to give it up when it was her next sister's turn. She was determined to teach her own children, because she herself had lost out". His mother also taught two of Theo's young cousins. "We had two pianos. You could buy a piano back then for the equivalent of twenty dollars, and a good one too. I later had a Hakia, which had also cost me only about twenty dollars."

His mother wasn't working but, at times, had boarders in the house. Both Theo's sisters provided an income by teaching music; his sister Doris played the violin and taught speech, while Mabel gave piano and singing lessons. They were happy to pass on their skills to their little brother, and thus Theo learned both the piano and the

violin. "Especially Mabel spent hours teaching me. She was a great teacher," Theo says.

Music was becoming an integral part of Theo's life. Meanwhile, the household struggled to make ends meet. His father had died intestate, meaning there was no will, so the Public Trust took over the household finances, deciding what could and could not be done. Because the house in which Theo and his mother and sisters lived had a mortgage on it, the Public Trust took control of that too, though Theo's mother still had to pay the mortgage. He remembers taking her into the Public Trust office whenever she had to go and showing them receipts. The Trust also came to value the furniture, but it turned out that Theo's father had insured it in his wife's name - nobody knew why - which meant they could not touch it.



Running errands, licking stamps and banking money: Theo Staples' first job out of school, at Dalgety & Company Ltd

## From Dalgety to music as a career

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Theo's mother, despite her own precarious financial situation, was determined to help others as much as she could. She would make hot meals for people in need, which the teenage Theo delivered around town on his bicycle. During the weekends, his mother was able to stay in bed a little longer, because Theo would cook everyone breakfast. But he would get so involved with the bacon, eggs and fried bread, that he always served the tea cold, something his mother complained about every time. Theo still chuckles about it.

By the age of 15 or 16, Theo left school and took up his first employment, running errands and messages, licking stamps and banking money for the mercantile firm Dalgety & Company Ltd. He

would work 6 days a week and earn 15 shillings a week. Shilling coins had only just been introduced in 1933, with a Maori warrior carrying a taiaha "in a warlike attitude" on the reverse. Theo soon figured out he would be able to earn more money teaching music, as he had seen his sisters do. It was a much more appealing vocation to him. He started giving private lessons and was soon teaching about 40 pupils a week. He would enter them in music



Theo Staples (right) with the composer John Anthony Ritchie (1921 - 2014)

competitions; they almost always won. Although Theo also played sports such as tennis and hockey, music was his main focus day in and day out. "At the time, I didn't think I was that focused, but to an extent I must have been." Theo remembers always getting annoyed whenever



Theo Staples in his late teens, early twenties

somebody would come around to see him while he was practising, and then he had to put his violin down to "go out with some chap."

Theo had a close friend, who worked as a doctor in Ashburton and played the violin as well. They saw a lot of each other. "He was older and a very good violinist. I was learning all the time. He'd come to my house and we would play together. He would often get called away. I remember we played in a club one night and got a phone call, because he had forgotten to sign a certificate to allow a body to be taken out of the morgue."

At the age of 21, Theo received a hundred pounds, part of an inheritance left to his late father, and he spent it on a car: a Whippet, a low-priced predecessor of the jeep. Theo started traveling to Christchurch, where he took piano lessons with a man called Alfred Binns and received violin tutoring from Arthur Gordon. Arthur Gordon was an accomplished, internationally renowned violinist, who had trained in Italy and Paris.



1940 - the start of World War II. By the end of it, Theo says, all his friends were dead

But Theo's promising musical career was nipped in the bud by the start of the Second World War. He enlisted in the New Zealand Air Force – his less than perfect eyesight luckily preventing him from being deployed overseas. Though the Air Force transferred him to a number of different locations within New Zealand, wherever he went, he would hire a room where he could practise his violin. The continuing war changed everything for the worse; by the end of it, all his friends were dead.

## Vernon Griffiths' incredible scheme for music

On the sunnier side, Theo had started courting Mary Irene Bruce and they got married on the 31st of December 1944. They would have two children together, Jocelyn Marie and Aubrey Bruce. Shortly after the Second World War ended, Theo looked into study for a bachelor's degree in music in Wellington, and despite disliking the professor who questioned the point of studying music, he seriously considered enrolling. Instead, however, he took up a position at Huntley Private School in Marton, as director of music, where he worked until 1947.



The wedding of Theodore Edward Staples & Mary Irene Bruce at 31 December 1944. They would have two children together, Jocelyn Marie and Aubrey Bruce

Then Theo Staples' path crossed that of Vernon Griffiths. Vernon Griffiths had been the music master at King Edward Technical College in Dunedin since 1933 and was looking for a successor



From Theo Staples Archives, with written on the back "Summer School, Masterton". Top left, Theo Staples. Sitting, third from left (with pipe): Vernon Griffiths

for his main music teacher Frank Gallaway .

Despite Theo's initial reluctance stemming from a combination of modesty and self-doubt, Vernon Griffiths insisted on interviewing him for the role of music teacher in Dunedin, and then gave him the job. Theo's seeming unwillingness only made Griffiths even more determined to employ this young talent, and at 10am the morning after the interview the principle of the school sent Theo a telegram stating: YOU HAVE BEEN APPOINTED.

Theo found himself assistant-director of music at King Edward Technical College in Dunedin, taking charge of the music practised daily by 700 children. "From that moment on, my whole life changed," Theo says. The next time Theo saw

Griffiths in person, Griffiths assured him the position at the school would secure his future. This, he remembers, helped Theo to go with the flow from then on.

Until Vernon Griffith's appointment, music at the Dunedin Technical School had received little attention. With the co-operation and support of the principal and the college board, Griffiths formulated an incredible plan for music.



The wood cut logo used on programmes for the music performances of the King Edward's Technical College Dunedin

Energetic, ambitious and enthusiastic, Griffiths displayed a single-minded devotion to his belief that everyone should be given the opportunity to experience making music in groups, which Theo deeply admired. Griffiths set up classes with a variety of orchestral instruments, formed orchestras, military bands and chamber groups, and introduced music into the daily life of the school. In 1941, he had published an account of the development of his scheme, *An Experiment in School Music Making*, and his vision and work received international recognition. The great success of his efforts was such that similar programs were adopted in other schools around New Zealand.

"Vernon Griffiths also produced a wide range of compositions for use in schools and churches and by adult amateur groups," Theo says, but a fire in the archives in Wellington, where recordings of performances of Griffiths' works were kept, destroyed most of the audial records. Vernon Griffiths was not only a great musical and educational visionary but also an extremely hospitable man. He invited Theo to visit the Griffiths' household any time, so he would be able practise the piano whenever he wanted.



Departure from Wellington, 1950:  
Theo takes off to England to study  
at the Guildhall School of Music  
and Drama in London for an entire  
year

## Crossing paths with Holst's legacy

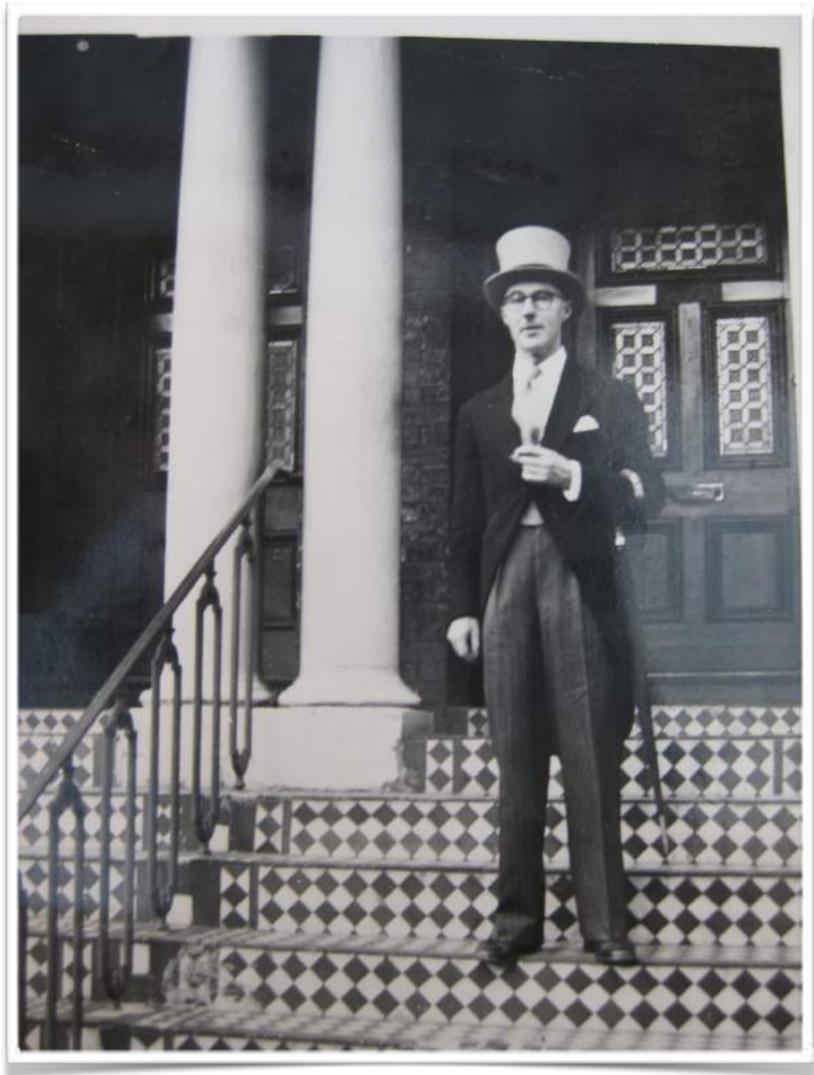
Theo's musical career took flight once more when he was awarded a British Council bursary for overseas study, after having applied on a whim. Arriving in England in October 1950, Theo studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London for an entire year. Making the most of his time in 'the mother country', he specialized in conducting, singing, violin and harmony.

A newspaper article reporting on his international venture entitled "Music Everywhere He Goes", mentioned his attendance at "several outstanding concerts in the Albert Hall, when Sir Thomas Beecham conducted the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra with Isobel Baillie as soprano soloist". He also attended a special service in St. George's Chapel, Windsor, at the invitation of the British Council. Together with 15 other overseas bursary recipients, Theo listened to a message from the King, and was served tea in the castle.

As it turns out, Gustav Holst would once again exert an influence on Theo's life; he had left his footprints as Director of Music at the school Theo Staples visited in 1951, the St Paul's Girls' School, an independent day school for girls, in Brook Green, Hammersmith, West London, England. "The head mistress took me with great pride to see the Holst room," Theo recalls. The story goes that Holst stayed in that room for an entire night to complete *The Planets*.

Theo ended up spending an entire day in that same room together with the composer Herbert Howells, who had succeeded Holst as Director of Music at the school. One of Theo's recollections of the day is that, on asking him if he could take

some of his music back to New Zealand, Howells replied: "I wouldn't recommend my music to



Off to an Afternoon Parthy in the Garden of Buckingham Palace, 19th July 1951, invited by The Lord Chamberlain "commanded by Their Majesties". Dress Code: "Lounge Suit" (or Uniform)

anyone." Apart from Howells' modesty, Theo was impressed by the fact that when rehearsing his choirs, all voices would first be required to learn all the other parts of a piece, before concentrating on their own.

But it was Vernon Griffiths who had set Theo Staples the most powerful example as a teacher, music leader and innovator, which subsequently inspired and moved Theo through his entire life.



"At the time, I didn't think I was that focused, but to an extent I must have been." Theo remembers always getting annoyed whenever somebody would come around to see him while he was practising, and then he had to put his violin down to "go out with some chap."

Theo remembers feeling quite overwhelmed and unprepared for the first big performance, which came a lot sooner than he expected. Controlling 700 voices and 300-odd instruments is no mean feat. According to the newspaper reviews, Theo's worry was entirely unfounded. "The control of so many children poses serious problems for the conductor, and last evening's show was a considerable personal triumph for Mr T. E. Staples, who has succeeded Mr F. A. Callaway as musical director at the college. Mr Staples appeared as a musician of character and ability, and the remarkable unison in which the children played and sang was a tribute to the control exercised by the conductor and the preparation which had gone into the performance."

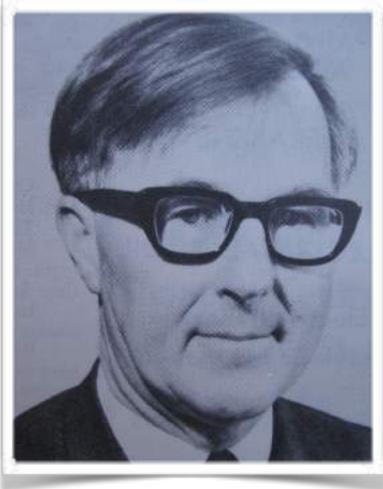
Theo Staples has always been an extremely busy man. While working under Vernon Griffiths, he was also the Choirmaster of the Presbyterian Church in Dunedin, rehearsing with the choir one night a week, and two nights a week maintaining his private music teaching. In addition, he taught a violin class of about ten girls at Dunedin's Columba College one afternoon each week. "I don't know how I kept going," Theo says, looking back on it now, admiring his younger self in hindsight. "I don't know why, or how I managed, but I never seemed to be sitting still for very long."

## Conducting with scissors

Often traveling by plane, Theo Staples would be invited to Invercargill, Waimate, Timaru, Christchurch, Blenheim and Nelson in the South Island, as well as to Wellington, the Hutt Valley, Napier and Gisborne in the North Island, to act as an adjudicator for the music competitions held

there. He also used to be a judge for the annual Mobil Song Quest.

When judging the competitions, Theo focussed firstly on intonation, including the quality of sound and tone, secondly on the exact length of the notes as written in the score, and thirdly on interpretation. "Of course, a lot of times interpretation is a matter of opinion. I always tried to give them (competitors) the reason why they did not qualify for a prize. I must have enjoyed doing it, otherwise I wouldn't have done it so much. I remember making a mistake once, and I have never forgiven myself for it. It was in Nelson and there were two finalists, a cornet and a trumpet, and I mixed the winners up. Afterwards, I wanted to go back and correct it, but the society wouldn't let me. This incident became the reason I gave up judging. I still worry about it. It's an injustice I've done that I shouldn't have."

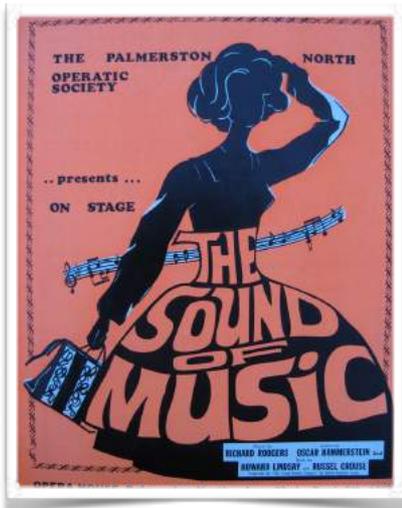


"I enjoyed directing the musicals but was a strict disciplinarian stipulating a total liquor ban. I didn't want people coming onto the stage drunk. It had to go my way, or otherwise they'd have to get someone else."

While Theo was hard on himself, always expecting himself to do his best, he was kind to others. He remembers teaching a little boy on Saturday mornings called Desmond, who would arrive on his bicycle and leave on time so he could go to the picture theatre in the afternoon. One Saturday morning during his lesson, Theo had to leave the teaching room to answer the phone. When he returned and checked the clock, he was surprised to find how long he'd spent talking, and allowed the boy to leave." But it later turned out the little beggar had changed the clock!" The boy was obviously more interested in movies than in making progress on his violin, but Theo "never made him conscious of it." It would not have suited his kind teaching style.

Did he have particular methods to bring out the best in others? "I don't know. To me that was just an enjoyable way of living. I expected everything to be like that. I expect myself to make the most of everything. I am still like that, to some degree. I enjoyed teaching."

As one of a number of former pupils taught by Theo Staples in the 1960s at Queen Elizabeth Technical College, Graham Barrow remembers that "Mr. Staples" would conduct the rehearsals holding a pair of small nail scissors in his right hand. Sometimes he would use a ruler and sometimes an old cane. At the end of year concerts, however, he would use a baton.



Theo Staples loves classical composers such as Bach and Beethoven, but also enjoyed conducting the lighter repertoire of a series of world famous musicals

## Hurrah, hurrah, sausages for tea at the rectory

His former pupil also pointed out Theo's sense of humour, expressed when he taught the entire school a song called "Marching Through Georgia" by replacing the original words for the chorus *Hurrah, hurrah, we bring the jubilee, Hurrah, hurrah, the flag that makes you free with Hurrah, hurrah, sausages for tea, Hurrah, hurrah, at the rectory.* As Graham recalls, Theo's version still came through loud and clear when it was performed at end of year concerts.

Theo Staples was well liked by all he taught. The kids who didn't enjoy him as a teacher were those with a dislike for music; it was nothing personal. His former pupils remember Theo as "a very nice person and a gentleman", always immaculately dressed in a suit and wearing a shirt and tie, the dress code for teachers in those days. Warrick Hamilton remembers having music class once a

week and really enjoying the class. "Mr Staples was a very understanding teacher. Yes, he conducted with a pair of scissors even at school assembly in the mornings. He also took our class for English lessons the odd time, mainly as a fill- in when required. My parents bought me a piano and I



continued playing for many years. Mr Staples was one of the reasons for this."

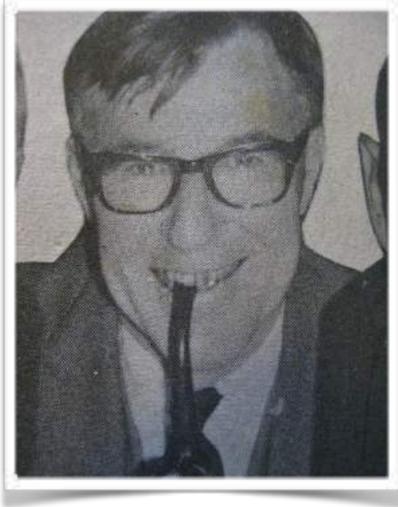
Theo Staples had numerous conversations with Warrick about the piano and was very pleased when his former pupil was able to find a good music teacher close to his home, in the country outside of Palmerston North.

Vernon Griffiths' intention had also become Theo Staples intention: to create a nation of musical amateurs ('amateur' meaning lover).

"The children in Dunedin went into a classroom according to their voice test, not their academic or vocational abilities," Theo Staples says. "Now where, can you tell me did that happen anywhere in the world?!" Vernon Griffiths would rewrite music for all the voices in the school, for instance the Messiah Hallelujah chorus. "What a wonderful thing for children to be able to sing," Theo marvels. "I still can't stop crowing about it, but no one wants to know. I have tried my best to talk to people about it, but they just don't care. Those children sang every day in school, at assembly, and there was an orchestra and a band playing every morning. And it was one happy school. There was no corporal punishment. It wasn't needed. The children knew this was their school, and they were proud of it. They were happy children and they went on to do very well in the world. Many ended up with doctorates, even though it was a technical college. If I have any regret, it is that I have never been able to convince headmasters and policy makers of the importance of daily music for all children in schools."



"I was taught the violin between 1962 and 1964 when I attended Queen Elizabeth Technical College in Palmerston North, and one of my teachers was Theo Staples. His love of music showed in the way he taught. He was a wonderful teacher," one of Theo's former pupils says.



Theo Staples, probably in the late 1970s, early 1980s

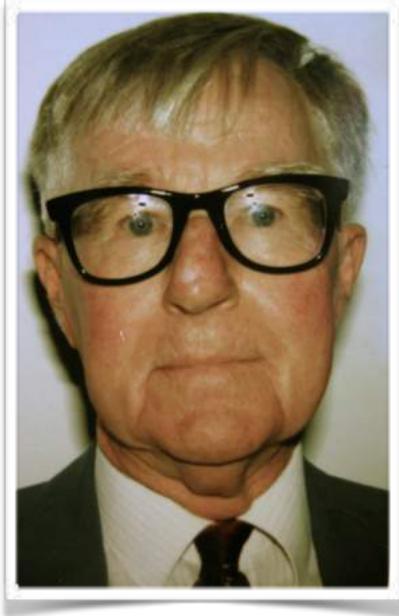
Proof of Theo's popularity also lies in the fact that many still remember being taught by him, as well as having stayed in touch with their music teacher long after flying the nest - and sometimes even the country.

In later life, Theo perhaps adopted a stricter approach to conducting, for instance when he started directing operatic shows and musicals. In his own words, he could sometimes be a bully. "I wanted music to be the very best it could be, in my opinion. If I'm in charge of the show, I'm in charge. If it went wrong it was my fault. I'd listen to the other producers, but I had the final say. It was my responsibility, when I took something on, to produce a result. I was very hard on myself. I don't know where that came from. I expected only the very best, from myself and from others. Most of them delivered."

## Strict theatricals

In the role of musical director over a period of decades, he would be responsible for performances of *Wild Violets*, *My Fair Lady*, *Oliver*, *White Horse Inn*, *Follow the Fleet*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *The Sound of Music*, *The King and I*, *Hello Dolly*, and probably many more.

"I enjoyed the theatrical aspect of it, but was very strict. I've been a disciplinarian,



Theo Staples retained his vitality, a quality he shares with many musicians and conductors, believed to be the positive effect of music on the thymus gland

stipulating a total liquor ban for the entire premises. I didn't want people to come onto the stage drunk. It had to go my way, or otherwise they'd have to get someone else."

Theo Staples also always kept a strict divide between home life and work. "I didn't like bringing family in. People talk about you, and when your family is there, it cramps the whole atmosphere. You have to expect criticism when you are involved in this type of profession. Not that I have been much aware of it, but I feel criticism must have been there."

## Epilogue

To this day, Theo Staples is a great fan of classical music. "I hate that word, really, but I don't like pop music at all. And I am very critical of a lot of modern compositions too, because to me, they are discordant noises. Listen to a lot of the music today; it's not pleasant – horrible noise. To start with, I admired Bach and I loved Beethoven. There are quite a number of composers, really. I don't like the modern 20th century Russian composers. I admire what they do, but I do not like it. I do not want to go to a concert and listen to a lot of noise. I think I would walk out of a lot of those concerts I hear on the radio these days. There is a lot of snobbery attached to it, I think. Other people say they like it, but I wonder what they hear, when they listen to that music. I was sometimes asked to give lectures about music, but I find it very difficult to talk about. You don't know what another person hears. You've just got to listen for yourself and work it out for yourself."

Theo Staples spent a lifetime bringing out the music in others, but when he listens to music he adores, what does it bring out in him? "It makes me feel a certain way. I believe, if you're repeating a piece of music or a series of bars a number of times, you must not make it boring, but play it slightly differently every time: softer or faster, or something like that, as a contrast. But very few musicians seem to do that. They just repeat the same thing over and over again. It makes me cross with the conductor. There is one chap that really intrigues me with his playing at the moment, and that is the Chinese concert pianist Lang Lang. He had a most cruel upbringing, with his father making him work morning, noon and night, but he is the most magnificent pianist in the world. He has a lovely tone, a wonderful rhythm and such a variation of sound. He's got it all, as far as I'm concerned."

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