

Dr. June Loney, MBE
22.4.1930 - 15.6.2016

June Loney was an extraordinary teacher, a perfectionist and musician of integrity and soul and a harpist with one of the richest sounds I have ever heard. She was my mentor and teacher for 8 of the most formative years of my musical life, giving countless hours of her time and energy to help me become the best I could be. She sought for herself and passed on to her students how to find joy in playing the harp.

June was an accomplished pianist, already performing and accompanying in the ABC studios in Sydney, before she decided that the life this entailed was too limited and not musically satisfying enough for her. She went to an SSO concert, looked at all the instruments, and decided she would learn "that one all on it's own" - the harp was the only instrument which had its own section.

She set about learning with the same single-minded determination she approached everything in life. Elizabeth Vidler helped her prepare for an orchestral position by taking the score to the choir stalls of the Town Hall to follow during rehearsals. Young June was so nervous and self-conscious her knees would shake.

After taking on the Principal position (after only about 5 years study!) she took an early sabbatical year, spending it with the Cleveland Symphony harpist Alice Chalifoux; staying at her home in Cleveland and also at the Salzedo Summer School house in Camden Maine. Here she went through every major and many minor works of the harp repertoire, taking advantage of every moment there, so that she would be ready for her professional life ahead as teacher and performer. The social situation of the times meant that on her return to Sydney, she had barely any professional contact with other harpists, especially with international developments.

As youngest daughter in a family of six, with a single parent mother - their father left when the children were very small - June was the one to stay at home with her mother and was her carer and companion until she died.

When June went to the US Chalifoux asked her why she was there - she already had an excellent position, and was not a young student any more. June replied that she wanted to learn about tone production. Consequently she learnt aspects of harp playing which most other students never did from this famous teacher. She knew what she was looking for and she ensured this is what she received. The main feature of her playing was in fact a glorious sound, developing her own way of articulating and passing this on to her students, who were then able to use this to form and understand their own sound.

She played concertos with the SSO, especially on their regional tours, but she was also good at taking initiative to organise concerts, and regularly played chamber music with her orchestral colleagues in various venues around Sydney. This enterprising attitude also led her to found the Harp Society of NSW.

It was always interesting to her to learn something from observing the great soloists who came to perform with the orchestra. Some would be sublime and inspirational, but she was also quick to notice if they “had nothing to say”, or “there was no one at home”. In teaching she would ensure that technical perfection was always in aid of “telling a story”. Each phrase was worked on to be relaxed, to be in control, to have the right tone colour, and to say something musically. Consequently lessons would often run to several hours without a break. But for June teaching was a passion as well as a joint enterprise, which demanded the same single-minded perfectionism as her own playing.

Her friendship with flautist Linda Vogt introduced her early on to the Alexander Method, and this inspired a new approach to harp technique, using herself and her students as guinea-pigs for the new insights. This then led naturally to other philosophical inspirations such as Zen. Always, new concepts were thoroughly absorbed and integrated so that she could change, articulate and realise things in a unique individual style.

She embraced her hobbies in the same manner, with intensity and full attention until she moved on to another - mosaics, tapestry, film-making, house-designing, painting to name just a few. Everything she approached had a distinct and unusual individual stamp on it.

I recall once how she went on stage to play a concerto with the SSO in the Sydney Town Hall - in those days in winter it could be very cold - with an old cardigan over her flowing pink chiffon gown. For her there was no excuse for not playing well, so being cold was not an option and she just got on with it.

From being a painfully shy young woman, she became a confident and strong leading professional in her field. However she found it difficult to fit a mould and often felt lonely in the orchestra. When she was forced to retire in 1984 due to ill health, she retreated inwards for several years. Years of accumulated tension seemed to catch up with her. Finally moving through her own issues, she came to help others, and took a PhD Honours in Social Work (thesis on Agoraphobia in Women). In the process she found she was able to relate directly and comfortably with people, finding a new joy and meaning in life.

Her last years in Mermaid Waters, where she enjoyed looking out onto the water and bird-life, were peaceful and happy.

June exemplified the power of the individual mind, not influenced by how others think or act; an open mind, ready to ask the right questions, to absorb and to integrate the answers; to sift out what was essential and look for the essence of meaning.

Alice Giles,
June 2016