

The City Organists of Sydney

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Part I

Introduction

Following the success of W.T. Best's 12 opening recitals on the new Sydney Town Hall organ during August 1890, it was automatically assumed that a City Organist would be appointed; all of the cities of Great Britain and the colonies with municipal organs made such appointments. The Organ Committee, whose original functions had been to draw up the organ specification, supervise the calling of tenders and then recommend to the Council the preferred builder, now turned its attention to the new City Organist position. It advised that:

The position should be occupied by no-one but a gentleman of proved ability and experience in the use of the largest class of organs, with a training such as the old country alone has hitherto been able to supply.

C.F., 26/244, 27.VII.1890

To the disbelief of the Organ Committee, which felt that an annual salary of £600 to £800 would be needed to entice an organist of the right calibre, the Council advertised the position at only £300. When this failed, the amount was raised to £500, a substantial amount, only £100 below the Town Clerk's salary. The advertisement read:

TO ORGANISTS

Town Hall, Sydney, New South Wales, 15th September, 1890.

APPLICATIONS will be received at this Office until Saturday, 29th November, 1890, from Gentlemen competent to fill the position of Organist to the City of Sydney. The successful applicant will be required to give two Public Recitals of at least an hour and a half each, each week, and on other occasions when specially desired by the Mayor. Salary 500 pounds per annum. The appointment will be for a period of three years.

HENRY J. DANIELS, Town Clerk of Sydney.

Over 100 hopefuls applied, including, doubtless to the dismay of the Organ Committee, not only a large bevy of local organists, but only one celebrated British organist. So it was that the first Sydney City Organist came not from the old country but from Belgium.

Auguste Wiegand

Auguste Wiegand was the first Sydney City Organist, holding the position for 10 years from 1891 to 1900. He arrived in Sydney in June 1891 and almost immediately submitted to the Council a list of more than 200 works divided into his first 20 programmes.

He also immersed himself in the intricacies of the world's largest organ, declaring it to be, 'a masterpiece and perfect in tone and power'. Nevertheless he requested several changes, notably the exchanging of the Swell Trumpet and the Choir Vox Humana ('In no organ is the Vox Humana on the Choir manual', Wiegand informed the Council), the octave transposition of the Swell Piccolo 2' to make it speak at 1' pitch, the enclosing of additional sections of the organ and the conversion of the hitch-down swell pedals to the balanced system. All of these changes were eventually implemented although some of them only years later.

In his interesting publication, *The Largest Organ in the World and the Musical Artists of Sydney*, Wiegand defended these changes, incorrectly claiming that Hill, in designing the organ, had been bound by the dictates of the original Organ Committee. In fact Arthur Hill's own words were:

We may congratulate the Corporation of Sydney, ... they left all details in our hands - a most unusual thing. Artists are so hampered by self-constituted critics and people who want their own ideas carried out The authorities in Sydney took the exact opposite course.

OHTA NEWS, Vol.8, No. 3

The immense audiences attracted to Wiegand's first concerts have already become the stuff of legend, so we'll move to the area of repertoire, an area which will be the principal focus of today's talk.

After Wiegand's opening concert, which featured a potpourri of classical music - organ and otherwise, and a descriptive storm fantasy, controversy erupted in the local press. For the Negative we read:

What is the position of the lovers of music who prefer original compositions to the arrangements, however clever, of our organist?

SMH 25.VII.1891

For the Affirmative *Vox Humana* wrote:

I hope our worthy organist will pay little attention to the call for more heavy classical music. He has shown great taste in his selections of various popular themes.

SMH 27.VIII.1891

Wiegand's choice of music was broad-base in the extreme. While he frequently performed the music of Bach and other great classical composers, he time and again proved himself to be, at heart, a pleaser of people. His programmes featured the evergreens of sacred, operatic and popular music, blithely mixing the Hallelujah Chorus with Rule Britannia, and excerpts from Carmen with God Save the Queen, a Bach fugue and the wildest of impromptu storm effects.

Arrangements occupied the central position for Wiegand. Their scope can be appreciated from a letter which he sent to the Council after only six months of employ. Three lists of works were submitted: the first comprising those operas already arranged and performed (35), the second those operas proposed to be arranged and performed (33), with the suggestion that the Council may care to add others, and the third list detailing those piano, vocal and orchestral works already arranged and performed (21).

Without doubt the opera fantasies were always amongst the most popular, for they rarely failed to arouse and delight. A commentary on the Faust fantasy offers a tantalizing morsel from bygone organ recitals.

(Wiegand's) arrangement opened with Valentine's solo and the ensuing choral hymn, beneath which Mephistopheles falls prone and powerless in the second act. This, given with the full power of the instrument, was spirit stirring, and the lovely air which both tenor and soprano sing in turn in the love scene was well contrasted with the chorus by the use of the sweet oboe and the foundation stops.

The 'salve dimora' introduced the Trompette Harmonique, with its golden voice and then followed the final prayer for soprano which immediately precedes the apotheosis of Margharita. Here, where the voice thrice repeats the heaven-inspired melody 'O, Signor', rising a semitone at the end of each verse, Mr Wiegand employed first the swell organ and then the grand organ. At the third repetition, he coupled all the organs so as to obtain the full power of the instrument, and concluded the subject in a burst of glorious sound which seemed to besiege the mercy-seat itself. After this most glorious effect ... the reception of poor Margharita's prayer for grace seemed assured.

SMH 20.VII.1891

For this particular performance, however, Wiegand offended at least one of his listeners, for instead of concluding at this moment of intercessional triumph, he introduced the Soldiers' Chorus with a blare of trumpets.

... A more ludicrous anti-climax could hardly be imagined.

For Wiegand, on the other hand, a good rollicking soldiers' chorus could hardly go astray.

Another of his popular arrangements was his Chants Nationnaux; a mix of national songs from around the world. This item may not have been in the best of taste, in fact,

... it probably proved a shock to classical ears and nerves (although there was) scarce a heart in the audience which did not feel heart-fibres quiver at the sound of one or other of the melodies.

SMH 10.VII.1891

However, standing head and shoulders above them all was a special genre of arrangement which was the most spectacular and sensational of them all. At a time before the symphony orchestra was common and before the commercial movie film was even invented, the organ was often regarded as a mighty theatre machine. Many composers and organists sustained this

view of the instrument by writing quite descriptive, even startling pieces which were intended to portray one of nature's most awesome outbursts - the storm. Wiegand made his own contribution with a series of Idylle pieces. The music was not always original. Indeed Wiegand's Idylle No 2 borrowed from many a well known number:

The pastoral subject expressed in Schumann's Traumerei which forms the introduction, the calm of Nature; the cuckoo's note, faintly echoed as if far away, suggested the woodland on the mountainside; a fascinating movement brought the village fete before the mind's eye; some marvellous storm effects interrupted the prayer 'Lascia ch'io pianga', the well known contralto aria which perpetuated the memory of Handel's Rinaldo and finally the Austrian National Anthem (Haydn's hymn) was introduced as a Te Deum of thanks giving at the restoration of peace and fine weather.

SMH 20.VII.1891

This work will form part of my St Patrick's Cathedral recital on Monday evening, and there are six comments I would like to make.

- 1.This piece, and others like it, offers great scope for exploring an organ's tonal range.
- 2.According to the review just quoted, Wiegand's performance differed from the printed score.
- 3.Consistent with Wiegand's rather free approach to the printed score, I, like Wiegand, will be concluding with Haydn's hymn even though it does not appear in the score.
- 4.While playing this and similar pieces, the organist must be totally convinced and convincing. The act of playing storm pieces is as serious a business as playing any other music.
- 5.Technically unusual passages will need to be treated with respect.
- 6.Below the final chords of the piece appears the rather one-upmanship instruction, '(add) 32 and 64 feet'.

How were the storm effects, which really means thunder effects, created? Bearing in mind that the Sydney Town Hall organ has never had a Thunder stop, although Wiegand did recommend that one be installed, other means needed to be contrived. In a review of one of Wiegand's early concerts it was reported that,

... the skill with which the player simulated thunder by a novel manipulation of stops was a 'coup de theatre' which caught the popular fancy.

SMH 20.VII.1891

In the storm sequence of the Idylle No 2, the right hand and pedal repeat 'ad libitum' the very naive 'Hymn of the Sacred Heart', again different to the reviewed version, while the left hand is free to interpret the instructions, 'thunder in the distance', 'thunder approaching', 'thunder big crack' and 'diminuendo thunder'. From my own experience at the Sydney Town Hall, I

can inform you that forearm note clusters in the bass register of the three giant tuba stops drawn together, produce a terrifying cataclysm which can surely be surpassed only by nature herself. This may well have been Wiegand's principal thunder weapon.

When Sydney organist and concert entrepreneur Nicholas Gehde played his 'Great Storm Fantasia - The Thunderbolt' at a 1907 Town Hall concert, the *Sydney Morning Herald* critic dryly remarked that,

... provided the effects are sufficiently impressive, hearers of this class of composition, in which the purely musical appears often to play a subordinate part, seem to care little whether the author be Gehde or a greater.

SMH 15 VII.1907

Although audience numbers dropped away by the end of Wiegand's tenure, they underwent a dramatic surge for his farewell concerts. At the last of these, on 7 July 1900, Sydney's first City Organist departed the stage with 'Off to Paris, 1900'.

During its course:

... the various incidents of the journey were adroitly illustrated by well known melodies; a jaunty rendering of 'Off to Philadelphia in the Morning', serving for the start, a dash of the 'Roast Beef of Old England' suggesting dinner, 'Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep' betokened a calm, and the roar and crash of the instrument indicating a storm off Cape Leeuwin. 'The Grand March from Aida' marked the arrival in the Kingdom of Khedive, and finally, 'Home Sweet Home', 'Auld Lang Syne', 'Rule Britannia' and 'God Save the Queen'.

SMH 9.VII.1900

Arthur Mason

18 months after Wiegand's departure, Arthur Mason was appointed as the second Sydney City Organist. Holding the position from 1901 until 1907, he was the first Australian organist, in what has become an unbroken line of Australian musicians to be appointed.

Mason's programmes, while still filling the recognisable City Organist mould, were somewhat more serious than Wiegand's; something not lost on Sydney's music-loving public. After his first concert, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer declared, perhaps with some relief:

It is recognized on all hands that the existence of the noble instrument which adds much dignity to our Town Hall is mainly due to the fact that it supplies an educational want, for musical culture is a necessary portion of every educational system. It is, therefore, pleasing to observe that in his first programme Mr Mason, whilst presenting compositions in such variety of styles that all present must have found something to their taste, also introduced several classical numbers which, to the student, were as interesting as they were instructive.

SMH 16.XII.1901

The programme was:

Toccatina and Fugue in D minor - J.S. Bach

Communion in F - Grison

Souvenir Gavotte - Zelman

Operatic Fantasia, 'Carmen' - Bizet

March in F - Guilmant

The Question, The Answer - Wolstenholme

Fantasia on British Airs - Mason

Salut d'Amour - Elgar

Hungarian March, 'Rakoczy' - Liszt

Mason rarely strayed too far from the classical organ repertoire. In fact he usually devoted his mid-week recital to it. Audiences and critics alike began genuinely to enjoy these concerts, with a fugue often described as, 'brilliant', rather than the previous, 'dry but presumably enlightening for the organists'. Indeed, by the end of his tenure, Mason had brought his audiences to the point of really enjoying Bach's Preludes and Fugues.

Thus, at his second last matinee performance in July 1907, where he opened with Bach's Prelude and Fugue in G major, the reviewer was happily able to report:

As everyone is now aware, many of the great cantor's fugues abound in tunefulness, and this one may be said to overflow with this attractive quality.

SMH 4.VII.1907

Certainly the fugues were registered in the crescendo style, with the aforementioned G major fugue being no exception:

... and towards the end he realized all the grandeur of the great composition.

Similarly it was reported at another concert that the G minor fugue was accorded an:

... imposing termination with full pedal organ.

Opera transcriptions were still always popular, but they were also seen as an important ingredient in the growth of Sydney's musical life. Commenting on Mason's work in this area, a *Herald* reviewer remarked:

The City Organist has forwarded operatic interests considerably during these last few years by rendering excerpts from the operas of the Ring.

SMH 4.VII.1908

Mason introduced a new series of concerts which became enormously popular. It was a Sunday afternoon series where all music was of a sacred nature. Unlike the popular Saturday concerts where soloists were engaged and admissions of sixpence and one shilling charged, the Sunday concerts were for organ alone and were free.

Mason's first Sunday concert had the following program:

'The Heavens are Telling' - Haydn

'Ave Maria' - Schubert

La Carita - Rossini

March of the Israelites - Costa

Fantasia on Hymn Tunes - Mason

Sicilian Mariner - Lux

Oh, Rest in the Lord - Mendelssohn

Grand Solemn March - Smart

In a society which still strongly espoused Victorian philosophies and morals, the presentation of Sydney afternoon entertainment became problematic. In May 1905 the Council received notification from the police that under provision of an Act of Parliament dating back to the reign of George III, both the Council and the Lessee could be liable for a heavy penalty if the hall was used on Sundays for entertainment purposes. Programmes were consequently carefully scrutinized to ensure that

... they gave no offence in a Christian community.

Town Clerk's Report, 1905.

Eventually, because of legal ambiguities, Sunday concerts were suspended for three years. When they did recommence, and for many subsequent years, it was necessary to have all programmes approved by the Chief Secretary's office of the NSW government. Words of all songs had to be submitted and approved, and no items were to be changed, while encores had to comprise pieces or parts of pieces already programmed.

Returning to Arthur Mason, it must be said that he was not an organist of only serious music. At his Boxing Day recital in 1901, for example, he unleashed Lemmens' Storm Fantasia on his eager audience. Similarly, at his final concert in July 1907, he improvised both a Storm Fantasia and a concluding 'Auld Lang Syne'. The programmes evocatively promised the following illusions during his storm improvisation:

Sunday Evening - Calm of Nature - Those Evening Bells - Alla Pastorale
- The Village Church - The Storm - Hymn for those at Sea - Calm once more - Triumphal Chorus

Although Mason's concerts were generally well patronised, they did come under increasing pressure from competing forms of entertainment. Many musical and dramatic societies were springing up, but towering above them

all was a totally new and delightful spectacle - the moving picture. Although still soundless, the movies grasped the public's imagination so firmly and instantly that theatres could hardly be erected quickly enough. By 1907, the Lyceum had become established as one of Sydney's principal moving picture theatres, and on any Saturday night could offer its patrons a complete range of short films from the humorous to the dramatic to the spectacular. Describing one such evening, the *Sydney Morning Herald* critic wrote:

Perhaps the pictured stories 'Cowboys and Indians' and 'The Maid from Mississippi', bearing graphic testimony to the characteristically prompt and decisive American way of doing things from murder to marriage, found on the whole most favour with the audience. Several other items, notably, 'The Short-Sighted Cyclist', 'The Lady Raffles', 'The Beggar Comes a Cropper' and in particular, 'The Teddy Bears' ... were not a whit behind in popular esteem.

SMH 18.VII.1907

Throughout this particular evening, De Groen's Vice-Regal Bank rendered a selection from 'The Runaway Girl', the overture to Auber's 'Fra Diavolo', and an almost continuous musical accompaniment.

Ernest Truman

The third Sydney City Organist, my predecessor, was Ernest Truman, and he held the position for a quarter of a century from 1909 until 1935. In style and content he followed firmly in the tradition established by Wiegand and Mason. Although he preferred the classical repertoire, it was often in the area of transcriptions and arrangements. For his first evening concert as the City Organist he included only one original organ work, Lemare's Andantino in D flat. In a similar vein he launched his Grand Opera Organ Recital Series in 1912, an intermittent series which continued for over a decade and generated considerable interest.

Strangely, his farewell concert in 1935 consisted only of original organ works, except for the final 'Tannhauser' March by Wagner. This particular programme generated so much enthusiasm that the number of encores (encores were generally played immediately after a piece that was particularly appreciated) eventually equalled the number of programmed works. This programme concluded, as did all of Truman's Town Hall concerts, with 'God Save the King', the closing bars drawing, as always, on the full power of the instrument with all three Solo Tubas coupled to the Great.

Truman generally enjoyed reasonable audiences until the 1930s when competition from other forms of relaxation suddenly became serious. Every newspaper now carried advertisements for radios and motor cars, and something else. Mason had to contend with the moving picture; Truman had to do battle with the talking picture. When, on 12 August, 1932, Australia's own 'On Our Selection', opened at the Capitol Theatre in Sydney, 1000s flocked throughout the day to share in the delights and hardships of the bush life portrayed through this exciting new medium.

Considering that the entertainment pages of the Sydney press at this time listed over 90 city and suburban picture theatres, several of them with their

own orchestras and 14 of them eventually with organs, the lure of the talkies must have been simply enormous.

Truman eventually also suffered because of the earlier success of the Town Hall organ. Certainly it was the Town Hall's Grand Organ which had played perhaps the biggest single role in introducing Sydney audiences to the joys and beauties of a vast range of classical music - operatic, orchestral and chamber music as well as organ music - yet, and paradoxically, it was this very enlightenment which eventually caused the organ to be displaced. The musical door opened by the Grand Organ became the portal through which now passed an ever growing audience more attuned to performances with original instrumentations.

Truman's tenure saw the end of an era and upon his retirement in 1935 he vacated a position which was not filled for over 40 years.

Incidentally, it is worth commenting on the large number of concerts performed by these early City Organists - often two and sometimes three per week. The impression is that these organists possessed enormous repertoires. Doubtless they did, but it must also be remembered that they were the chief purveyors of the popular classical music of the day. Thus they repeated many pieces with the most popular numbers sometimes appearing more than half a dozen times in a year. This was not laziness on the part of these organists; it was expected from them.

The Present

My appointment in 1978 was motivated by two related events. The first was the complete breakdown of the Sydney Town Hall organ in 1971 and a subsequent innocent telephone call to Roger Pogson, asking him to get the organ working again; a situation formalized by the City Council the following year so that 'getting the organ working again' turned into a famous restoration. The second event was agitation by Sydney and other Australian musicians, first of all to have the organ restored, but then to have the position of Sydney City Organist reinstated.

Once appointed, I found myself in a position for which I, and virtually every other organist in the world at the time, had neither experience nor training. Sydney organ recitals in 1978 generally attracted fewer than 100 listeners; a situation which, if continued at the Town Hall with its over 2,000 seats, would soon see me on the unemployed pile.

Happily there is still a Sydney City Organist, but for this to be the case, many different roads have had to be traversed and explored. For today, and consistent with the general thrust of this talk, only one of these roads will be considered - repertoire.

Right from the start, it seemed that in order to re-establish the City Organist concerts with the flair and success of 100 years ago, there needed to be not just a knowledge of those concerts, but more importantly an understanding of the tradition itself.

In my student days, an organ recital programme, which would normally have comprised mainly early music, was given popular appeal by the inclusion of a Franck Chorale or a Reger work. Looking back, this was arguably a case of organists playing for organists. At the Town Hall I had to

play to a wider audience - to the people of Sydney - always remembering that the general public tended to listen more to the music than to the organ. On behalf of those who rarely heard organs, I was obliged objectively to ask questions like: how interesting is the opening of the full swell, or the power of the Tubas, or the rumble of the 32' and 64' stops, or the continuous roar of the full organ?

I was trying to understand the old tradition, but instead, I was being confronted with more questions. Was a 1900 style municipal organ programme relevant? And, given that an important role assigned to the municipal organs and their organists had been an educational one through the presentation of transcriptions, was not the whole concept of a modern City Organist, now that performances on the correct instruments could readily be heard, perhaps an anachronism? Finally it had to be asked whether the large English style Town Hall organs even possessed a genuine repertoire?

Programmes from yesteryear could certainly be simply copies, but that seemed to be missing the actual tradition. Then, while studying early Town Hall concerts and concert reviews, something so obvious that it could easily be missed suddenly struck me; something which was the true heart-beat of the tradition. These concerts were, before all else, entertainment events. Patrons attended these performances simply because they enjoyed themselves there. Whether the music was original organ music or transcribed music was generally of little concern to audiences and critics alike. Music was appreciated for what it was.

So re-establishing the tradition meant putting the fun and the entertainment value back into organ concerts, and the challenge was to accomplish this without demeaning the instrument.

The quest for entertaining repertoire proved interesting, even disturbing. But first the concept of 'entertaining' had to be understood, for it was not automatically synonymous with 'rubbish'. A programme consisting only of the music of Bach, Mozart or Beethoven could be popular and very entertaining, but it would hardly be considered rubbish. Surely organ concert programmes could also be similarly entertaining and yet still be of high musical quality.

With the proviso that 'entertaining' generally also implied 'satisfying' and even 'delighting', I found potentially uncomfortable questions nagging me. Was Clerambault's music as good as Lully's, or Daquin's as good as Rameau's? Was the music of Rheinberger, Reger and Karg-Elert as good as that by Bruckner, Mahler and Wagner? Or the music of Dupré, Heiller and Langlais? How did it compare with that by Stravinsky and Schoenberg?

And again I thought, if some easy-listening music was needed in a programme, which would the general musical public find more appealing: a Balbastre Noel or a transcription of an Andante from a Haydn Symphony? Perhaps there was an implication here that in order to make programmes more entertaining, they needed to be not lighter, but of better quality, and that the attaining of this quality would have to see the admission of transcriptions, not as music jokes, but as musical equals to the quality original organ works. Although in my application for the City Organist position I had specifically ruled out the playing of transcriptions, I now found myself asking whether I was not suffocating the future of the organ by

denying a tradition which had existed since Renaissance times. I also found myself questioning the place of the chorale prelude in the concert hall.

Every so often colleagues and friends tell me of a new piece that they have discovered which would be good for a Town Hall concert. They mean well but they are also usually referring to music of the three Ts: music which is Tuneful, 'Tractive and Trifling. There is certainly some place for such music, but I have come to believe that in order to offer the best entertainment, the basis of the concert repertoire needs to be a corpus of good quality music, with the source of this music perhaps of secondary importance.

Three of the great international organists from the turn-of-the-century played in Sydney: Best, Lemare and Hollins. Their successful and obviously entertaining programmes generally followed a fairly set, perhaps instinctive, formula; one also often followed by the City Organists. This formula ensured a good dose of quality entertainment and usually contained the following five elements.

1. An original Bach organ work
2. An original work of their own which may be an improvisation
3. Their own transcription of another composer's music - Handel's was justifiably popular
4. Contemporary music, both transcribed and original organ music
5. Music known to most or all of the audience

I have adopted this formula at Sydney and it seems to have worked. I now perform a major Bach work in every recital and at times perform, and encourage others to perform, quite modern music. Although original organ works form the bulk of the programmes, transcriptions now make regular appearances without any special explanations or apologies. 'Melodious' music is also given a hearing, and from time to time I also include my own music and arrangements.

Being a City Organist does carry one particular responsibility, and this is certainly part of the tradition. It is the responsibility to ensure that certain popular organ pieces and arrangements, and I need name no names, are heard regularly. The public, as opposed to the organists within that public, expects to get its regular fix, and because visiting organists avoid these pieces, the City Organist is obliged unashamedly to play them, perhaps more often than he or she might wish.

One result of this can be the understandable rolling of the eyes by colleagues and the danger of earning from them the title, 'Master of Minor-Masters'. It is a professional hazard of the job.

Conclusion

Finally, the ultimate question must be asked: is the City Organist position relevant any more? An exact copying of the programmes of yesteryear is not relevant, but the position itself is actually more important now than at any other time. In an era of diminishing church attendance and very little quality church organ playing, the City Organist position is becoming one of the few

public upholders of organ music. For many, the City Organist concerts are now their only encounter with the organ and its music, and this adds special significance to the repertoire choice for these concerts. More than ever before, the City Organist controls many listeners' concept of the organ's musical potential. If we never play the music of Frescobaldi, Bach, Reger, Messiaen or Hakim, these audiences may never hear it or even know of its existence. Thus the traditional role of the City Organist as educator is just as relevant and vital as it ever was.

It is therefore of the utmost importance that audiences continue to be drawn to these concerts, and for that to happen, they must be entertained in a worthwhile and satisfying manner. And this means repertoire. We must continue to include the best music and we must balance and hone our programmes so that they become part of the wonderful and successful tradition of the first great City Organists.

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