

Restorations in Retrospect and Prospect

by Peter Jewkes

EXTRACT FROM OHTA JOURNAL JULY 1996, pp.21-25.

A paper presented at St John's Uniting Church, Neutral Bay, NSW on 27 September 1995 as part of the OHTA 18th Annual Conference

Being the last speaker of this conference is something of a two-edged sword. On the one hand it takes me back to school debating where the opportunity of "having the last word" enabled one if not to plagiarize, then at least to capitalize on the statements of previous speakers. On the other hand, if Stuart Garside felt yesterday that some revision was necessary after hearing Mark Fisher's earlier paper, then how much more must I revise after Stuart's excellent statement of commonsense, which surely would be the *sine qua non* for all organ restorers.

By way of introduction, I have to confess to being the "baby of the bunch", starting my career in organbuilding not in the post-war '50s, nor in the swinging '60s, but at the dawn of the dreaded '70s. The memories of Célestes under the bed and Mixtures in their place still haunts me!

Two suburbs from here lies Scots Kirk Mosman, "mother church" and founder of this once Presbyterian Church at Neutral Bay. I grew from the cradle up with the fine 1911 Richardson organ there (unaware of the ignominy it suffered in the addition of upperwork in the 1960s and again during its 1970s rebuild). In 1970, home from high school, nearly recovered from mumps, I was allowed to visit the church to practise the organ and, as fate would have it, encountered Ted Pitchford tuning it. I believe St Paul had a similar sensation en route to Damascus! Spending every minute of school holidays was an easy joy. Convincing parents that this, rather than medicine, was my chosen career was not, and I shall never forget the consternation on the face of a vocational guidance officer, as I tried to explain that here was an industry which encapsulated all the things which had always absorbed me - music, mechanics, architecture, antiques and the church. As an aside I should add that Ted Pitchford can still make me squirm with embarrassment recalling that on that first day I failed to recognize his condensed instruction "Next, next, next" to the noteholder, assuming instead that he was remonstrating with him for some reason, and that the assistant's name was Nick!

For better or worse I prevailed over my parents (little thinking that my mother would be my Company and office secretary years later!). I commenced my apprenticeship in 1972, spending the first 3, years with one firm, the final six months with another, the then mandatory year in the U.K. following. Three years as Administrative Director of J.W. Walker & Sons (Aust) was salutary in every sense of the word, not least the experience of international organ politics. Here in Sydney we have tried to create an "all-round" company, though my own particular musical preference has always surfaced for organs of the romantic/symphonic variety, whether English,

French, American or Colonial. Whether this results in a straight forward "black and white" conservative restoration of the work of my idol Father Willis, or the rescuing of organs such as St John's, Toorak or Pittwater House from neo-classical oblivion, the overriding philosophy remains.

Ian Bell was formerly a Director of N.P. Mander Ltd and is now an independent organbuilder and consultant. He is also Acting President of the embryonic Institute of British Organbuilding, the professional organization formed to amalgamate the former I.S.O.B. and F.M.O.B. I am indebted to him for permission to quote from an address given some years ago (before such philosophy was *de rigueur*) at an I.S.O.B. meeting:

" In the years since the war, whilst we waited for the neo-classical wind of change to blow itself out, or at least to modify its strength to a breeze, we took it upon ourselves to modify, almost invariably for the worse, some of the finest of our inherited instruments, many of which were already very successful rebuilds by an earlier generation. The work of Arthur Harrison came out of this particularly badly, and in a decade was devalued in public opinion from being the finest in the land, to being merely beautifully built eccentricity. In truth, although he dealt savagely with the organs of Father Willis and Hill that he encountered, the viewpoint from which he began was essentially theirs, and his rebuilds were almost invariably more successful and coherent than his new work, where his own foibles were allowed dangerously free reign.

The results, tonally of what can only be described as idle meddling during this period, are almost without exception lamentable. Delightful Choir organs lost inoffensive Dulcianas and Clarinets in order that the indispensable Nazard and Tierce should find soundboard room. Shrill Cymbals, perhaps three or more octaves in pitch above the nearest rank of principal tone, spread across the land like dry rot and can even now be heard ruining evensongs in cathedrals everywhere. Families of Ophicleides found themselves topped by ridiculous Rohr Schalmes bought, or copied, from continental trade houses, or alternatively, in one case uncomfortably well known to me, *underpinned* by short-length 32ft ranks of stubbornly unblending tone. The horizontal reed - thanks to George Guest and the Argo Recording Company - became popular almost overnight, and has gone on to ruin many previously well balanced full organ sounds from Sloane Street to Lichfield to St Paul's. With a flourish of the voicers' shears, round and woody Clarinets became unstable and offensive Crumhorns, and wooden pedal Diapasons, worth a fortune at today's prices, became bonfire fodder on all sides.

It all has to stop, and over the past five or ten years, an accelerating awareness of the true worth of the romantic organ, and of the futility of trying to turn it on its head in some misguided aim of making it more suitable for the great God Bach, had lead to reappraisal of the whole approach to the instrument."

(Less than a kilometre from this building stands an organ, almost an exact catalogue of Ian's lament.)

The first entirely new instrument commissioned from our Company for commencement late next year will strongly reflect a reaction against these problems. Tuning of some 200 organs also occupies a great deal of our time,

and I can strongly endorse John Hargraves' comments that herein is great education.

But being the youngest of my colleagues brings with it the burden of pondering the future direction of organ restoration, hence the reference to "Prospect". Hopefully I shall be restoring organs well into the next century (unless I succumb to an early demise wrought by over-indulgence!). Therefore, in the best clergy tradition, I'd like to share a few questions with you, not necessarily providing any answers.

DO WE RECREATE, "WARTS AND ALL"?

This Neutral Bay instrument is a good case in point. I suspect "descriptive noun" is an oxymoron, but I've heard quite a few applied to organbuilding during this conference, from colleagues and lay people alike - *industry, trade art, craft, profession, business* among them. From the perspective of the last named, a purely commercial view, it seems that, in terms of "Rolls Royce" restorations where there is a simple black and white philosophy, things are "drying up". The flourishing restoration trade of the last 20 years has, with a few notable exceptions, taken care of the really top quality Victorian English and Colonial instruments in this country. It seems to me that attention is gradually focusing on newer and less-splendid organs - or are they?

When I first inspected this organ in 1981 the church was about to be condemned and prospective purchasers were being sought for the instrument. The organ itself presented huge questions regarding its integrity. Underneath the unusual case layout (exotic even in undiapered "basic gold") there lurked a multitude of design problems. A thousand rattles were evident in every part of the action, e.g. unbushed "wood on metal" key centres and pallets; "bounding" stickers, backfalls and drumstick couplers; and a knee panel which covered less than half of the pedal coupler action. No amount of re-felting would ever silence that lot! The crude exhaust pneumatic action of pedals and drawstop machines seemed hopelessly inefficient and slow. From a cosmetic viewpoint, the drawstop knobs were a curious mix of machine, hand and "photo" engraved, and the drawstop jambs had at least 20 unwanted "holes" in them, ranging from 1 to 20mm in diameter. What to restore and what to reconstruct?

Tonally, there seemed even more problems. The pipes were from disparate sources. At least four stops were made up of two or three composite ranks, the Pedal Bourdon had a scale change of approximately six notes between bottom B and middle C pipes. The balances were quite bizarre. Consultant Kelvin Hastie pointed out that once the Open Diapason was drawn, the rest of the organ was inaudible, and I was reminded of Prof. Peter Shikele's remarks on P.D.Q. Bach's use of bagpipes and lute together in his *Sinfonie Concertante*! The Gamba, however, gave it a run for its money, and had been dubbed *Gamba Mirabilis*. The list goes on - most ranks were grossly irregular and many pipes off speech. Even if the stops and finishing had been paragons of their kind, the specification was far from ideal. It was, as Kelvin Hastie noted, "a bit of an old bus".

What to do? Where was the artistic vision of the builder? Would it be possible to "get inside the head of the builder" as Mark Venning describes Harrison's restoration philosophy? Had the vision been blurred by others? The Sydney organbuilder Roy Huggins lived roughly one block from this building and worked roughly one block in the opposite direction until his mid

80s, c.1976. Roy sub-contracted high quality work to most Sydney firms at one time or another. Under his care the double-rise bellows had been superbly re-leathered, but did he make other changes?

This then was neither the "black and white" conservative restoration situation of yesterday's Gray & Davison at Burwood, nor the reconstruction of the little M.L.C. organ - it hovered in a "grey area" somewhere between. So how far should we go? Where to draw the line? It seemed to me that "to get inside" Richardson's head would be to make the instrument work tonally and mechanically within the constraints referred to, with reference to other contemporaneous examples of his work (though there were no good comparisons). The pipework was regulated to the *average* of its existing dynamic levels, as far as the pipes would allow. Only the Gamba, which showed definite signs of having been tampered with, was returned to the dynamic level of a typical Richardson example.

We decided to rebush the worn action, but not to bush previously unbushed action. Cosmetically things were easier - the copious holes, switches, enormous signal lights were removed from the console, and the case restored. The philosophy was thus "to make good, without radical alteration". This was not an entirely popular decision and we were accused by the then organist of "failing to pursue excellence" when we declined to add a three rank Mixture to the Swell. As an organist, I was well aware of the need for proper Principal choruses and their uses, but I feel that we've grown out of the tendency to "tack on" modern additions in a misguided attempt to make period instruments more "useful" - thanks in no little way to the efforts of the OHTA. In the end the organist resigned in a flurry of indignation.

The result you see before you. There is no semblance of a chorus, and there are various tonal and mechanical limitations. It is still an "old bus", but a bus serving its owners and the community extremely well - a bus which I would be happy to drive! The large number of "between the wars" organs in NSW will deserve careful attention and scrutiny.

BUT WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

What of the even grey areas of the post-war builders? To many organists most of these would have little artistic value. Among our tunings we have organs of the 1950s with specifications such as:

GREAT SWELL PEDAL COUPLERS

Open Diapason 8 Gedact 8 Bourdon 16 Swell Sub

Dulciana 8 Gamba 8 Bass Flute 8 Swell Super

Harmonic Flute 4 Oboe 8 Swell to Great

tremulant Swell to Pedal

Swell Octave to Great

Swell Sub to Great

Great to Pedal

Their actions are as unresponsive as their specifications are unmusical, but are they of no worth at all? Does OHTA have a rôle here? Does one infer that "Historic" merely means old? Sydney has been home to two pioneers of the *orgelbewegung*: Ron Sharp and Roger Pogson. Should their work be drastically rebuilt after only 30 years?

Whilst the sort of specification above makes the organist in me shudder, the organbuilder is more cautious, though far from certain. Jonathan Ambrosino, writing in *The Erzähler* (the journal of the American Symphony Organ Society) says, "Too often, our rationale for tonal changes seems based upon an instrument's stylistic, not its musical shortcomings; it may do one thing well while we condemn it for not doing another. For this reason, we must acknowledge our own stylistic shortcomings. What one incumbent considers hopelessly unmusical, the next may find subtly magical. The elegance of this phenomenon is how the organ remains uncannily intact - indicating one truly economical plan. Leaving organs alone is the only way to allow our history to reach its eventual admirers."

All I can conclude is that a great degree of flexibility and wisdom will be needed to separate the wheat from the chaff. Perhaps as the millennium draws to a close we need to consider a set of guidelines?

Mark Fisher mentioned the use of computers for stop knob engraving. The use of AutoCAD has already been a wonderful tool for us at St John's, Toorak in recreating the console from the Hill sketches. Displayed here are photographs of contemporary Hill consoles, the sketches and their transition via the computer to full-size drawings of the new console. Our American colleague's ability to "scan" John Stiller's tracing of the Pitt Street Uniting key cheek profiles (from the OHTA documentation of that organ) was particularly useful. CAD drawings of our new instrument commissioned for next year are also on display. This instrument will be based shamelessly on the work of "Father" Willis, based on our belief in the appropriateness of those tonal qualities to the worship of the private chapel in which the organ will be located, built of bluestone in a distinctly Victorian style. Photographs of two recent restorations in progress are also displayed, including this (Neutral Bay) instrument.

Whatever the future may hold, I look forward to working in it and to the ongoing effect on and input into organbuilding which the Organ Historical Trust of Australia is certain to have.