

THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN ORGANBUILDING

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As a young man who is about to begin a career as an organ builder, I thought that the topic of "The Future of Australian Organbuilding" was a most appropriate subject on which to base my talk at this conference. Last week, I returned from the United States of America, where I attended the twentieth Annual University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Organ Conference. Entitled "Perspectives on Recent and Future American Organ Building", the conference included lectures presented by Gene Bedient, John Brombaugh, Steven Dieck who is the managing director of C.B. Fisk, Manuel Rosales and George Taylor of Taylor and Boody organbuilders. I have been very fortunate to have been offered jobs with various firms in the United States and also in England and I am hoping to commence such employment from Easter 1999. However, just as the famous Peter Allen song states:

I've been to cities that never close down,
From New York, to Rio and old London Town.
But no matter how far, or how wide I roam
I still call Australia - Home.

I am going overseas to receive the best possible education that is currently offered in the field of organbuilding. However, if I return after five to 10 years, what will I be presented with if I was to establish a business in the field of Australian organ building?

Many who are part of the audience of this speech have greater qualifications, knowledge and experience than myself. I will probably learn more from this OHTA conference than most of you will learn from the paper that I have prepared for this evening. It is often considered the prerogative of a young person like myself to be idealistic. The knowledge of Australian organbuilding in the last 100 years, on which I have based this paper, has been gained from talking and listening to many people, reading widely and simply observing events occurring around our nation in my own lifetime. As a very close friend and mentor often reminds me "I am but a spring chicken". I must emphasise that I do not intend to promote or criticise individuals or firms within this presentation. Therefore, I will exclude any specific names.

At the Nebraska conference, one of the most pertinent ideas that became evident, in regard to the future of organ building, was that an organ must be

an instrument that is musical. Under the heading of "Music", the World Book dictionary states that "music is the art of putting sounds together in beautiful or pleasing arrangements; something delightful to hear". [\[i\]](#) I believe that a worldwide trend has emerged whereby organs have been put together like a jigsaw puzzle to produce merely aesthetically pleasing results. Unfortunately, it is my opinion that this has also been occurring within the realms of Australian organbuilding. It is far too often that we listen to instruments that are harsh and have no beauty or soul. This has been excessively evident in the past and even in the current generation of neo-classical instruments. In my opinion these organs, with screaming mixtures, high content tin pipe-work, rock steady winding, and equal temperament, have driven more people away from the pipe organ than the instruments constructed before 1950. Today's organs, which have resulted from the above traits, have been constructed with a synthesis of styles, this being better known as the eclectic organ. Lawrence Phelps best summarised such an instrument in this way:

The eclectic selection of stops will result in an organ which in fact plays nothing right, and which has no character or individuality as a whole and complete instrument. Even though they are technically correct they are not musically useful. [\[ii\]](#)

However, on a positive note, we must not neglect the fact that this eclectic organ and the Organ Reform Movement sought the return of the most musical connection between the finger and the pipe, that is the mechanical or tracker action. Quoting a colleague:

Clearly the return to the use of mechanical action in new organs has not only revived many skills of fine craftsmanship (generally lacking in the era when the electric action was exclusively made) but has revived confidence in the pipe organ and its promise for longevity, and the growing healthy attitude to pipe organs and good music, is very encouraging. [\[iii\]](#)

So, what has any of this got to do with the future of Australian organbuilding?

If people, whether it be in the concert hall or as part of a congregation, do not like the sound of the organ, there will naturally be a decline in the number of contracts for new instruments, especially in churches across this wonderful country. Unfortunately, it is a common facet of human nature that once a person has made a decision, no matter how convincing an argument may be, it can be virtually impossible to change their mind. It is basically pure ignorance. With regard to tracker organs, I once heard "We don't want a tracker organ because we don't like the sound." Is this the outcome of the Neo-Classic movement? This further leads to the question: what is the

sound of a tracker organ? One only needs to listen to a CD of tracker organs built before the 20th century to discover that, in most cases, these wonderful instruments had a beauty and warmth that encapsulates the entire soul, mind and body. This is what needs to be emulated in the building of new instruments today.

So, how do we currently perceive the future of Australian organbuilding?

Over the past 20 years, we have witnessed some excellent restoration work in addition to the construction of many wonderful new instruments, all of which have been undertaken by many of our Australian organbuilders. Many of the instruments that will be viewed on this conference testify to this. The reason why we are together today is that we have an organisation which has established guidelines for such restoration work. However, what will occur when most of these historic instruments have been restored? This is of grave concern to those organbuilders who are experts in the field of restoration. Some of the finest builders who have specialised talents could experience a dramatically decreased workload in the restoration area. One organbuilder has stated, "At least I will be able to build fine furniture." It is certainly desired that this state of organbuilding does not eventuate. Fortunately, tuning and maintenance work will always need to be completed, thus ensuring some future work for organbuilders.

It is unfortunate that in Australia there are a large number of unqualified and untrained organbuilders. These people actually threaten the future of organbuilding and the pipe organ in general, particularly within churches. There have been occasions where organs have had to be discarded despite great expense having been outlaid supposedly to return the instrument to reliable working order. This has the potential to result in the demise of the organ. In addition, a consequence of such poor workmanship is that today's professional organ builders are wasting valuable time to repair the mistakes of others rather than instigating new work. I find it very disconcerting when negative comments are made in regard to repair work that has been carried out on instruments that were initially constructed poorly. Ultimately, only so much can be done to make an inferior instrument sound and work relatively well.

One of the greatest threats to the organ and the organbuilder has been the evolution of the electronic organ. As it offers a relatively inexpensive alternative and occupies less space than a pipe organ, the electronic organ is commonly favoured. However, even with the advent of digital sampling, these electronic substitutes cannot equal the tone and natural harmonics of wind blown pipes. Additionally, they do not have a long life expectancy (commonly 15 to 20 years) compared to the many decades, or centuries, for which a well built mechanical action organ can survive. Thus, in the long term, the pipe organ is the cheaper alternative. For eight years I have been organist of a Conn electric organ at a private school in Brisbane. After nine years, submission of three proposals, many presentations and the infliction

of bruises on my head from hitting it against a brick wall, this school has finally decided to purchase a pipe organ next year. We are all able to undergo this onerous process. This issue is the centre of much debate in many present day churches. Again, it is all a matter of education.

It is also disappointing to observe a lack of collaboration between many of the organbuilders in this country. Sharing and exchanging of information and ideas must occur readily. Instead, many a sly word has been uttered. Surely, it would be more advantageous to work and collaborate together to reach the ultimate goal, that is the preservation of a most wonderful heritage and the building of the finest instruments possible. On one occasion, I was informed of a group organbuilders and amateur organists who tested an instrument that had just undergone extensive work. A letter was then written by one of these amateurs informing the congregation of, in their opinion, the poor work that had been completed. How can this be beneficial to the profession of organ building in this country? Of course, criticism is vital and necessary, but it should be constructive, not destructive, and should be given by those who are knowledgeable in the particular field.

What can Australian organbuilders do to ensure their future?

It is my belief that builders in Australia need to strive to produce as much as possible within their own workshop. It would be far more exciting to see an instrument that is solely made by one professional company, which is skilled in all aspects of organbuilding, rather than being constructed as a kit. The latter has the potential for too many craftsmen to influence the ultimate outcome. To produce an instrument with specific characteristics, the organbuilder should have control over all aspects of the construction process.

In reality, the establishment of metal pipe shops can be very expensive. Hence, subcontracting to pipe shops is sometimes necessary. Australia has two main companies in this field, so why is it that some of this work is sent to offshore manufacturers? Australian builders and pipe shops need to work together to ensure that the production of pipes is of the highest quality so that importing of pipe-work is not necessary. However, even with the subcontracting of metal pipe-work, organbuilders can still influence the ultimate sound of the pipes if they purchase unvoiced pipe-work. Thus, they can impart their own particular style upon the sound of the instrument rather than merely completing final regulation work when the pipes are placed in the organ. An organbuilder should aim to impart individual influences upon his/her instruments. The striving for varied styles needs to occur for Australia to become renowned for its own style of organbuilding.

Why is it that the organist and organbuilder cannot work together to promote the future existence of the organ in this country?

A pertinent example is this conference. Potentially, this could be the ideal forum for organists and builders to confer and interact. It is a shame that only two Australian builders are present to make a difference in this way. It is also interesting to note that the third builder has travelled across from New Zealand to participate. Without vindicating any one person or group and not knowing personal circumstances, the absence of many predominant Australian organists and organbuilders would indicate that they are not interested in the promotion of the organ and its music. Australia will never be seen as having a reputation on the world scene unless we can work together to produce a common goal, as OHTA has endeavoured to do and is evidenced in its aims:

1. To preserve historic pipe organs and organ building records;
2. To stimulate public interest in pipe organs which are of national or local importance; and
3. To encourage scholarly research into the history of the organ, its musical use and organ music.

Organbuilders must pursue excellence in all their work. They need to expand their minds by doing continual study. This necessitates overseas travel and the study of old organs so as to learn from both positive and negative influences of the past. It is vital for builders to experiment and to attempt new construction methods, particularly in the areas of pipe and action making. Builders must strive to formulate their own style rather than replicating those of other builders. However, to be influenced by others is more than acceptable; it is an essential part of learning. For example, the French Classical organ built by Bedient in Grand Rapids, Michigan, although being based upon the works of the Classical French builder Cliquot, is still a unique Bedient instrument.

Australian builders need to construct organs that excite their audiences. The instruments should be the means through which wonderful music is played. Thus, every stop must be designed ultimately to attract musicians and all people alike. Music sounding forth from an organ should enliven one's emotions as Gwen Ravert, in her autobiography *Period Piece*, wrote about her childhood when attending church in England:

I simply hated the unfair, juicy way in which the organ notes oozed round inside the roof, snapped at your vitals, and made you want to cry about nothing at all. [\[iv\]](#)

Organs need to be built to comply with their ultimate role as liturgical instruments, that is to assist in worship. The room in which the organ presides is also a major contributing factor to this function. I consider that 85% of the success of an organ is dependent upon the room in which it is located. How can an acoustically dead space be sympathetic to an organ that is shrill and without foundation of tone? Unfortunately, many churches in Australia suffer from this problem and suitable organs must therefore be constructed. As organists and organbuilders we must constantly fight for better acoustics in our performance spaces and worship venues. Music is one of the most important parts of worship. Why then is music often ignored as a priority?

Other factors that may be influential in the future of the pipe organ in Australia are the utilisation of flexible winding, higher lead content pipework and unequal or well tempered tuning in instruments. Flexible winding makes music breathe naturally, as the human voice does, thus giving it a unique character. Today, we see many instruments that include a small concussion bellows that, via a switch at the console, can alternate between steady and flexible winding for individual uses. In a dry acoustic, high lead content pipework gives the organ a warm, rich sound that is in contrast to the harsh sound produced by tin pipes in such an environment. It was also of great interest to learn that the majority of the builders who spoke at the conference in Nebraska have not made organs tuned to equal temperament for at least 20 years. Even some of the large instruments, situated in major concert halls, are well tempered. How can a tuning system such as equal temperament, that plays nothing pure or in tune, be pleasing to the ear? This topic on its own is worthy of many hours of discussion.

It is essential that organs be made user-friendly to both the amateur and the professional organist. Consoles should be made to be comfortable with adjustable stools and with all stops within easy reach. In addition, instruments that include gadgetry, too sophisticated even for professionals, will not be desirable organs to play. I once played a 20-rank instrument with a 64-channel sequencer. With eight general pistons per channel, this system had 512 different combinations. Is this really necessary and worth the added expense?

One must always work within cost boundaries. This is of particular importance for the organbuilder as most organs are housed within churches that are fighting to survive in financial terms. Thus, a builder must construct the instrument that can best be conceived within these boundaries. George Taylor, of Taylor and Boody organbuilders, stated that for one of their contracts in New York a budget of \$300,000 was awarded. In trying to establish further money for the contract they were informed that the church had other work to pay for, part of which included \$250,000 for the front doors. On the other extreme, the new French Romantic organ at Rice University, USA, is housed in an \$8,000,000 building, constructed especially for the organ. The organ, built in collaboration with Rosales and Fisk, cost over \$1,000,000 despite the room only seating approximately 60 people. I believe that money is always available, either through existing funds or via

fundraising activities. It is a matter of education and teaching the lay person of the importance of fine music. In addition, it is common for an organ to be built in stages. The venue may firstly acquire the basic stops and then, as finances become available, the additional registers can be added. This ultimately makes instruments within easy reach to those with limited monetary resources.

Besides what the organbuilder can do, how can the organist influence the future of the organ and the organ builder?

The history of the organ over the last 100 years has varied greatly in comparison to the 300 years prior to this. The organ, up to the 18th century, was most commonly housed in churches and was played by professionals. Thus, the instrument formed an integral part of worship. Much of the music for the organ was composed by the organists who held such church positions. However, in the 19th century, the organ was progressively removed from its sacred context and was established as a secular instrument. It was played to a completely new audience and consequently was used in an entirely different style. As a result, the lay person was able to come into close contact with this mighty instrument and to learn its varied repertoire.

As well as initiating the development of the electronic organ, the advent of electricity also saw the rise of the 'extension organ' which resulted in an instrument with reduced tonal quality and, in most cases, lower standards of craftsmanship. It also made this, "the King of Instruments", inexpensive and available to many churches. However, what was unforeseen by these churches was that many did not have a professional organist to play such an intricate machine. Hence pianists filled these positions. Therefore, being an organist today is one of the few professions, musical or otherwise, where one does not require any qualifications to sit at the console and play. This has greatly lowered the standard of music in churches and has resulted in several problems.

The new era of organists largely consisted of people from church congregations, therefore initiating a decline in professionally paid positions. Today, this has not only reduced the number of qualified organists but has resulted in a scarcity of these positions. Why should this occur? As with legal, medical and other professions, trained organists have completed many years of study. The principal difference is simply that the work is mainly undertaken on Sundays rather than on weekdays.

How does this affect the future of the organ and the organist? As with all members of society, organists require an income. If the churches do not provide this, musicians cannot accept these positions. Thus, the pursuit of excellence in organ playing and church music will not be achieved and

ensuing generations of church musicians will not be inspired to study the organ and church music as a profession.

To rectify this situation, churches must be made aware of the work and study that organists have completed. In addition, organists should present a standard of work that is of very high quality and worthy of payment. A well played organ not only inspires singing, but also adds much to the worship and encourages the young to learn.

As most amateur organists do not understand the full capabilities of the instrument on which they play, the most exquisite combinations of stops will not be heard. It is the soft stops, and not the sometimes crude sound of full organ, that gives the organ its beauty, particularly in relation to worship. Therefore, to promote the organ and quality music in the church, organists must be prepared to teach those less qualified so that they can be confident in their role. Many trained organists complain when they hear an organ played poorly, yet most do nothing to rectify the situation. Learning the organ in this manner is rewarding both for the student and the congregation for whom they play. When the organist's knowledge is increased, particularly in regard to stop selection, the organ will ultimately be more pleasing to the ear, therefore becoming an integral part of worship. This will establish the future of the pipe organ within Australia.

Use of the organ in the Australian church is declining rapidly. One reason for this is that many modern styles of worship require the use of piano and drums to give a percussive drive, something for which the organ was not designed. To keep the organ and its music active in the church the new generation organist must be able to adapt to every style and situation. If this adaptation occurs, the future of the organ can be assured in the liturgical context. There are obvious exceptions to this of course.

The organist's role in the service is also extremely important in ensuring the future and continued use of the organ. Unfortunately, today, the organ is mainly used in the service for one short prelude, for the accompaniment of hymns, and the final postlude. This is structured on the English choral tradition. Although somewhat restricted, organists can nevertheless choose appropriate music that is based upon the readings set aside for the particular Sunday. They should change both registration and harmony according to the different words of the hymn verses and also encourage the use of preludes and postludes to form part of the service instead of being background music whilst people enter and exit the building. The advantage of these suggestions is that, even on small instruments, there will be much diversity in the sound, tone and playing style of the organ. This enlivens the worship and the people who are partaking in it. It is of the utmost importance to educate church councils and even clergy of the importance of music within the service.

Unfortunately, we live in a society of fast food and the quick religious fix. Some feel that services should only go for an hour. The problem then occurs that too much music increases the length of the worship, which to some is far from desirable. It is also evident that some clergy feel threatened by an expert choir and/or organists as the quality of music takes away from the remainder of the liturgy, which they are controlling. Again, this reveals the importance of education in regard to the way in which music can lift worship to new levels.

To improve the standard of playing by the organists of Australia, tertiary institutions should include the teaching of church music in their curricula. The secular performance of organ music is vastly different from playing in a liturgical context. As many institutions only lecture in the ability to perform they are excluding their students from the profession of being a church musician. This is most relevant as virtually all organists ultimately are employed in a church position. An assessment of this style could be incorporated in a syllabus structured by the Australian Music Examination Board.

This paper did not set out only to view the unfavourable happenings in Australian organbuilding. We must not forget the most excellent work of a small number of this country's builders and organists.

As organists and organbuilders, we need to educate as many people as possible of the advantages of the pipe organ and its music. The new organs of today must excite those who are going to listen to them. This will attract the next generation of organists, church musicians and ultimately organbuilders. As Australians, we must give the small minority of professional organbuilders a chance to prove themselves. Ultimately, the first contract is the hardest, but if the end result comes from the heart, mind and spirit and is of the highest quality, these future instruments will be an inspiration to all and will ensure the continued existence of the Australian organ builder. Every Sunday, nearly all of us play the "King of Instruments". We have three basic items, namely wind, metal and wood, which we combine together to make music, "the art of putting sounds together in beautiful or pleasing arrangements; something delightful to hear". [\[v\]](#)

1 *World Book Encyclopedia*, 1971 ed. Article on "Music"

2 Lawrence Phelps, "An organ for today", *Sydney Organ Journal* (June 1972), p.4

3 Kelvin Hastie, "The organ at St Joachim's Church", *Sydney Organ Journal*, vol.14, no.3 (June/July 1985), p.42

4 Graeme Rawson, "WEA Course - The Organ - The King of Instruments", *Sydney Organ Journal*, vol.24, no.1 (February/March 1993), p.31

[i] World Book Encyclopedia, 1971 ed., s.v. Music.

[ii] Lawrence Phelps, An Organ for Today, The Sydney Organ Journal (June 1972) : 4.

[iii] Kelvin Hastie, The Organ at St. Joachim's Church, The Sydney Organ Journal Vol. 14, No. 3 (June/July 1985) : 42.

[iv] Graeme Rawson, WEA Course The Organ The King of Instruments, The Sydney Organ Journal, Vol. 24, No. 1 (February/March 1993) : 31.

[v] World Book Encyclopedia, 1971 ed., s.v. Music.