

Paul Frederick Hufner – his life and work.

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“Organ Builders I have known seem, to an outsider, to be endowed with certain essentials in their DNA which generates a most amiable and unique species completely consumed by the love their work.

The paramount gene seems to be that of limitless patience, yet tangled up in the tightly-bound DNA helix is a complex of interacting virtues: devotion to detailed craftsmanship (most of which is not seen); an innate love and feeling for eternal tactile materials (wood, metals of different kinds, leather, even glue); a genius for melding ancient traditions with the benefits of 21st century technology. All this ultimately depends on a keenly perceptive ear and musical sense to transform a machine into a musical instrument which is to be located at some time in the future in a space of uncertain acoustic sympathy.

Paul Frederick Hufner was exemplar of these qualities and a large measure of what he has bequeathed to this isolated part of the world would not have been possible without his devoted wife Joy.”

These are the words of Dr James Rowlands, published in OHTA News, upon the death of Paul Hufner in August 2010. Dr Rowlands, as a youth, spent after-school and holiday hours working in the Hufner workshop and factory before heeding the call to medicine. Paul and Joy Hufner left an indelible mark on his life as they most certainly have on mine.

Paul Hufner was born in Leederville, an inner northern suburb of Perth, on November 17th, 1918. He was a second generation Australian; his father, Frederick was born of German parents in Sydney, New South Wales and his mother, Helena, of German parents in Rosebud, Victoria.

Paul’s paternal grandfather was from near Dresden, Germany and came to Sydney in the early 1800’s as a skilled woodworker – a cabinet maker and carpenter. It was in Sydney that he met his wife, Paul’s grandmother, who was from Hamburg.

They moved to Perth where he worked for the state sawmills in the city and he was, reputedly, in the habit of walking home to Leederville with jarrah lumber over his shoulders with which to build his house. Paul later recalled riding his bicycle along those same streets with a large piece of plywood under his arm ready for wood work classes at

Technical School, so he inherited his grandfather's doggedness. He also inherited his skills in woodwork.

Paul's father, Frederick, was sent in his teen years to his mother's family in Hamburg to study – apparently they were very “arty” types. His father wished to be an artist.

This didn't really work out and on his return he became a school teacher and met his future wife, Paul's mother, in South Australia where they married before returning to WA.

Paul's father was very gifted with music, sound and such things and evidently was a very good piano tuner, which was a gift passed on to his son.

He was also very keen on science and, with a neighbour, held “scientific evenings”, complete with experiments, in the kitchen of the family home to which young Paul was privy. It was here that Paul became interested in electricity and related matters, which was to prove very useful later on in his organ building career.

As such Paul retained strong links to his German heritage throughout his life: he loved German pianos; in latter years he had a model railway running around his workshop, complete with German station names and signage in German (and had a friend who would come over to play trains, in the course of which they were only allowed to speak German); he developed a liking for Audi cars in later life and, of course, he loved his German Lutheran Church.

Paul has an older sister, Joy, an organist, who still lives in Sydney.

Paul's eventual career in pianos and organs had early roots in the afore mentioned natural gifts of his father but also in the fact that Paul's uncle Paul Meyer, (his father's sister's husband) was from a line of fine piano builders. His (Paul Meyer's) father was a piano tuner and his brother worked at the famed Ronisch factory in Dresden. Paul Meyer himself spent time as a finisher in the Schwechten factory in Berlin before being recruited as a tuner by Nicholson's and Co, Perth, where he commenced work in 1904 – interestingly this was a year after Ebenezer Dodd was sent to Perth, by his father, JE Dodd, to establish the WA branch of JE Dodd and Sons, Organ Builders. Ebenezer Dodd was also a skilled piano tuner and for years looked after the ABC pianos.

Paul's primary education was at North Perth Primary School, amidst some antagonism toward his and his sister's German extraction and their church, known as the “German Church”. He had some secondary education but later thrived during 2 years at Junior Technical School where he excelled at blacksmithing, metal-working, wood-working and technical drawing.

During his second year at Technical School he was offered a job as a messenger boy at United Motors, a Car Wreckers in Hay St Perth, being fully qualified for the job by owning a bicycle! He enjoyed 12 months there, earning 12/6, a week but evidently his father didn't like Paul coming home dirty from work because, arriving home for tea one night, he announced that he had secured Paul a job at Snaden's Piano Shop in Hay St. The Snaden's Piano business is still operating in Nedlands, near the University of WA to this very day.

Paul was 15 years old when he started working for Charles Snaden, who had learnt his trade with Paul's uncle, Paul Meyer in his piano workshop, which was called Meyer and Orr in Stirling Street, just north of the railway line in Perth.

During the course of his time at Snaden's he learnt french polishing from an old Englishman called Ted Flanagan, 80 years old, who had started work as a polisher in a London piano factory when he was 10!

Paul had spent 2 years at Snaden's when his Uncle Paul, whom he liked very much, said to him at church one Sunday "It's time you came to work for me and learnt the trade properly" or words to that effect. Paul didn't hesitate in taking up the offer!

With his uncle he fast learnt to become a fine piano tuner and repairer and also built up a network of contacts, as his uncle did work for the many piano shops around Perth.

Interestingly I have come across many small pianos, all looking identical to me, all with different names on them - Renardi, Mignon, Lyric, all sold by different Perth piano shops. Paul told me that, in the 1940's, each piano shop in Perth had its own "brand" of piano but they all came from the same place - the Beale factory in Sydney.

Paul left his Uncle Paul after a couple of years, in his early 20's, and went to work for himself. The piano shops gave him a lot of work. The fee for tuning a piano in those days was 15/- - in the range of a 3 penny tram fare!

War years came and Paul was found to be unfit for war service due to a defective valve in his heart. He did however join the ARP in North Perth (Air Raid Precautions) and trained to be an ARP Officer. He recalled the amusing tale (although not at the time) of struggling home at night during blackout from Northam, a town about 90km's east of Perth, where he had been tuning pianos and also where, coincidentally, the main Army training camp was stationed, with his headlights blocked out save for small slit for light so he was hardly able to see. Suddenly there was this array of blinding lights coming towards him, which turned out to be convoy of a dozen Army trucks on their way back to Northam, lights blazing away on high beam!

During these war years Paul was offered a job as a piano tuner in one of Perth's larger music shops, Musgrove's. They had an extensive tuning round throughout the south west with good living away from home and car allowance included. Paul made a considerable profit during this time with Musgrove's as he was allowed 2/6 for breakfast, 2/6 for lunch, 2/6 for dinner and 2/6 a night. As he was quite often offered all of the above by clients for nothing (a privilege he often took advantage of) he was able to find working away from home much to his liking!

Just before Christmas one year he was working in Geraldton, about 500km's north of Perth, when he was summonsed back to Perth by Mr Musgrove, the store owner. Most employees lived in fear of being summonsed by the boss but Paul had a good relationship with him so he wasn't unduly worried. Mr Musgrove then proceeded to offer Paul a better job as manager of his branch in Bunbury, about 180km's south of Perth.

To the great surprise of Mr Musgrove Paul declined his invitation to be promoted to manager and he was even more surprised when Paul resigned from his employ completely – Paul again had the itch to work for himself.

Paul was again working for himself in the piano trade and he prospered. He was always very careful and never overcharged. I remember him counselling me, when in my early 20's and just starting out in my career; "always do the best job you possibly can and you'll never want for work" and I have tried to operate to this dictum ever since. Word of mouth is by far more effective than any amount of advertising!

At this time he met his life partner, Joy, also of German heritage. Her brothers, Victor and Beno Lange, settled in this Great Southern area and founded Alkoomi Wines at Frankland, about 140km's north west of here – you may have heard of this high profile WA winery.

Paul and Joy were married in 1943 and subsequently had 2 children, a son, Glen, born in 1944 and a daughter, Dale, born in 1946.

Organs.

Paul's interest in organs started before the Second World War. His father tuned some of the organs around Perth so Paul was pressed into duty as a note holder. One instrument that Frederick Hufner looked after was St Mary's Cathedral, presumably because of his connection with the Sisters of Mercy, over the road at the Victoria Square Convent, for whom he looked after the pianos.

It is interesting that the Cathedral organ was not looked after by the Dodd firm, who built it in 1910. Paul told me on more than one occasion that the Dodd's kept themselves to themselves and regarded the Hufner's as the "enemy", both with regard to piano and organ work!

Interestingly I discovered recently, when tuning a Bechstein grand at this Convent last year, that it had only ever been maintained by 2 people since new in 1910 – Frederick Hufner and, when he died in the 1960's, Paul Hufner took it over!

Paul's first organ tuning contract came from his befriending the Gunn brothers, Sid and Gordon, when they were installing the only Gunstar organ to come to WA, in 1939, in Forrest Park Methodist Church, Mt Lawley. He signed an agreement to maintain this organ for them in February 1940.

He moved this organ into the new Maylands Mt Lawley Uniting Church in 1985 and continued maintaining it until around 1993, so had an unbroken relationship with this organ of some 53 years.

This was also where our family relationship with the Hufner's began, as my father, Bob, was organist at Forrest Park Methodist Church from 1955 until 1970. The relationship well and truly continued here in Albany as Dad has been one of the organists here from 1971 until now, a period of 41 years. I also learnt to play here and many of my formative musical moments were conceived in this building, especially listening to the other organist here, Mrs Beverley Bird, who was, and is, a fine player of both organ and piano.

I well remember attending Forrest Park Church as a youngster and pushing keys for my father as he tuned the Trumpet stop on a Sunday morning before the service, with his ingenious aid to a 5 year old for handling the sides – blue chalk for the C side, pink for the C#.

Paul's father, Frederick, was very clever with his hands and could often keep organs in trim for Sunday services by making repairs where others couldn't and, with his enquiring mind, his interest in organs grew with the result that Paul's interest also increased.

Early in the 1950's Paul's uncle, Paul Meyer, was very keen to have a small organ in the Lutheran Church but the difficulty of obtaining parts was a problem. Eventually they bought a small theatre organ and used the pipes and electrical parts out of that. Paul's uncle made the console but Paul made everything else except the pipes – even the keyboard and the blower. We experienced one of Paul's wooden blowers at Lockyer Church this morning, even if you weren't aware of it at the time!

This organ gave good service until 1991 when it was replaced by the 3 manual organ, his last and largest instrument.

Paul also secured some organ rebuilding work and an early contract, signed in 1951, was to electrify the pneumatic action of the 1911 JE Dodd organ at St Matthews Anglican Church, Guildford, which we visited at both previous OHTA Conferences in WA.

As you all know it was common to upgrade older organs with the newest technology of the day in the 1950's and 1960's, mostly by electrifying what were perceived to be obsolete playing actions and accessories and many fine organs were irretrievably altered, for the worse, by following this path. Indeed it is precisely why OHTA was formed some 35 years ago to educate and encourage the custodians of these instruments to respect them for what they are rather than to try and make them something they can never be.

As an aside Paul's organ of 1962 at St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Floreat Park, Perth, is now 50 years old and in completely original condition but with the electrical side of things become less and less reliable. I now have a lot of thinking about what to do with this aspect of this instrument – it is pretty well the only of his larger early instruments completely intact – do we upgrade, do we restore?

So, in rebuilding some of Perth's stock of 19th century organs, Paul Hufner was no orphan in the organ building scene of Australia, or, indeed, the world. However he did differ in one respect from some, in that he rarely, if ever, altered the pipework in any irreversible way. One of his major tasks in the late 1960's was to relocate the 1893 Norman and Beard organ from Johnston Memorial Church in Fremantle to St Patrick's Anglican Church Mt Lawley, which we visited on Wednesday. During the course of this work the mechanical action was lost in the quest to provide a detached console, however the pipework remained untouched so it would be very possible to reconstruct this instrument to its original form. He radically rebuilt the 1884 Robert Cecil Clifton instrument of St John's Anglican Church Fremantle, (at the request of the organist, the influential Dr Roy Wood in 1961) disposing of the mechanical action and console. However the pipework remained untouched so it has been possible to reconstitute the Clifton great organ on the original windchest (which was stored in his Bayswater factory for some 35 years) and thus get some idea of the sound of this instrument.

Time for a joke: how many organ builders does it take to change a light globe? Answer: 2 – 1 to adjust the globe and 1 to hold the switch.....and what does the organ builder do with the old globe? Answer: stores it in his workshop until he find another organ to put it into..!

Paul Hufner varied not one iota from this stereotype – I helped purge his Bayswater factory in the early 1990's, his Inglewood workshop a little later on and, finally, was given quite a supply of goodies from his Wilson villa a few years ago – as a result my 90 square metre factory unit has a small path way cleared from the door to the bench area to allow me in and out of the place!

The quality of his workmanship in all this rebuilding and repair work was solid and based on sound principles – gleaned mostly from his excellent training in piano repairs. He used the best quality materials he was able to procure and his repairs were long lasting. He releathered the pallet pulldown motors of the 1929 Hill Norman and Beard organ at Trinity Church, Perth, in the mid 1960's and when John Larner undertook restoration work on this fine organ some 30 years later he found no need to touch the earlier Hufner work, it had been so well executed and was in such good condition.

New organs

The first contract to build a completely new organ came from St Andrew's Anglican Church, Subiaco. It was installed in November 1954. Paul manufactured everything himself: keyboards, pedal board, wooden pipes, even stop tabs but imported electrical components and metal pipes from England.

This organ, complete with home made wooden blower, gave excellent service until 2006, a period of 52 years, until replaced by the new Letourneau organ we saw on Wednesday morning.

It was here that he also formulated his recipe for success – his new organs were all built on the extension principle, with each rank of pipes electrically wired to provide several stops – in this way resources could be very economically utilised, although, inevitably, with some musical sacrifice. He was, no doubt, influenced in this thinking by the aforementioned Gunstar organ at Forrest Park, which was built on a similar scheme.

The St Andrew's instrument was based on 3 ranks of pipes, Open Diapason 8', Lieblich Flute 16' and Gamba 8'.

He rarely moved away from this formula – some of his smaller organs were 2 ranks (with the string omitted) and there were some single manual organs of one rank of flutes (extended out of course) with manual keyboards of short compass, infinitely better than a beaten up Estey or Cornish reed organ that had been cooked for years in the heat and dryness of a Western Australian summer.

The smaller organs were always fully enclosed in a swell box and the several larger instruments he built of 5 or 6 ranks had 2 independent divisions, with 2 or 3 ranks on each manual – such as we have here – and this considerably lessened the musical limitations of extension.

The larger 2 manual instruments also had a reed, sometimes extended to 16'.

He always imported good quality metal pipework from FJ Rogers of Leeds and rarely moved away from doing what he found worked for him. Sometimes he found that what worked, scaling wise, in building 'A' didn't necessarily work as well in building 'B' but he was never far too away from the mark.

All of his instruments feature soundly made solid timber consoles and those not fully enclosed in swell boxes feature functional pipe displays such as seen here – he was, no doubt, influenced by publications coming out of America, of which he was fond, such as The American Organ and WH Barnes' "Contemporary American Organ".

A number of his organs featured hand made electrical components such as stop relay switches and even key contact blocks. In the immediate post war years he found it impossible or, perhaps, a little daunting to obtain reliable supplies from Europe and in those far off days way before fax machines and emails he must have wondered, when posting an order for materials and supplies from lonely old Perth, when and whether he would ever see the goods arrive.

His pipe actions were usually direct electric – magnets were one thing that he simply had to import – although he quite often employed electro pneumatic assistance for the larger pipes – large capacity pallet magnets were many years away. The design of these direct electric actions was also very influenced by his American books but kept very simple and easy to maintain.

This (Wesley Church, Albany) organ had, up until 1991, handmade stop relays, beautifully made, although there is no doubt that phosphor bronze wipers and brass buzz bars were not an ideal marriage in an organ so close to the sea – it was necessary to be constantly cleaning them to restore missing notes. The problem was exacerbated with the advent of a modern, smooth DC power supply – there was no longer the spike of current to break through any oxidation build up.

Part of the reason for this provision of hand made electric parts was also to cut costs – his life's aim was to make organs affordable for all churches, not just the elite and wealthy parishes. In certain instances Paul preferred to reduce his hourly rate to a miniscule amount in making parts rather than spend money on proprietary brand parts, when that money could be better utilised in other areas of the organ. His dream was ultimately realised with small organs installed in far flung places throughout the state, small churches who would not normally have dreamed of owning a pipe organ, towns such as Carnamah in the northern wheatbelt, some several hundred kilometres north of Perth, to Collie, Bridgetown and Katanning, several hundred kilometres south.

Also of interest was that the original new organ of 1954 for St Andrew's Subiaco led directly to orders for organs in Tasmania – the Subiaco Parish Priest Reverend, "Dick"

Cranswick, was Tasmanian by birth and a gifted musician. A visit of a friend of his, who was also an organist at St Peter's Anglican Church, Sandy Bay, led directly to an order being placed in 1958 and 2 others followed at St Columba's Presbyterian, Devonport and Davey Street Congregational Church, Hobart.

The boom years in this making of new organs were during the mid 1950's through to the late 1960's. During this time he had procured a small factory in the industrial area of Bayswater – which was, incidentally, immediately adjacent to the Pipe Organs WA factory, which was, in turn, the former factory of John Larner – work that lot out! – and he always had an apprentice, sometimes two, in his employ during these years. The most notable of these was John Larner who started his apprenticeship in 1960 and left Paul Hufner to start his own business in 1968.

It was the advent of John Larner into the market place, together with the advent of the interest in classical organs that caused Paul Hufner's organs to become less fashionable and desirable and new organ work slowly disappeared for him in Perth, although he produced several small instruments in the 1970's and continued tuning and maintaining a large number of Perth's stable of organs.

Throughout all of this activity he had continued his piano tuning and repairing!

Retirement

As retirement approached he had the dream of building his last and largest organ for his beloved St John's Lutheran Church in Perth and, over the course of 7 years from 1984 to 1991 realised this dream.

This organ was a major step away from what he had built his reputation on in that, although it was still an extension organ, it had a much larger number of ranks (13) and was also of 3 manuals, including a Positive organ on the gallery rail.

Into this organ was poured a lifetime of saved treasure – all the best jarrah from the previous 25 years had been saved, bit by bit, so that the casework and console was able to be made out of beautiful timber, including 3 keyboards made out of the best seasoned pine which had been stored away. Pipework over the years had also been saved – although this is not necessary a recipe for success and, indeed, forms one of the weaknesses this organ possesses.

This organ was inaugurated on April 28th 1991 and is known as the “Pioneer Memorial Organ” in honour of the many German immigrants coming make a new life in Australia, especially Western Australia.

Over the last 12 years of his life Paul faced a gradual reduction in his mobility, especially with regard to his legs. He found it increasingly difficult to get out of chairs and eventually was not able ascend stairs easily and, for the last 5 years, was unable to visit his much loved last organ at St John's, which is situated up 2 flights of stairs in the rear gallery of the church.

Eventually his condition was diagnosed as Inclusion Body Myositis which is loosely defined as "some sort of viral infection of the muscles, particularly the arms and legs". This led to the muscles of his arms and legs withered away to almost nothing

There was, medically, no help at hand and he, gradually, was unable to even work on pianos, or to fossick around in the little workshop he had equipped in the garage of their retirement villa. This was a great tragedy and incredibly frustrating and depressing, as his mind remained very sharp until the end.

He died at age 91 on the 30th of August 2010.

A life well spent surrounded by the instruments in his care and a wonderful servant to music and musicians in Western Australia.

Patrick Elms
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