

R.E.V. Church (1901-1985)

compiled by **Beth Williams**

A paper presented at the Melbourne Organ Weekend, 21 October 2000, in the hall of The Scots' Church, Russell Street, Melbourne. Beth Williams, Dip. Art & Design (Swinburne), is a daughter of R.E.V. Church. The paper was delivered by John Maidment who recalled R.E.V. Church's varied programmes and polished performances in the 1960s as St Kilda City Organist.

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Reginald Edward Victor Church, familiarly known as 'R.E.V.', had a musical career spanning nearly 70 years. During this time he made a significant contribution to the Melbourne musical world, particularly in the field of organ and church music.

Born on 23 January 1901, R.E.V. was the youngest son of Mr & Mrs Richard Church, of Kew. His father died at the age of 49 years, leaving six children. He began his musical career at the age of six, when he played the piano for the children at his kindergarten, and as his mother was a very musical lady, she encouraged his studies from this early age.

As time progressed, he exhibited a talent for the organ, and was enrolled as a pupil with Mansley Greer, organist of The Scots' Church, Melbourne, and considered a noted organist and teacher. He stated that Reginald Church learnt more in two years than most in four.

In 1920, at the age of 19 years, he became organist of The Independent Church, in Walpole Street, Kew, where there was a three-manual organ of 1891 built by Alfred Fuller, whose workshop had been nearby at Kew Junction. Then in 1921 he was appointed to Cairns Memorial Presbyterian Church in East Melbourne, where there was another Fuller instrument dating from 1884. Here he joined Mr R.J. Oehr, the then choirmaster and conductor.

In 1923 he was appointed organist and choirmaster of South Yarra Presbyterian Church, in Punt Road, where he played on a Fincham organ of 1887.

In 1925, R.E.V. Church married at Cairns Memorial Church Miss Bertha Oehr, eldest daughter of Mr and Mrs R.J. Oehr. Mr Oehr was R.E.V.'s partner in their chartered accountancy practice, was well travelled and a very musical gentleman with a unique record in Melbourne's musical life for more than 40 years. He held a long period in office as secretary of the Melbourne Philharmonic Society, honorary secretary of the Council of Melbourne Musical Societies, member of the Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne and sub-committee of the Melbourne centenary celebrations. He was also associated with the management of musical preparations for State functions including visits of Royalty.

In October 1925, R.E.V. accepted the post of organist and choirmaster of St Mark's Church of England, Camberwell. His appointment found him playing a harmonium at the laying of the foundation stone.

In 1927, he was invited to compose music for the first Scotch College Foundation Day Concert, held at the Exhibition Concert Hall. This was the College prize song entitled 'Come on Scotch', which went with a fine swing. These concerts have continued each year up to the present day.

On 29 August 1928 the opening of the new organ at St Mark's Church, built by George Fincham & Sons, took place and a recital was given by Mansley Greer, the first of many such events. During his years at St Mark's. R.E.V. gave frequent organ recitals with musical identities, such as Bertha Jorgensen, Thea Phillips, Beatrice Oakley, Alberto Zelman, William Herbert, Marjorie Smith and Percy Pledger, Margaret Schofield and Nance Grant, to mention a few. He also gave many free midday recitals at the Melbourne Town Hall over a few years, not forgetting the Sunday afternoons at different venues.

In 1947, upon the termination of Dr A.E. Floyd's tenure at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, R.E.V. was approached to accept the appointment as organist and choirmaster of the Cathedral. However, his practice and professional commitments made this impossible to accept. Nevertheless, he agreed to take the appointment for six months until a successor to Dr Floyd could be found. At Christmas time he took the St Paul's choirboys along to the Children's Hospital to sing carols to the patients.

An important contribution to Sunday music was the choir broadcasts on the radio with Norman Banks in 1947-1949, which brought enjoyment to many listeners. Also, one must not forget his work with Norman Banks to inaugurate the 'Carols by Candlelight', which still bring so much enjoyment to people all these years later.

During a visit to the United Kingdom and Europe in 1954, R.E.V. played the organ in many churches and cathedrals, a highlight being during the Empire Youth Service at Westminster Abbey, at the invitation of his old friend Sir William McKie, who was the organist and master of the choristers and official director of music at the Coronation in 1953. On the subject of overseas organs, an interesting sidelight was a visit to Manila where he played the famous Bamboo Organ.

In 1961, R.E.V. was appointed Organist of the City of St Kilda. The 1892 Fincham & Hobday organ was rebuilt in this year by George Fincham & Sons Pty Ltd. R.E.V. and Harold Rooksby, organist of St Mary's Caulfield and prominent recitalist, were appointed joint organ consultants for the work and both shared in the re-opening recital in December 1961. This work was directed by George Fincham, a grandson of the original builder, with whom R.E.V. enjoyed a long friendship and association. R.E.V. gave many Sunday afternoon recitals at St Kilda in association with noted artists until the late 1960s, these attracting large and appreciative audiences.

In 1962, after 36 years service, R.E.V. retired from St Mark's as organist and choir director. He had great musical talents and brought the best from the choristers. His accompaniments could be said to originate in his heart and emanate from his fingers. He had a wonderful ability to add colour and volume just at the right time. He accepted his obligations with a deep understanding of their nature and scope and discharged them with singular distinction, refusing to compromise his high standards. St Mark's was famous throughout the Diocese for the beauty and inspiration of its music at great festivals and other important occasions people came from far afield.

A report in the *Camberwell Press* issued on 27 March 1962 reads: 'It is said that Mr R.E.V. Church has done more to make the City of Camberwell known throughout the world than any other Camberwell citizen, and despite what seems an ambiguous claim it may be musically true.'

While music and its associated activities formed a large part of his life, his principal profession was that of a practising chartered accountant as a partner in the city firm of R.J. Oehr and Church until his retirement. Because of his associations, musical

and theatrical personalities were often visitors to the office, amongst whom were Percy Grainger and Bert Bailey.

His associated activities including being a foundation member and president of the Society of Organists (Victoria), secretary of the Royal Philharmonic Society, president of the Royal Society of St George, and a member of the Savage Club. He enjoyed the rare distinction of a 60-year membership of the Melbourne Cricket Club.

Regrettably, in later years his failing eyesight prevented him from maintaining the high standards he required from his music and he retired from playing the organ, only occasionally playing the piano for his own, and his grandchildren's pleasure. He passed away on 18 February 1985 at the Bodalla Nursing Home, Kew.

In 1985, a fund was opened to rebuild the organ at St Mark's. A committee was formed consisting of Sir James McNeill, Bob Johnson and Dr Ted Ware. Sir James accepted the invitation to be the working patron. The organ was rebuilt and enlarged by Australian Pipe Organs Pty Ltd and a service of dedication of the rebuilt 'R.E.V. Church Organ' was held on 27 May 1990. An *opus sectile* plaque was also placed in the north aisle of St John's Church in Toorak to commemorate his life and work but it is sad to relate that no trace remains of the organ at St Kilda Town Hall (destroyed by fire in 1991) where his playing gave such pleasure to large audiences on Sunday afternoons in the 1960s.