

The Who, When, Where, What and Why of Australian organ composition

by Robert Boughen

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The keynote address delivered at St John's Anglican Church, Toorak on Saturday 27 September 1997 as part of the OHTA 20th annual conference.

It is indeed an honour to be invited to give this address. A bright person quipped that if this was to be a keynote address, would it set the tone of the proceedings or merely provide a tonic for the audience? A brighter wit interjected, "No, if it's the old man, it'll be a super-tonic!" Advice was given that I should not take too dominant a role in the proceedings and that any note I gave would be leading to some useful conclusion. Was I to be the mediant in group discussion? No one asked if I was to receive any 'doh' for giving the keynote address.

Undergraduate wit notwithstanding, I believe that this conference might well prove to be a watershed in relation to this sector of our national musical culture. Later this weekend, we shall discuss professionalism and related aspects together with an official of the Musician's Union. It is over 20 years since I, for one, floated the idea of a National Association. As well as these events, together we shall enjoy renewing old friendships and making new ones, and in both be stimulated, encouraged and enlightened.

First, we shall together share some aspects of Australian composition. 'Tis over 50 years since I started to play Australian organ music. The composer was Percy Brier, a great man to whom I owe much. Then, other people asked me to play their work and from there, my interest grew so that for over 20 years I've been compiling a catalogue of such compositions. Allied with this is a discography of (a) Australian organs (played by any nationality) and (b) Australian organists recording both here and overseas.

Some statistics for those who find interest therein. The number of alleged composers is 202. The number of alleged compositions is 727: the number of Australian instruments recorded - and available for sale - is 102 (NSW 50 and rising every month, especially after the recent work of Robert Ampt and David Rumsey, NT 0, Qld 5, SA 8 and recently rising rapidly due to the great labour of Dr Fabrikant in particular, Tas 14, Vic 21 [and much of this comes from friend June Nixon] and WA 4): the number of Australian organists involved is 71 and the number of recordings, 179. Do you want me to repeat all that? I thought not!

Statistics have some value, but much more valuable has been the policy of the University of Queensland to acquire, legally, a copy of every composition and every recording. Even though they turned me out to grass a few years ago, they intend to continue with this policy of acquisition. Thus we have a repository for the use of scholars and performers, This is particularly

opposite as the Australia Music Centre now holds organ music of only 47 Australians. In the last few years, these holdings have diminished rapidly. Some discards were sent to the Australian National University in Canberra, others have vanished without trace. Today, even the LP record is fast disappearing, and with it, some of our valuable history in sound.

I have brought with me one copy of each segment of this catalogue-discography. It must be considered as work in progress, work I have been keen to disseminate for years, assuming that it might be of some practical value. All this work has been done in my spare time. It needs the further attention of, say, two full time helpers for two weeks, and one Apple expert, for the whole to come to conclusion. I'm considering issuing it on disc and not in hard copy.

Please, help me to improve this grossly unfinished document - help me by giving your corrections and any other advice you choose. A little encouragement will also be gratefully received. The Australian Music Centre now has an expert review panel whose approval must be gained before any composition is lodged there. That is a reasonable action in these days of economic rationalism. My approach has been opposite. In all segments, I have noted every scrap of information available or even rumoured, including some I consider suspect. Of course I know that a goodly proportion of these works may be considered of little aesthetic value but I do not wish, at this stage, to interpose my own critical judgement between the data and their lodgement in my own University.

I have said earlier, alleged compositions. Some claims may prove to be somewhat, shall I say, fanciful. If the good Lord permits me to complete this project, then the second edition will be restricted to listing the works that I have seen with my own eyes. Perhaps, the remainder might go into an appendix. In this present catalogue, I have ignored organ accompaniments to choral music but have of course included works for organ and other instruments, together with the usual organ solos.

Here endeth the first lesson.

Let us now briefly consider Australian organ music under these headings: WHO - WHEN - WHERE -WHAT - and WHY.

WHO is an Australian composer? It has been said that to define is to confine. My flexible definition is one who was born and largely educated here, even if now resident overseas - examples, Malcolm Williamson and Barrie Cabena. Or, a person born elsewhere and who has spent a considerable time living and composing in this country - Dr William Lovelock for example. Also, since we are considering the heading, WHO, I pose the question, "Who is going to be around in future to play any composition on any organ?" The world wide fall in the number of organ students has been of concern for quite some years. It is also serious in Australia and something must be done else we could arrive at a time when organs are mere pieces of sculpture. I think of this when I consider museums of old locomotives. Some are still in working order but there is a diminishing number of people around who know how to fire them up and drive them. Even now, some get an outing only on rare occasions.

Closer to home for me, is seeing the types of fighters I flew, now permanently grounded in static displays. Much more of this will be discussed

later in this conference. OHTA is doing a good job in preserving organs; let us expand that thought and say we need to preserve the art of organ playing.

WHEN did these composers write? The bulk of composition comes from after WWII. Although I had entertained hope of the possibility of a major work written before Federation, I have been disappointed. Indeed, I can find no trace of any major work till, say, the 1960s.

WHERE - First, where did they write? Mainly in the capital cities for here there was at least some chance of their works being performed. Second point of WHERE - Where did I get the information? I have already confessed that some of it is second or third hand and may well prove to be nothing more than gossip. If I have done ill to some reputations, sackcloth and ashes are already in store. Some information comes from the programme guides of both the ABC and Community Art Radio. Some information comes from the magazines issued from the various Organ Societies.

Most of the data, however, has been obtained on site. I have personally combed the State Libraries, and the Music Libraries of Universities and Conservatoria in each capital city, from Perth to Brisbane including Canberra. Little information was received from a survey made of all major publishers. My wife and I spent hours, many hours sifting through the records of the then voluminous holdings in the Australian Music Centre. You have before you a very rough draft, without introduction or explanation. An even more primitive draft was sent years ago to Librarians and some colleagues and from their corrections, this study has gained much.

Quite a deal of information has come from the composers themselves, but as I said earlier, seeing is believing. I believe we should at this point pay tribute to Currency Press and their editor, David Kinsela, for publishing what I believe to be the first volume ever of Australian organ music. Coupled with this and among his many discs, is David's recording of many of these Australian works. While we are about paying tribute to those who put their muscle where their Australian music is, is Douglas Lawrence whose recordings from the early 70s paved the way. Robert Ampt is writing and putting his own music on disc, as is another old friend, David Rumsey, whose latest disc on the Chrysalis label has only recently been released.

WHAT - what are they writing? Mainly the ubiquitous Chorale Preludes and associated ecclesiastical fare and that is understandable. Some of this genre can of course be incandescently beautiful - *O mensch beweine* for example. It is perhaps, in secular music that one might find significant local compositions. The longest work so far noted is the Symphony for Organ by Williamson. This 35 minute work was published in 1961. I wonder how many know it and how many of you have played it. I wonder.... Decades ago I gave the first Australian performance of his Organ Concerto, a work that received, I believe, only its second Australian performance not many years ago with the composer at the console. I wonder ... I shall return to this theme of the secular in a few minutes. Now, let us consider WHY.

WHY do people write this and why should we old hacks bother to play the stuff? I guess the reason for composing organ music is the same as for composing any other type - for example an inward compulsion to share and, for some, the financial reward of a commission. Like many of you, I've spent many hours learning some Australian pieces I dislike. Like many of you, I've

performed them most times without fee, without audience appreciation and, in many cases, without much of an audience. Let me ask, who wants to listen to this? It has been said that the future of the organ lies in its past. There is some truth in that, especially as we now have instruments in Australia well suited to those periods.

Surely, a vibrant future for the organ implies that composers of today and tomorrow will use it. The organ is far more than a museum instrument for antique art. It's not a case for either-or, but also-and. I reckon we should play Australian works if only to encourage local composition. We never know when a great masterpiece might appear. For that matter, who wants to listen to organ music by any composer on any organ, anywhere in the world? The ABC programme guide, *24 hours*, lists for this month of September, a total of 170 minutes of organ music, 41 are concerti and the remainder, solo organ. For our Brisbane 4MBS, 55 minutes for theatre organ, and 86 minutes for classical organ.

Let us have a short diversion to the theatre organ. For my sins, I'm the current patron of the Theatre Organ Society of Australia, Queensland Branch. Doubtless the cynics will say, "How apt." You may now all cease bowing and resume your seats. But I'm sure that they can teach us something. In Brisbane, years ago, they got off their butts and actually bought a theatre organ, found it a home, installed it, and are now completing the organ's renovation and enlargement. In Adelaide, a similar society owns two such instruments. I have not knowledge of other centres. How many organ societies can make the same boast?

To generalise grossly, our organ societies seem to be preoccupied with the machine itself, and don't give a hoot about its music. At least, it appears that they don't come out to listen to concerts, even by Dame Gillian. The theatre organ folk don't seem to be very interested in wind pressures, cut-ups or nicking, but gloriously wallow in the music with which they identify. Are we classicists missing out somewhere?

I believe that this conference has an even more important matter to discuss than Australian composition, vital though this is. I believe we players are an endangered species and some ecological change must occur in our environment to ensure the propagation of our kind. I joke not nor am I a prophet of certain doom. At the International Congress of Organists held in 1987 at Cambridge, this problem was noted as being of immense significance. Since then the number of organ students has further diminished. In these days of economic hardship, the young will put their energies into studying a branch of music through which they can make not necessarily a living, but receive some financial reward.

How can matters be improved? One cannot presume to cover all the relevant aspects of this important conference in a short introductory address. Neither is there any need to pre-empt the direction of future discussion. However, may I suggest that we briefly examine two different aspects of organ art: the secular and the sacred.

Let us start with the church. This is not to be a "can-the-clergy" session. On the contrary, let's support the surpliced. Most of the men and women I know in the ministry work themselves to near exhaustion in service. Much rarer are the fat cats in clerical collars. Even rarer still are the petty despots who hide their insecurities by perfunctorily sacking the organist. Of course

incompetent organists should be sacked. They should never have been appointed in the first place.

The clergy work under two great disadvantages. First, they have only the laity from which to recruit. Second, in their three or four years of training, they are expected to graduate with a finely honed expertise in everything from church architecture to church music, from sanctity to synergy. In church music there are exceptional pockets of excellence, but generally we so called serious musicians have let the church down by the milk-and-water way in which so many of us play for services. We are so jolly respectable. Where is the joy of which the New Testament so often speaks? Let us put our own house in order before we criticise the Church. Nevertheless, what comes first, the chicken or the egg?

The number of church positions is falling. There is a danger that all too soon there will be pitifully few organists left to fill such vacancies as there may be. That may not worry some, because so many churches are opting for microphone, cantor, guitar, drum kit and synthesiser in an effort to make worship music more popular and relevant. If this is so successful, why aren't the churches full?

Obviously the problem is one of money. Even more so, it is one of morality. If it is ethical to pay clergy and pay award rates to typists, cleaners, electricians, painters etc., why is it not ethical to pay professional church musicians? Many consider music only a part time occupation. There is need of a complete culture change in our society in order to validate the claim that it takes years of training to be an outstanding musician, and it takes hours to prepare virile music Sunday by Sunday. The stumbling block, I have found, is not the clergy, but the laity, the bean counters. Occasionally, so I'm told, we have the spectre of a parochial Mrs Proudie.

Now to some comment on civic organ playing.

It is right that we should try to ensure that there are healthy audiences for these concerts. Our politicians have a duty to ensure that the money they spend on the purchase of a fine instrument, and on its expensive maintenance, is well spent. The pollies are, frankly, interested only in the number of bums on seats. Sir Humphrey Appleby often stated that the barbarians are at the gates. Well, in some places, they are past the gates and well ensconced in positions of influence - on boards, and often, as arts administrators. Although there are some notable exceptions, many of this ilk are culturally anorexic and have no concept of a balanced artistic programme for the community. They are rushing helter-skelter down market to ensure that venues are full to please their political masters. There are few votes in culture.

Secular solo recitals are the kiss of death for an entrepreneur. Consider how the number of solo recitals sponsored by the ABC has shrunk in the last 50 years. Sure, Aunty imports fine performers but most of their appearances are with orchestra. Organ recitals are even less popular. Can we reverse the trend? I believe I have two possible pieces of advice, not surefire cures. I was shocked during my Churchill Fellowship tour to find that organ recitals were not nearly as well attended as I had imagined. I was strongly advised to include in recitals, music from the church choir, or outstanding soloists. So, a few years ago, I used my Cathedral boys to join with me at the City Hall. The attendance rocketed from about 300 to over 900.

On a subsequent occasion, I engaged a pan-pipe-player and managed to get a photo in the local rag, with the same jump in audience numbers. I hear that some Town Council's idea of advertising is to include a two-line notice in the fortnightly newspaper that is thrown on the lawn, free of charge. However, the same people spend megabucks when they present a vaudeville type show for the plebs, events that bring much kudos to the polities in power.

Of course advertising is important. Also, I believe, is psychological cunning in merchandising, in packaging. Sounds frightfully common, doesn't it? Maybe it is. Consider this: a few years ago I instigated a project which could have resulted in much egg on face. It was an experiment. The result was that I twice filled the new Concert Hall in Brisbane (over 1500 people) with a paying audience at lunch times, and this was without an associate artist. Despite the fact that I was playing, I advance this hypothesis as to why these events were successful.

Point 1: The title - each was called "Concert With A Split Personality"

Point 2: Each was well advertised as part of an annual series of organ concerts.

Point 3: The actual programme, titles and composers, was printed in full. None of this as we often read: "Music by Zucchini, Paternoster, Filibuster and Claptrap."

Point 4: Here is the crunch line and you should get your smelling salts ready. With great deliberation, I started with music most people knew and liked; then followed a bridging short piece to change gear without too much of a jolt; then a no-holds-barred-piece of great organ music, without any concession to so called popular taste. This formula was repeated throughout the programme. I tried to link these elements with that some call an interesting comment or two.

CONCERT WITH A SPLIT PERSONALITY I

27 June, 1991

Selection from Mikado Sullivan

Allegro for Glockenspiel from Magic Flute Mozart

Fantasia K 608 Mozart

Humoresque Yon

Well loved melodies by Kreisler

A Beatles' melody

as it might have been played by J S Bach (RKB)

Prelude & Fugue in D BWV 532 J S Bach

Adagio Albinoni/Giazotto

Toccata Thou art Peter Mulet

I make no apology for that experiment. It worked! Many hundreds of people who previously had associated the organ with dismal noises in church, were happy. The organ buffs enjoyed their music, everybody was happy. Each member of the audience had the opportunity to write a report on the concert, and to make suggestions. Hundreds did. Management was delighted. Imagine all those paying customers for a lunch time organ concert!

The experiment was so successful that it has never been repeated, and all the audience letters have somehow been lost in head office. *C'est la vie!*

Here endeth the second lesson, and with it we return to the original theme of Australian organ composition. It is a good thing to plan a "Learn-To-Play-The-Organ Week"; it is a good thing to provide organ scholarships; it is a good thing to design a water-tight contract so that organists cannot be summarily dismissed; it is a good thing to retain in pristine condition the best instruments of the past; it is a grand thing to encourage composition for our instrument from our fellow Australians.

All these things are good, but they are but tinkling brass or sounding cymbals until we have a culture in which organ playing and the organist is recognised as a professional on a par with any of the virtuosi in our symphony orchestras.

Some 25-plus minutes ago, I asked for your help in emending this catalogue. All contributions of scores and discs, even on loan for copying, will be most gratefully received. We store them at a readily accessible site for use now, and for the players and scholars of future generations. All contributions of ideas and energies will be gratefully received during the next few days to ensure that there is a future generation of organ players to whom these gifts might be available.

I hereby rest my semiquavers.

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