

Sigfrid Karg-Elert and the Australian Connection

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I shall attempt to discuss the following:

1. Why Karg-Elert as composer has been neglected for so long
2. Australia's privileged link through A E H Nickson from 1913 to 1929, at its peak in 1923-24.

1. Karg-Elert as organist-composer was rejected in Germany throughout his life. He never gained an organist's post and gave up trying a little before 1920. Primarily a pianist and harmonium-player, his capacity as organist declined greatly from then. Most Germans were unaware of his many organ-compositions but his chamber-music was popular, especially his pieces for the flute. He was a respected Leipzig teacher, successor to Reger at the Conservatorium from 1919 until his death in 1933. Why was he ignored at home? I suggest:

a. His outspoken, even libellous comments and his eccentric appearance and behaviour could never endear him to his mostly serious countrymen. German nationalism was very strong early this century: Karg was very patriotic but he also forged strong links with England, Italy and even France, the historic enemy.

b. Antisemitism was rife; although the son of a Catholic father and a pious Lutheran mother, strong in his Christianity, he was often thought to be Jewish, mainly it seems because of his appearance. At the time, this alone was excuse for rejection (great musicians such as Mendelssohn and Mahler were compelled to convert to gain social acceptance). A scurrilous publication in 1933, *ABC of Jews in Music*, was put out as part of the Nazi boycott; by mistake (or on purpose?) Karg's name was included.

c. Karg suffered greatly under the German critics who roundly condemned everything he did. They expected him to imitate Reger, who, initially rejected also by these same critics, had been elevated to the status of hero once he had died in 1916. Karg did write some music in this fashion but took pains to avoid it.

d. Some of his music is very easy to play but much is demanding and clearly requires considerable discipline. A particular problem is the difficulty in registration, conceived at a time when pistons were minimal and generally fixed.

e. The *Orgelbewegung* gained pace in the 1920s when Karg was at his height as a writer of colouristic 'impressions' suited to the orchestral organ. Even he came to regret this, stopped writing for the organ, then returned to it in the late 1920s, inspired by the untouched Silbermann organ in St George's Church, Rötha, near Leipzig. This late music is still daring harmonically and magnificent in its polyphony but the bizarre tonal requirements of his earlier works are now lacking. Nevertheless, the collapse of the romantic organ in Germany gave a further excuse for musicians to reject (or at least ignore) much of Karg's music.

f. Karg had a lifelong interest in the harmonium, starting about 1905. He was a touring virtuoso player and even made regular radio broadcasts from 1924 to 1930, i.e., late in his career. His famous contemporaries, Reger and Straube, regarded the harmonium as a second-rate instrument and the composer at a similar level should he continue to 'waste' his time with it.

The English-speaking world, by stark contrast, received Karg's organ-music enthusiastically. This probably began with the arrival of the *Chorale-Improvisations*, Opus 65, from 1908 to 1910, and it started in England. The Americans followed and gave him his greatest following from the 1920s. Altered taste, particularly in organ-design, caused this to falter then collapse in the 1940s and 50s. Despite the formation of Karg-Elert Societies in Germany (1984) and England (1987), the revival of interest has been cautious.

We now have 'appropriate' organs, making this even more regrettable. The requirements are:

a. clear speech and reasonably balanced choruses as so much of the writing is contrapuntal - here the English romantic organ often fails;

b. delicate mutations and orchestral stops; bizarre combinations are frequently specified - these need not be taken literally but a serious attempt must be made to fulfil the composer's wishes;

c. electric stop-action with 'adequate' pistons, if possible a sequencer; frequent and sometimes far-reaching, even instantaneous, stop-changes are needed - the music suffers if these are ignored.

A vicious cycle has arisen: the music is heard less and less, so the chance it will be taken up by younger players is reduced accordingly, thus it is heard even less, etc. Ultimately the music must go out of print and is even more likely to be forgotten. This cycle has already occurred but it is now being broken. Public performances and new recordings are again bringing Karg's music into attention; out-of-print works are being reissued, although often only as copies of the original editions with their errors uncorrected. All this is a slow business, as was the baroque revival several decades ago.

2. Australia's connection with Karg-Elert was established through the letters initiated by A E H Nickson (1876-1964). They were 'open letters' shared with a small group of admirers in Victoria and Tasmania, all personal friends of Nickson. The present writer does not know whether Karg had contacts with Australians elsewhere (but Nickson states this was so in an essay, without giving any detail). Some key ingredients in the connection are as follows:

a. Nickson, born and raised in Melbourne, was a graduate music-student at the Royal College of Music in London from 1895 for three years and a church-organist in Surrey for two years from 1898. He resettled in Melbourne at the beginning of this century but maintained his English contacts and returned several times. It is probable that his friends in England introduced him to Karg's music c.1905-10 but this is speculation. In any case, he obviously was delighted with the music and started to play it at his Melbourne concerts; he even wrote to Karg to compliment him. Karg-Elert, always touched by any support of his work -particularly bearing in mind his rejection in Germany - responded warmly in 1913 and thus commenced a correspondence which persisted until 1929.

b. The Great War interrupted the letters but Margarete ('Greta') Bellmont, a German immigrant, musician and Nickson friend who acted as translator (Nickson knew no German and Karg had poor proficiency in English), evidently

kept contact via the mails with Karg's wife; she eventually became aware of their poverty. Nickson arranged that money be collected from his friends and associates at the University of Melbourne and a substantial cheque was sent in time for Christmas 1922, the first of several such gifts.

c. Karg was overcome with gratitude in his first major letter (January 1923) and chose that moment to announce that the Seven Pastels from the Lake of Constance, Opus 96, still awaiting publication (late 1923) had been dedicated to Nickson in August 1921. The Australian link was now firmly cemented.

d. The largest cheque, in time for Christmas 1923, evoked an immediate reply and the largest letter by far in the series: 28 sheets of foolscap, written over eight days, 20-28 December. This highly emotional letter deals with social conditions in Germany, philosophical and theological matters, comments on Karg's compositions and contains much humour which includes some phenomenal puns. With the link now at its peak, an Australian tour was planned in which Karg would bring his art-harmonium for public concerts and the composer, emotionally charged by his latest gift, gave a detailed plan of an organ-symphony he had just worked out in his mind which he proposed to dedicate 'to his Australian friends'. Both plans failed dismally: no German was permitted to enter Australia in the still-prevalent hysteria caused by the Great War and lost mail early in 1924 led to a misunderstanding which provoked the volatile Karg into destroying the symphony he had completed by then. The Karg-Nickson relationship remained warm but its intensity waned.

e. Nickson was always a loyal supporter and guarded the letters zealously. He never ceased to champion Karg's cause and taught his friend's music until the end of his long life. Early in the 1950s he wrote an article criticising the English for abandoning Karg's music whilst Nickson's pupils still kept it alive in Melbourne.

f. Professor Noël Nickson passed his father's papers over to the University of Melbourne c.1965 and they are now stored in the Grainger Museum. Detailed study from November 1995 led to the publication of the Karg-Elert letters by Academy Music in Adelaide a year later, with annotations and biographical notes, under the title, *The Harmony of the Soul*.

We are delighted to report that The Karg-Elert Society (based in Great Britain) has made its 1997 award to Harold Fabrikant 'in recognition of your outstanding contribution to the Karg-Elert scene during the past two years, particularly by your Adelaide Town Hall CD and the valuable compilation of the Karg-Elert letters *The Harmony of the Soul*'. An engraved trophy will be presented to Dr Fabrikant in March by Anthony Caldicott, chairman of The Karg-Elert Society, who will be in Melbourne at the time. We warmly congratulate Harold Fabrikant on this significant honour.

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