

Reversing the Past

by Mark Fisher

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Before considering the process of reversing the past or reconstruction in particular, I want you to digress with me a moment as I paint a backdrop which may make it easier for you to appreciate why I am so dedicated to a field of work which so many shy away from.

How often have you seen an old rusted hulk of a motor car body, sometimes with weeds or flowers sprouting from within it, being carried on the back of a lorry? I have.

Often though, it is only the remains of an almost rusted away chassis with the stark reminder of a steering column, part of an axle or spring and perhaps the remains of a wooden spoked wheel.

Have you seen or imagined these cars years later at a concours d'elegance or at an antique car rally?

How many of you have recently travelled behind the superb steam locomotive 3801?

Some may have even been privileged to travel on the steam launch 'Lady Hopetoun'; many I'm sure have shopped at the Queen Victoria Building; others have visited the Capitol Theatre.

Who has had the occasion to stand in awe in Westminster Abbey or even in the vestibule of Sydney Town Hall?

What, you may well ask, has all of this got to do with the restoration or reconstruction of pipe organs? Plenty.

Consider this: How many of us witness the young teenager from next door who proudly arrives home with his first car, only to spend the next few months or even years lowering the suspension, hotting up the engine, replacing the wheels and tyres, adding the most mind-blowing sound system and doing everything possible to make the car go faster, look different and sound much louder? What, again, is the connection to pipe organs? Much. Are not organists and enthusiastic amateurs like these teenagers at heart?

Right through the ages, the human race has liked to dabble in things scientific, liked to discover new ways, new versions, easier methods. We have sought

ways to save time, and now that it has become, it seems, the only criterion - money.

In Australia, committees, organists, amateurs, all both musical and unmusical, together with, I'm afraid, some organbuilders, have spend the last 150 years dreaming and scheming and too often being successful in visually, musically and physically defacing or even destroying a large number of the pipe organs to come to this country, and locally built ones too. Sadly, they've been at it even longer in other countries. What is it about us that makes us always want to meddle? Why can't they leave things alone?

This surely has become my catchcry during the last 11 years as I have begun each giant jigsaw of reconstruction - to unscramble the vandalism which has befallen many of the instruments which I am privileged to have had the opportunity to work on. It is almost inconceivable to me that the largest organ in the world 100 years ago right here in this city was still not good enough for its incumbent, who set about having it altered to suit his personal taste, even before the dust had begun to settle on the pipes. He even managed to include another gem from the same stable in his musical rampaging.

Even earlier, in another part of the country, Australia's most prolific organbuilder seems to have spent much of his time carrying out alterations and so-called improvements to nearly every organ to arrive in Melbourne - even before some of them were erected.

To quote but one.

The notable organ by Bevington & Sons, London, installed 1853 in St Francis Church, Melbourne, had its keyboards brought forward from the case to the gallery and three years later, back to the case again, during which 17 stops, including a new department, were added, and all in the first 20 years of its life. A litany of further work followed in 1886, 1889, 1898, 1899 (with each organist it seems) and, would you believe that the keyboards were moved forward again by two metres in 1910, this time with pneumatic action and many tonal additions? The organ was rebuilt in 1965 with electro-pneumatic action and further tonal additions, until finally, after an amazing 120 years' service, it was removed, and now has a remarkably peaceful existence in another Melbourne church with 16 of its original 25 ranks of pipes still in near perfect condition, 143 years after it arrived here.

To 'restore', the Oxford Dictionary tells us, is to bring back to its original state. To 're-construct' is to construct or create again. You will have heard from my colleagues, during this conference, of the background leading to the history of successful preservation of our musical heritage. You will hear their views and share their experiences in the changing attitudes of the last half century. There are many noble and ignoble, historic and not so historic, musical and unmusical, local and imported organs which survive today because of restoration, which has played so important a part of the preservation of pipe organs in New South Wales and indeed is the *raison d'être* of this conference.

What, however, is to be the fate of the many other organs which have suffered severe and even irreversible alteration or mutilation at the hands of those who

can only be likened to the teenager next door with his reckless ambition to improve the hapless machine he controls and to show off his ego? What hope for these instruments, large and small?

Although the restoration and reconstruction of pipe organs formerly damaged or altered beyond recognition has become the principal part of my work for more than a decade now, it was also the reason for my commencing organbuilding in 1959. The resurrection of what is sometimes only a pile of junk, gives me as much or even greater satisfaction than the building of new.

When building a new organ, the organbuilder is in control and can imagine and anticipate each step as it happens. Much the same is true with straight-forward restoration work where everything is present and can be well documented, then the various parts refurbished and placed back in position.

In the process of re-construction, it is vitally important that the personal views and work practices of the organbuilder always remain subservient to the workmanship, ideals and methods of the original builder and to whatever is left of the instrument. Very little can be planned or any work commenced until thorough investigation is made of what is present, and what is obviously absent. The detective work associated with the organ's reconstruction takes far longer than the actual building up of the missing sections and parts.

As well as researching all history of the particular organ from the time of its installation in the building, or any former sites, the history and records remaining (if any) must be sought from the organbuilder's order books and job books. Some of the English builders' records are remarkably well preserved and informative.

Having obtained whatever archival documentation is available, one must then begin a systematic search of the organ, the church and any other likely venues for any relics pertaining to the organ. In the case of the Thomas Jones organ at St Laurence, Barraba in NSW, parts of the organ were retrieved from the church, under the church, the blower shed, then from 16 kilometres away, a hay shed, a shearing shed and both inside and under the floor of the shearers' hut. Whilst sifting through a box of dirt and rubble, after the organ was brought to Sydney, the discovery of a small piece of fretwork alerted me to the possibility of the presence of pipe shades. This fact was then confirmed by laying the facade pipes out again and discovering the faint outline of the shades from where the last painting of the casework, whilst the pipes were in place, had left faint brush-marks.

Some vital clues to the details of the action for the Hill organ at St Luke's, Concord were unearthed, literally, from the ground under a trap door in the floor near the organ. The rusted remains of a bent iron roller arm with parts of a sticker attached confirmed that the pedal action here was by transverse roller board on the floor, not by an extension each side of the pedal coupler roller board as in a similar Hill organ used for reference. Of the six missing case panels, one was found on the ground under the tiered floor area at the rear of the church, one was found under the stage in the hall, another through a trapdoor under the stage to the underside of the hall floor and a fourth was the pack panel for a darts board in the youth fellowship room. A very fortunate

feature of this reconstruction was that the building frame and floor frame had not been re-painted, thus allowing faint indentations or paint smudges to be discovered along with previous screw holes, by the aid of a strong light source. I estimate that of all the reconstructed parts made for this organ, nearly 90% went back into the original screw holes.

The chamber organ at All Saints', Woollahra has so far defied all efforts to trace its origin. A pencilled note on the front rack board pronounces 'Upper Board for Fr. or Dr. Polding'. Archbishop John Bede Polding was the first Roman Catholic Bishop of Sydney from 1835 and Archbishop from 1842. A search of all Polding's correspondence to his cousin and agent in England, Fr. Paulinus Heponstall, has so far failed to shed any light on this little organ's arrival or purpose. There are, however, a number of unusual design features in the key and stop action as well as distinctive note markings on the feet of the wooden pipes and I am sure that positive identification will be possible when these details are circulated. Any organ builder who had notice such features would not forget them easily.

Part of the problems associated with reconstruction has been the procuring of timber to match that originally used. Most of the species used in English organs of 100 plus years ago have long been out of use. I am fortunate that, after years of searching, I have just taken delivery of reclaimed supplies of pitch pine, yellow pine, Scots pine and Douglas fir or Columbian, which is a very fine grained oregon. Supplies of English elm have been procured from the New England area of NSW and the three species of mahogany most used by the English builders are also now at hand.

Reproduction of different types of stop labels has also occupied a great deal of my time, particularly reproducing those plates and labels originally done by the endolithic process, a method no longer in use. I am happy to say that I have a method in place now whereby any label and engraving may be reproduced as exact facsimiles of the original, with any of its faults or irregularities, and existing engraving may even be gone over on the label itself where some areas have become worn or partly obliterated. I am glad that this facility, though expensive, has already been made use of by two of my colleagues in Australia.

I have spoken with some detail of the many varied aspects of reconstruction, but what of the original parts: the pipes, the windchests, the action and all the other myriad pieces which go to make up the organ? How are they treated?

It is now that I take you back to my opening remarks. It is my philosophy that the restoration or reconstruction of an historic pipe organ, one that is expected to do its work for another 60 or 100 years, cannot be thought of any differently from the emergence of a beautiful 'as new' antique car from a rusty and wasted hulk. Neither is a static display, but a working asset to its owner. Both can be viewed as accurate glimpses into the past and, as such, can be used for teaching, for comparing and for performing. In the same way that a vintage car is completely restored to as new condition using original components where that may be still possible, tyres, electrical components, fuel, paint, leather, timber, electro-plated parts and engine components are from today's supplies or technology. Do we worry if the original engine block no longer has traces on it of the first oil to be used in it, or the upholstery has different stitching? The

original condition of the object can and certainly must be documented by many different means, so that the original state is accurately remembered.

However, the most important reason for restoration or reconstruction is that we, today, are able to view, to listen to and, most importantly, to use that valuable asset which we have preserved from the past. People want to see and hear a pipe organ working and reliably at that, in the same light that its builder saw it. Every part, therefore, of that organ must be given equal consideration and returned wherever possible to the as new condition that its builder saw. It may come as a surprise to many people, but organs - and organbuilders - obtained their reputation on the sound that they made when they were built, together with the reliability with which they operated, and, in the case of organs sent to Australia, the condition in which they arrived. The only sound of an organ that matters is the sound it was intended to make when new, not the sound heard four generations later. To expect anything other than this is to make a mockery of restoration.

To achieve that result in most of the organs with which I have dealt required some, or considerable, work on the pipes. How can you be sure, you ask, that you are not altering the sound of the pipe if you touch it? Do any of us here honestly believe that by the time the organ is packed, shipped, unpacked, erected and tuned again, there have been no changes already? As I have mentioned earlier, many organs were damaged, some quite severely during shipment.

A cone tuned pipe, with original cut up and nicking, if any, is only happy to play on a limited pressure range. As pitch can easily be determined by the very large pipes, which are not easily affected by pressure change, correct pressure can therefore be determined by the pitch of the smaller pipes. The pipes of the Hill organ at St Luke's, Concord and the Walker organ at St Stephen's, Newtown suffered considerable damage as a result of very poor cone tuning efforts. In both these organs, when the pipes had undergone considerable panel beating and re-soldering repairs and were placed again in the organ, whole ranks were found to be in tune in octaves, even before tuning commenced.

As both a pipemaker and voicer, I have confidence in what I do. Voicers, by nature, are expert mimickers. They copy always either the sound which they hear in their minds or the sounds which pipes around them make. It is an insult to a pipe to expect it to play in the manner in which the builder and voicer intended if it is out of round, dented, lined with dirt, suffered movement of the languid, or had its style of nicking (if any) changed. In manufacture, pipes are cut, rolled, sometimes even hammered, heated, washed and scrubbed and polished or even burnished. They are given their own inscriptions, tuned and then transported to their place of installation.

A confident restorer will have no problems with returning both the wood and metal pipes in his care to virtually as new condition, even still maintaining their original markings. This takes a great deal of time and patience and I have spent many years perfecting this process which is a hallmark of my work.

So, next time you stand in Westminster Abbey, give eternal thanks that someone understood that it was not the historic patina of 300 years on the interior that mattered, rather, the masterpiece preserved underneath that we are now able to view.

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