

# Frederick Earle (1876-1961)

by Alan Glover

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Undoubtedly one of Australia's finest organists of the first half of the 20th century was Walter Frederick Earle, yet his name may not be widely known among present-day organists. What might be called his 'genetic legacy', however, can be heard in the excellent organ playing of his grandson, Dr Robin Batterham, Commonwealth Chief Scientist, who is also assistant organist of The Scots' Church, Melbourne. Frederick (or Fred, as he was generally known - never Walter) lived long enough to be well pleased at his grandson's serious interest in the organ, advising him to have only the best teaching available.

Born at Stirling, Illinois, U.S.A. in 1876 of English parents from Portsmouth, Hampshire, Fred as a young child returned with his parents and siblings to their Portsmouth home at 4 St Mary's Street, Portsea. In boyhood he would spend every possible moment listening to the organ at the nearby St Mary's, Portsea, a magnificent neo-Gothic church with a fine three-manual Walker organ of 1889. At mealtimes he was often missing and his youngest sister Sarah would be sent to the church to bring him home. As a youth, to be an organist became Fred's aim in life, thus it was wonderful for him to be awarded a five year scholarship at St Mary's - the start of a long, happy and successful career.

Fred's musical training was most comprehensive. As well as a thorough training in piano, organ and choral works, it included copying, much manuscript work such as being able to write for soloist, copy and arrange music up to the size of a large orchestra. Each student eventually had to be perfect in orchestrating items for up to 100 musicians. In later life the breadth of his training was to equip Fred Earle superbly for his notable career with the Australian Broadcasting Commission. But that was many years after Portsmouth.

As a young man Fred spent five and a half years as organist of the Ryde Congregational Church on the Isle of Wight where he would have played a two-manual organ built in 1885 by Forster & Andrews. On the crossing from Portsmouth he usually had his pet dog for company. He regarded the visit to Ryde as being the highlight of his week. As an initial member of the Ryde Philharmonic Society Fred was organist for their first performance of 'Messiah' and 'Elijah'. He was praised in contemporary reviews for his "complete mastery of the organ" and "the high quality of the organ playing of Mr Frederick Earle."

He is also listed in old programmes as organist for concerts of a general nature in the Portsmouth Town Hall where he performed upon an 1887-90 Gray & Davison four-manual organ of 52 stops. His solos included items with popular appeal such as Mendelssohn's 'War March of the Priests', pieces by Dubois, Mozart, Baptiste and others. He also became a Masonic Lodge organist. On his leaving the church position in 1900 the citation accompanying 'A Clock and Purse of Gold' bore 60

signatures and wrote of "The esteem and regard we entertain for you and the conspicuous ability you have displayed as Organist of the Ryde Congregational Church, raising as you have the musical part of our service to a high state of proficiency." It concluded by wishing him "a Bright and Prosperous Career."

We can imagine Fred's elation at being appointed assistant organist at his beloved St Mary's Portsea. Here he was able to practise to his heart's content, sometimes as much as eight hours a day. He revered the music of J.S. Bach and would later be acclaimed as an exponent of Bach's organ works.

In 1907 Fred married Lucie Martin at St Barnabas' Church, Pimlico, London. They had planned to move to San Francisco, but the great earthquake of 1906 changed that idea and they decided to make a permanent home in Australia. They went to Ballarat where Fred became organist and choirmaster at the city Congregational Church which had a two-manual Fuller organ of 22 stops, very similar in design to the organ he played at Ryde Congregational Church, and where Fincham & Son were asked to name "a price to increase the power and improve quality of tone of some stops" in 1908. Fred also became a piano demonstrator and salesman at a Ballarat music house.

In 1910 the Earles moved to Geelong where Fred was soon acknowledged as that city's outstanding organist. The next 22 years were spent in Geelong. Fred was appointed organist and choirmaster of the central Yarra Street Methodist Church. The organ was a two-manual Grandfather Fincham of 1873. Ten original ranks have survived two rebuildings and enlargements. Yet although Fred Earle spent many years playing organs in Geelong and was described as being "in a class by himself", the Geelong public in the main knew his music-making in an entirely different context.

Having a wife and young family to support, it was necessary for Fred to have other work. These were the days of the silent film and Fred became film pianist at the large Geelong Theatre. He formed a small orchestra at the theatre, arranging and conducting the music himself. It is on record that "Quite a large proportion of the patrons went to enjoy the music rather than to see pictures. Mr Earle's flair for orchestration no doubt accounted for his outstanding success as a conductor." An honour for his orchestra in July 1918 was to be asked to play at the Geelong City Hall on the occasion of the mayoral reception to Dame Nellie Melba. An item that particularly appealed to Melba was the singing of 'Sometimes', music by Fred Earle sung by a little girl of six years accompanied by Marjorie Earle aged nine. Melba led the applause crying "Bravo, Bravo!" She then complimented the two children, asking them their names. This happy memory remains with the pianist, now Marjorie Batterham, aged 93, mother of the aforementioned Robin: "We two children really thought we were the luckiest two in the world."

During the First World War Fred Earle was pianist and orchestral conductor for a Geelong amateur entertainment company, The Blackbirds, a talented group of male vocalists which began performing publicly in 1917. Their concerts raised considerable sums of money for Red Cross and other patriotic objectives. The company played to crowded audiences in the Geelong Theatre and to large gatherings at Ballarat and Queenscliff.

After 14 years at the theatre Fred was obliged to relinquish his position owing to ill-health. Coinciding with this was the advent of 'talkies' hence on his recovery the theatre regretted that "Owing to the installation of Talking Pictures at the Theatre we are unable to re-instate Mr Earle, as the Orchestra is being dispensed with

entirely." The management praised "in the very highest terms Mr Earle's musical ability, both as pianist and conductor."

Through all the years of his theatre work Fred had continued as a church organist in Geelong. He was at St Peter and Paul's (architect William Wardell) when the Fincham organ arrived in 1925 and at St Mary of the Angels before a larger organ, also by Fincham, was installed in that grand church in 1930. At St Mary's the high standard of music - good choristers with excellent sight reading and singing abilities - made Fred's task a happy one. Often a full sung Mass at a morning service would be preceded by only one rehearsal. The details of his 1932 handing over as organist to Dorothy Glover, whom he regarded as his most talented pupil, are recounted in the July 2001 *OHTA News* article on Dorothy Glover. This marked Fred Earle's departure from Geelong after long being acknowledged as its leading musician.

The start of the 1930s Great Depression made it hard for musicians seeking permanent work. With the dismantling of his Geelong Theatre Orchestra it was off to Melbourne for Fred to see what might be there for musicians. The relatively well-paid positions at the four Wurlitzer organs in the big city theatres were all taken; he would have set a high standard had his enquiries led to an appointment. As it transpired, the varied skills acquired in his young days at Portsmouth were now to serve him well.

Newly created was the post of Music Librarian at the fledgling Australian Broadcasting Commission's Victorian headquarters at 3LO Melbourne. Fred was auditioned in 1932 by Mr W.G. James, the ABC's Director of Music, the test being to write four or five bars of 'God Save the King' perhaps for a large orchestra or only for a pianist. Fred Earle, the successful applicant, was on the job just seven weeks after the ABC began. In fact he was 'on the air' almost immediately as the composer of the first prelude to all ABC News broadcasts. This was a short fanfare; incidentally his daughter Marjorie Batterham, as his heir, still holds the copyright.

In addition to his work as Music Librarian, Fred became increasingly involved with the development of the re-formed Melbourne Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Professor Bernard Heinze. He was to receive high praise from both the Commission and conductors for his work as its Arranger and Orchestrator. Furthermore his keyboard skills were quickly recognised and he provided accompaniment for various artists on numerous occasions. Inevitably he also became the official ABC Organist whenever required at the Melbourne Town Hall.

Fred Earle's poise at the organ always impressed - steady, in complete control however demanding the music, never showy. Robion Batterham recalls that as a child of eight he would sit beside his grandfather at the Town Hall organ at rehearsals and "Even as a child it was clear to me that he was extremely competent." One incident worth recounting happened when Fred was organist for an orchestral concert conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham. The music required the organist to count 63 bars then come in with almost full organ. Quite a test. After the concert Sir Thomas congratulated Mr Earle. A Celebrity Concert programme for 1949 has Frederick Earle in Handel's Concerto for Orchestra with Organ Obligato, the programme noting that "The organ obligato is treated in more or less virtuoso fashion."

Versatility was a feature of Fred Earle's organ playing. In 1936 ABC Melbourne acquired a Hammond, the early 'pipeless' organ. Naturally it was assumed that Fred would be the studio organist. In fact it was stated that no-one else was to play the instrument. He had been pianist for the popular 'Village Glee Club' broadcasts. His

new duties were to include 'Devotional services, special organ recitals, special ensemble programmes, and in association with small orchestras.' The ABC certainly intended to make good use of the Hammond - and of Fred Earle! Yet there was no suggestion that he might be relieved of any other duties.

In August 1936 Bernard Heinze wrote to the Commissioners expressing the view that "Mr Earle is one of the most valuable officers in the Commission's employ, but I am afraid that if he goes on working as he is at the moment he won't be in the employ much longer. The man is hopelessly overworked and understaffed." A supporting letter from W.G. James, Federal Controller of Music, advocated an increase in salary for Mr Earle as his duties now included much studio organ playing. Yet another supporter for a salary increase was the Victorian Manager of the ABC, Mr B.W. Kirke, who sensibly recommended that a deputy librarian be appointed, one who could also assist with orchestrations: "Already Mr Earle has more work than he can reasonably cope with which necessitates working unduly long hours." The letters were fruitful: a salary increase was granted and Mrs Batterham recalls her father's relief when Mr Ian Bird was appointed as his competent assistant.

A fascinating article entitled 'A Ghost Critic' appeared in the Melbourne newspaper *The Argus* (3 January 1934). It told of an unseen anonymous person who auditioned aspiring singers wishing to broadcast over the ABC. "This unseen critic, an expert judge of singing and music, listens to a test from a nearby studio. From old men with quavering voices to the young untrained, almost daily his intelligence is insulted. He writes a considered report on each, always thoughtful but sometimes devastating. One man who claimed to have a 'musical face' sought a hearing! He got it. But his name is not among the 600 artists whose records are filed and who are called on for engagements from time to time." The un-named critic was, of course, Fred Earle.

Given the diversity of his work it is no wonder that Fred had little time at the ABC to relax, yet he was in his element and could cope with anything asked of him. He was known for never losing his composure, however extreme the pressure. Occasionally he was able to take a few minutes to meet his friend Dr A.E. Floyd, organist and choirmaster at St Paul's Cathedral, for a chat over a cup of cocoa at a little café behind St Paul's. The two were almost exact contemporaries and held each other in high regard. Both were Englishmen spending the greater part of their careers contributing to the musical life of Australia.

In 1959 Fred Earle retired. Though still a model of efficiency, the onset of deafness was becoming a problem. He had a wealth of achievement behind him. In the early days as Music Librarian he had travelled thousands of miles in Victoria on concert activities. In addition to his work already considered, he had been deputy conductor of the Wireless Chorus Choir and had written incidental music for radio plays. No wonder he was to be sorely missed. The conductor Joseph Post spoke for many when he described Fred Earle as "One of the best team mates anyone could wish to have." An earlier tribute from Sir Bernard Heinze in reply to Fred's letter of congratulation on the award of his knighthood is worth printing in full:

My Dear Mr Earle,

I was delighted to receive your kind congratulations.

I can never think of you but with a great warming of heart with gratitude. That our association has gone on through all these years in the dedication of our lives to the good, the beautiful and the true is something that fills my heart with happiness.

You have been a true and loyal friend and I will never cease to be conscious of it nor thankful to you,

Yours ever,

#### 14.1.49 Bernard Heinze

Speaking of himself, Fred Earle attributed his long and active life to "Living carefully, a deep interest in gardening, lots of hard work and no regrets." Perhaps understandable is that those who admired his superb organ playing had regrets that this talent had become somewhat submerged within the full scope of his career. Yet that it did so was inevitable in the light of his earlier need to provide security for a growing family in difficult times, security which could only be assured by recourse to his other skills.

Frederick Earle, splendid organist and multi-talented musician, loving husband and father, greatly loved by his wife and three daughters, departed this life peacefully in 1961.

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