

Attitudes to organs in the Wesleyan churches of New South Wales 1855-1902

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Pipe organs have traditionally been a status symbol for the major Christian denominations in Australia. They represent wealth and culture and, as such instruments vary tremendously in size and musical potential, the most impressive examples have always possessed the power to attract church musicians of high stature. This fact is very significant to the music-making of any church because the skill of a musician is often critical to the nature and extent of a church's musical programme. Other factors, such as the remuneration of organists and choir leaders, are also significant in determining the staffing, and therefore the quality, of music-making within a church.

In respect of the phenomenon of status, it is clear that the Methodists of New South Wales were at a disadvantage when compared with the Anglicans, Congregationalists and Presbyterians and even when compared with Methodists interstate. The Church was not especially wealthy, and in the small number of cases where pipe organs were purchased, they often consisted of the bare minimum of stops and sometimes left with space for the supply of additional ranks when funds became available. The fact that many Wesleyan churches, even some with sizeable congregations, could only afford reed organs meant that the opportunities for an extensive musical programme were often restricted.¹ Moreover, organists had limited freedom to express their musicality within the service setting and were often additionally expected to provide their services in an honorary capacity.

The combination of these factors had far-reaching implications for the church, extending well into the twentieth century. Many musicians nurtured by Methodism have found it necessary to transfer permanently to other denominations to realise their talents and advance their careers. Frederick Morley, organist of the Bourke Street Church for many years and widely sought after as an organ consultant, became organist of St John's Anglican Church, Darlinghurst, after advising on the installation there of a large 3-manual Hill & Son organ in 1886.² One twentieth-century case is that of Mervyn Byers, organist in the 1940s and 50s at Wesley Church, Concord, who became the organist of St Andrew's Cathedral, subsequently migrating to England to undertake a similar position at Selby Abbey. This process continues today in the Uniting Church and there is now such a shortage of competent players that the whole image of the instrument and its music has been tarnished to such an extent that several churches have opted to exist without any organ music at all.

The above preliminary remarks need to be constantly borne in mind when considering aspects related to the use of organs in local Wesleyan Churches.

Organs were held in suspicion by the early Wesleyans as a result of their association with the rituals of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches and its potential to dominate or replace the special atmosphere of corporate fervour. With the passage of time, however, the leading of singing passed from the hands of a precentor into those of an organist, with the time frame for change being determined by local circumstances.

There can be no doubt that there was, by the end of the period, a general consensus in the Church that organs were desirable and that a pipe organ should be the ultimate goal. Such a view did not always pertain. George Hawke, an "old Methodist" precentor who lived in the Bathurst region, in two of his writings, summarised this early opposition to organs, as follows:

Though I have been passionately fond of instrumental music, I could not recommend much of it in divine service. A single instrument of not very loud tone might be a help in small congregations where there are but a few singers; but I cannot conceive that it is so conducive to spiritual worship as the human voice.³ . . .

A scientific choir with a band of instruments, a harmonium, or an organ well played has a tendency to affect the passions just in the same manner and with such effect as the music of an opera does, and it passes off as quickly, but the heart is not affected as it often is when the congregation joins in sacred song.⁴

This outlook received diminishing support from the 1870s onward and by 1887 previous musical practices, including those which used instruments other than organs for congregational support, were considered quaint, but irrelevant:

As the useful old flageolet, such as used to guide the choir at Ryde, and the harmonious concertina, one of which, played behind a red curtain, led the singing at a little bush chapel near Hobart, have given place to the Alexandre harmonium and Smith American organ; so, in some of our churches, have even these statelier instruments given way in their turn to the regal pipe organ, with its majestic appearance and rich softness of sound. And the possession of these real organs opens up fresh possibilities of giving musical entertainments of an attractive and elevating character without all the immense effort and training required to get up a concert.⁵

In the same era, the connexional journal published a number of articles which elevated the status of organs, suggesting that they were of divine inspiration and could be used to bring the masses into the church. One of these, entitled "Dr Parker on Church Music" highlighted these attitudes:

Think of those great churches - I mean by churches all kinds of places of worship -standing nearly empty every Sunday night of the year. Why not have music in them? Music would fill them; music would startle the old

echoes; music would make the walls wonder what was the matter with them. Music - God's first-born angel ! Try music.

How many noble church organs are standing dumb tonight that might be doing the work of God in the minds and hearts of people? They will be used here and there for the purpose of eking out the ebbing life of some aged and asthmatic common metre tune mumbled by persons of decaying respectability, when they might be interpreting infinite and thrilling melodies to hearts in which baffled hope is dying. God made the organ ! .

. .

He, mighty God, put it into the mind and heart of man to make that king of instruments, the organ, which can announce a jubilee, or bless a mourner's heart.⁶

While Dr Parker's position can be seen as extreme when compared to the beliefs of George Hawke, the church nonetheless rapidly embraced organs so that by 1883 the policy expressed by the editors of the *Weekly Advocate* was that "in all our Churches we must provide instrumental music - that of a good [pipe] organ, or, in default, a good harmonium."⁷ It is interesting to observe that the harmonium (the term, as used here, clearly implies any reed organ) is firmly established here as inferior in status to pipe organs.

As mentioned earlier, the New South Wales Wesleyans did not have sufficient financial resources to arrange the installation of a great number of pipe organs in the nineteenth century. By 1902 they owned only 18 pipe organs, this number being considerably fewer than the 28 to be found in the slightly less populous state of Victoria, but where Methodism enjoyed greater strength and wealth. Further comparisons can be made in New South Wales, where the Presbyterians (with similar membership numbers to the Wesleyans) had installed 20 pipe organs by 1902. Very significant is the fact that the much smaller Congregational denomination had 21 instruments by the same year.⁸

The great majority of pipe organs installed in local Wesleyan churches were of English origin and included samples of the work of builders such as Hill & Son, Henry Willis, Alfred Hunter, W.E. Richardson, Henry Jones, T.C. Lewis and Wadsworth Bros. These organs were erected here by local builders including C.J. Jackson, William Davidson and Charles Richardson. On occasion, these local builders received contracts to carry out major contracts including new organs and rebuilds, and the work of William Davidson is most prominent in this regard.

Pipe organs installed in local Wesleyan churches were all typical of the Victorian age, although it could be added that, for reasons of economy, they were generally voiced to produce the maximum chorus effect from a relatively small number of stops. Additionally, the local instruments were centrally placed at the front or back of the building where tonal egress could be maximised.⁹ Surviving instruments at Bathurst (William Davidson, 1874) and at Wesley Church, Wollongong (Henry Jones, 1871 - originally at Bourke Street, Sydney) reveal all such features: the powerful choruses of these instruments are among

the strongest and most brilliant of the period and were clearly designed principally for the provision of effective congregational support.

The list below provides a useful summary of the pipe organs known to have been installed in Wesleyan Churches of New South Wales during the period discussed in this article.

Manuals

Speaking Stops

Date Location of Organ Builder (As in 1902)

1844 York Street, Sydney (rebuilt 1868, 1880, Mostly Jackson/Fincham 3/35 1902)

1868 Wesley Church, Regent Street, Chippendale Henry Jones, enl. 1902 2/24

(First organ by Kinloch sold 1879 for Jones organ)

1871 Bourke Street, Surry Hills Henry Jones, enl. Davidson, 2/18 1878

1874 Bathurst Davidson, enl. 1887 2/16

1875 Stanmore Davidson, enl. Richardson 2/16 1889

1875 William Street, Woolloomooloo Henry Jones 2/?

1878 Newtown Hill 2/13

1878 Parramatta Davidson 1/7

1881 West Maitland Willis 2/14

1885 Ashfield Elliot

1885 North Sydney W.E. Richardson 2/7

1886 Newcastle Supplied by Lewis 2/9

1886 Goulburn Wadsworth Bros 2/17

1887 Paddington W.E. Richardson 2/11

1888 Waverley Hunter 3/24

1890 Orange (an organ purchased but not installed)

1893 Burwood Hunter 3/29

1898 Rockdale Unknown 1/4

Further detail of the above organs is provided in Rushworth's *Historic Organs of New South Wales*. Such has been the destruction of these organs, that only three may be considered to have survived without major alteration, a further

nine have been substantially altered by rebuilding (sometimes in new locations) and a further six have been completely destroyed.

Organs: Service Usage

The various connexional journals and secular newspapers, while providing substantial information on the use of organs in the concert setting, provide almost no information as to how organs were played in Methodist services in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Virtually nothing has been found to describe performance practices (such as phrasing, articulation, and registration) in respect of hymn accompaniments and organ voluntaries. The great majority of players would have performed upon reed organs in small buildings; such players were generally amateurs with little or no training, and played without remuneration. Standards would, therefore, have varied considerably, there being no consistent approach to playing style. John Spencer Curwen, in his *Studies in Worship Music* of 1880, provides general observations of the contemporary British approach to playing pipe and reed organs.¹⁰ Many of his comments would have been appropriate to the local setting and are summarised below:

- a) Only a minority of church organists received formal training.
- b) The majority of organists were either unwilling or unable to seek "improvement".
- c) Where voluntaries were used, the prelude tended to be of a subdued character, with the postlude a contrast:

Some organists have such an unvarying habit of making a deafening noise as the congregation retire that it is necessary to make for the door with all speed after the benediction, lest one should get caught in the storm.¹¹

- d) The majority of voluntaries were chosen by the organist without reference to the subject of the sermon.
- e) Extemporisation, in the context of a voluntary, was a rarity, but when undertaken was generally poorly conceived, with aimless harmonic motion, drawn-out cadences and "swell pumping" to produce expression.
- f) In the accompaniment of hymns there was a tendency to drown out the singers with excessive volume. The majority of organists had a poor sense of timing because the sustained tone of the instrument was "an inducement to laggard players."¹² Staccato playing was used by some players to maintain the pulse in hymn singing. Where this style was suggested as a remedy for unrhythmic singing, the pedals were to maintain a legato style.
- g) Word painting was often achieved during hymn accompaniments, through altering the stops, changing manuals, or through manipulating the swell pedal. Excessive use of this technique was considered vulgar.
- h) The use of ornaments (such as the acciaccatura used at the start of a musical phrase) in hymns had largely died but the "obnoxious" habits of

"suspending the fourth in the closing tonic chord" and "simultaneously putting down the left foot on the tonic and the semitone below it in a *fortissimo* close", were still maintained in some quarters.¹³

i) The use of varied harmonies and the insertion of melodic passing notes were common and were recommended among skilled players.

j) In Britain, harmoniums and "American" organs were in the majority but such instruments and their players were of low status.¹⁴

k) The playing of harmoniums (which had greater expressive powers than "American organs") was often exceptionally bad, and sometimes comical:

Everyone with an observant ear must have noticed how the harmonium is abused. . . The vulgar player keeps up a perpetual see-saw, analogous to "swell pumping" which players of the same calibre keep up at the [pipe] organ. . . He jerks irregularly at the beginning, the middle or the end of each note of a hymn-tune, varying these musical spasms with staccato, which always comes so as to break a musical or verbal phrase. . . The effect reminds one of a child playing with a squeaking doll, or of an infant trying to play a concertina, and unable to control it.¹⁵

l) The American organ was played more musically than the harmonium, largely due to its more stable dynamic output, but, like the harmonium, it was often played by ill-prepared pianists who did not understand organ articulation.

m) The division of stops in reed organs to provide separate treble and bass registers had the advantage of allowing the organist to emphasise the melodic line through drawing more (or louder) stops in the treble. While such facility could well apply to pipe organs with divided stops, no local Wesleyan pipe organ of the period was equipped in this way.

Some of the above features, especially a) - f), may still be observed in church organ playing today, lending support to the notion that Curwen's comments would have been a fair summary of the situation in local Wesleyan churches of the nineteenth century.

Organ Voluntaries: Brief remarks

To conduct an exhaustive examination of the pieces organists played in services is well beyond the scope of this article. An overwhelming amount of music was printed and, although some

incomplete local collections survive (such as those of Arnold and Livingstone Mote and of W.A. Pogson), the organists concerned were active largely in the early twentieth century. Moreover, although some publishers provided the date of publication on their editions, the majority did not. The descriptions of concerts provided by contemporary writers give a good indication of the range of music in the repertoire of the era.

Local Wesleyan organists would have purchased most of their music from the leading Sydney stores of W. Bullard, J. Corbett, W.H. Paling, J. Reading and

the Wesleyan Book Depot, all operating at various times in the period of study. All of these firms, with several others, advertised extensively in the connexional journal (the *Christian Advocate and Wesleyan Record*, 1858-76; the *Weekly Advocate*, 1876-91; *The Methodist*, 1892+). The editions available were largely from British publishers, including the firms of Ashdown, Boosey, Chappell, Curwen and Novello. It is also highly probably that many organists would have supplemented their repertoire with hymns and their own arrangements of choral and instrumental music, as is the case today.

In the Wesleyan churches of New South Wales instrumental voluntaries were not played at the commencement of the period because the church Laws did not permit them; their introduction was gradual, with variations from place to place.¹⁶ At the end of the period, however, they were commonplace, and performed before and after services and during the offering.¹⁷ As with so many other aspects of music-making (such as the introduction of Victorian tunes, gospel hymns and choir anthems) the era of change was the 1870s; one writer, "Junior", confirms that the use of offertory voluntaries was not uniform in the Wesleyan church at this time, but was to be recommended:

During its [the offering's] progress a voluntary should be played, and continued till the stewards take their seats. I have attended services where the instrumentalist sits like a statue, and the congregation wait impatiently with nothing to engage their attention but the chink of coin.¹⁸

In spite of the above sentiments, organ voluntaries were still a source of contention among older Methodists as late as 1880, as the following comment shows:

In many of our chapels there is a jig played on the instrument at the close of the service to "march" the people out of the sanctuary. . .

I believe we shall never have prosperity in our Church, with corresponding increase in Church members as of old, until the evil of such changes and associations be more generally acknowledged and strenuously opposed by the leading members of our church.¹⁹

This negative view of voluntaries was not sustained in the church and by 1895 the editors of the *Methodist* were receiving review copies of organ and choral music, recommending them, as shown in this extract:

We have received from J. Curwen and Sons, London, some specimens of new music. . .

Vol.XIV of "The Harmonium Album", [contains] a nice selection of short pieces for Church voluntaries, mostly new. We can heartily recommend the above-mentioned publication.²⁰

Remuneration and Blowing

To conclude the section on organs two additional points need to be made: one is the aspect of remuneration for organists, and the other concerns the institution of organ blowing.

In the great majority of Wesleyan churches, organists performed their duties without any form of recompense, although in some instances an honorarium was paid to cover, among other things, the cost of music. Where organists had more duties (such as at York Street, Sydney) a stipend was paid.²¹ The attitude and experience of the majority of players was summed up by T.W. Craven, of William Street:

I hold, that a man having abilities and talents conferred on him by God, ought to use those talents in the service of God gratuitously. . . in my own case, I have had the privilege of presiding at the organ and harmonium, in Wesleyan Churches, in England and Sydney, for the past 18 years, more or less, and never received one penny piece, and further, never will.²²

The above sentiments have prevailed in the church right through to the present, but this spirit of service has not always been of benefit to the church. Payment creates an expectation that organists will be responsible in terms of practice and performance; while the volunteer, often with good intentions, is under no official obligation. It is sometimes easier to remove the remunerated organist whose services are unsatisfactory, but, on the contrary, it is near impossible to do the same to a volunteer, especially if the player concerned has given long service. Some congregations have, therefore, endured many decades of very poor organ playing which has marred the quality of music-making.

The great majority of pipe organs and some of the larger reed organs were blown manually and it was customary for boys to be engaged, sometimes with a small financial reward, to operate the pump handles. Many legends survive which relate to mishaps in the activity. A typical story comes from Wagga Wagga, where manual power was required for a large reed organ:

For more than a quarter of a century, a regularly recurring payment by the Trustees was then "to a boy, for pumping organ". The system placed the onus for a satisfactory musical accompaniment upon organist and blower as a team and there were times when the teamwork faltered or broke down. Unless sufficiently vigorous pumping was maintained, an intended crescendo was likely to emerge as a despairing sigh and an inattentive organ blower could all too easily destroy the mood of voluntaries and hymns. . . On one occasion, at sermon time, as he relaxed on his seat behind the organ, well hidden from the minister's sight, he was attracted by the view of the outside world visible through the open window nearby. Acting on impulse, he clambered out, with the intention of returning in a few minutes in readiness for his labours during the final hymn. The sermon ended, the minister announced the hymn, but the organist could not produce a sound. The lad had discovered with consternation that he could not reach the window sill from the ground outside. He was obliged to re-enter the church by the main door, suffering the irate frown of the preacher and disapproving glances of the congregation as he made his way to his post at the organ.²³

The above quotation is a reminder of the importance of organ music in the Wesleyan Church of the late-nineteenth century. The role played by organists

(and blowers) was critical to the lead given to singing and to the overall atmosphere of worship services.

notes:

1. Included in those important centres where Methodists were unable to install pipe organs in the nineteenth century are Albury, Balmain, Armidale, Grafton, Manly, Mudgee, Penrith, Port Macquarie, Singleton, Tamworth, Wagga Wagga, Windsor, Wollongong and Yass. The Anglicans, by way of contrast, had pipe organs in all these places by 1902.

2. Rushworth, *Historic Organs of New South Wales*. (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1988), 426.

3. George Hawke, *Wesleyan Methodism in New South Wales*. (Falmouth: Fred H. Earle, 1879), 36.

4. George Hawke, "Congregational singing", *Christian Advocate & Wesleyan Record*, 1 July 1873, 77. It is interesting to note that Hawke has expressed a similar outlook to that of Wesley and comparisons may extend to the views of Augustine - c.f. St Augustine, *Confessions*: "Thus float I between peril of pleasure and an approved profitable custom. . ." in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1950), 74.

5. "An Organ Recital", *Weekly Advocate*, 27 August 1887, 225.

6. "Dr Parker on Church Music", *Weekly Advocate*, 2 May 1885, 43. Dr Parker was a prominent nineteenth-century Congregational clergyman, noted for his work at the City Temple, London, during this period.

7. "Church Music", *Weekly Advocate*, 21 July 1883, 132.

8. John Maidment and others, *Gazetteer of Pipe Organs in Australia*. (Melbourne: Society of Organists [Vic] Inc.), passim.

9. Of all the Methodist pipe organs in New South Wales, only the Waverley and Burwood instruments were located in chambers at the side of the chancel.

10. John Spencer Curwen, *Studies in Worship Music*, London: Curwen & Sons, 1880, 91-112.

11. Ibid., 94.

12. Ibid., 98.

13. Ibid., 101.

14. The harmonium (which reached its peak in French instruments, especially those manufactured under the "Alexandre" label) relies on air blown through metal reeds, while American organs draw air through the

reeds by suction. Harmoniums characteristically speak with greater promptitude than American organs.

15. Curwen, *Studies in Worship Music*, 110.

16. The term "voluntary" can be taken to mean any piece performed by an organist as a solo in the service. The use of this term has a long history in Britain.

17. Methodists never made use of an offertory hymn, common in Anglican churches.

18. Junior, "Ritualism in the Wesleyan Church", *Christian Advocate & Wesleyan Record*, 1 September, 1873, 93.

10. George Hawke, *Reflections on Methodism*, Bathurst: J.C. White, Printer, Free Press Office, 1880.

11. *Methodist*, 3 August, 1895, 8.

12. "The Central Mission", *Weekly Advocate*, 14 June, 1890, 106.

13. T.W. Craven, Letter to the Editor, *Weekly Advocate*, 2 January, 1874, 156.

14. R.E. Wade, *The Methodists of Wagga Wagga and District*, Wagga Wagga: Parish Council of the Uniting Church, 1980, 195. For a further anecdote on blowers and a comical caricature of a typical Victorian church organist, the reader is referred to Old Boomerang [pseudonym], "A Touchy Organist", *Sydney Mail*, 1 April 1876, Supplement, 2.

* From *Music-Making in the Wesleyan Churches of New South Wales, 1855-1902*.

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