

# The Conservation of Organs in an Age of Uncertainty

by Kelvin Hastie

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## Introduction

In a conference dealing with the conservation of church fittings entitled "tradition and change" it is essential that consideration be given to issues surrounding the conservation of organs. A pipe organ will often represent the single most valuable artefact in a church building, and in some instances will be of greater historical significance than the building itself. Moreover, organs physically embody the traditional musical culture of many Australian Christian churches and because that culture is changing, the future of the instrument needs careful consideration.

## Australia's Organ Heritage: some basic facts

1. Organs are used extensively by mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches. Orthodox churches and other religious faiths generally do not use organs, nor do many of the recently-established Pentecostalist congregations.
2. Foot-blown reed organs, once widespread in Australia, have all but disappeared in larger centres, although they may still be found in small rural churches. The Australian market was dominated by instruments mass produced in North America: they were rarely custom-made for individual churches. Compact in size and readily movable, such instruments can and should be easily conserved, even if it means storage. Expertise in their restoration still exists and an effort should be made to effect their relocation if they become redundant.
3. Electronic organs were not installed in large numbers until the 1950s. Such instruments, like reed organs, are mass-produced and readily movable, but rarely have any historical significance in themselves, or heritage value in the context of their buildings.
4. It is pipe organs, therefore, that are of greatest heritage concern as they are usually an integral part of a church's internal space, they are nearly always custom built for that space, and they cannot be obtained or replaced without considerable

financial outlay. (A medium-sized new pipe organ of high quality cannot be obtained today for less than \$200,000).

Australia is home to about 1,700 pipe organs, of which the great majority (about 85 per cent) stand in Anglican, Uniting, Catholic, Lutheran and Presbyterian churches. Our association has recorded technical and historical details of all these instruments in a set of state-based Gazetteers, edited by our chairman, John Maidment. In the period 1978-86 341 significant historic organs in Australia and New Zealand organs were documented in greater detail by our research officer, John Stiller, whose work was partly funded by the Heritage Council of NSW. As a result, we have a complete picture of our organ heritage, augmented by scholarly articles and volumes, such as Graeme Rushworth's *Historic Pipe Organs of NSW* (1988).

While the earliest instruments arrived from Britain in the 1820s, it was not until the 1860s that large numbers of pipe organs began to be imported or built locally. By 1900 there were about 500 pipe organs in Australia, including the world's largest instrument, built in 1890 by Hill & Son of London for Sydney Town Hall. Australia is now recognised internationally as having one of the best-preserved collections of 19<sup>th</sup>-century organs to survive anywhere in the world. This heritage is thus worthy of protection.

In this century the greatest level of organbuilding activity took place in the 1920s and 1960s: economic troughs and the two World Wars affected the craft as much as any other industry with production especially at a low between 1930 and 1950. The high cost of pipe organs, fierce competition from technologically advanced electronic organs, the decline of mainstream Protestantism and changing worship patterns, have all combined to reduce substantially the number of new organs built for churches in the past 20 years.

Although the majority of Australian pipe organs may broadly be described as either "English Romantic" or "English eclectic" in tonal style, each state has its own distinctive organ heritage, defining features of which are summarised as follows:

a) New South Wales has an impressive corpus of English Victorian-era organs, with notable examples of the work of Hill & Son, J.W. Walker & Sons, Forster & Andrews and Henry Willis, among many others. A smaller group of locally-made organs by C.J. Jackson, William Davidson and Charles Richardson is also significant. Outstanding among 20<sup>th</sup>-century instruments are so-called "neo-baroque" organs by Ronald Sharp and Roger Pogson. About 80 restorations have been completed in the past 20 years, funded in part by ongoing Heritage Council patronage. We believe this record to be unparalleled for 19<sup>th</sup>-century organs anywhere in the world. That this has been achieved amid so much change is a remarkable feat of conservation. Sadly, no other state has matched the vision of successive NSW governments in this regard until recently.

b) In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Victoria indigenous craft blossomed under tariff protection, with George Fincham dominating the market into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until 1929 that Fincham found a strong rival in the firm of Hill, Norman & Beard. The craft flourished in favourable postwar economic conditions, with many older organs drastically altered through rebuilding and modernisation at this time. Significant modern organs have been produced in the past 15 years by Knud Smenge, a Danish-trained builder. Restoration activity, while not matching NSW in terms of volume, has increased over the past decade.

c) Organbuilding in Queensland was dominated from the late 1890s through to the end of the 1970s by the firm of Whitehouse Bros, whose best work was the solidly-built products of the pre-1930 period. Some fine new instruments have been imported in recent years, with a handful of quality restorations also completed.

d) Among a small number of impressive mid and late-19<sup>th</sup> century organs in South Australia are the diminutive products of German immigrant builders, including Carl Krÿger and Daniel Lemke. The market was later dominated by J.E. Dodd, Australia's greatest builder of organs in an advanced Romantic style: he was successful in gaining contracts throughout Australia and New Zealand. An important rival was W.L.Roberts who flourished in the inter-war years. Few restorations have occurred in recent times: this problem is compounded by an organ community not always sympathetic to Romantic organs, nor the principles of conservation best practice.

e) Virtually all pipe organs in Western Australia date from the 20th century, with only a handful of significant instruments among the total. A strong economy has led to some major projects being completed in the past 20 years, although quality has not always been a hallmark of this work.

f) Tasmania has a most impressive collection of small instruments dating from the 1820s through to the 1870s. While virtually all historic organs in Hobart and Launceston have been unsympathetically rebuilt over the years - a process that regrettably continues today - the rural gems have survived largely unscathed. Many of these are well overdue for restoration, financial constraints inhibiting this work.

### **Erosion of the heritage: lessons from the period of "adaptation"**

While the alteration, enlargement and rebuilding of old organs occurred in previous centuries, such work usually recycled a maximum number of pipes and parts within a standard design.

In the world of 1950s modernism, however, organs both in Australia and overseas were drastically modified - tonally and mechanically - to conform with prevailing musical tastes. In most cases this work removed mechanical actions that had given trouble-free service for decades and in their place came electric actions, detached consoles and playing accessories. While players delighted in the extended capacities of newly-rebuilt organs, they were not aware that the new technology was not to last. It is not uncommon these days to find organs rebuilt only 30-40 years ago in need of further extensive, and therefore costly, renovation. In many instances churches have not been prepared to meet the cost of such additional work and the organs have been removed. Such is the case with organs formerly located in six Anglican churches on Sydney's north shore - at St Paul's Chatswood, St Philip's Eastwood, St Martin's Killara, St Clement's Mosman, St Mark's Northbridge and St Paul's Wahroonga.

The Romantic tonal style, in which the great majority of Australia's historic organs were conceived, started to go out of favour in Australia in the 1950s. Warm-toned flutes, colourful string and reed voices were thus discarded or remodelled to produce high-pitched "Baroque" effects, to match the prevailing upsurge of interest in music written before 1750. While fine new "neo-baroque" organs were installed from 1958 onwards, the adaptation of older organs to conform to this style was rarely successful. In recent years some reversal of this work has taken place, at great cost.

It is an important point to note here that pipe organs were among the first church fittings to be subjected to "adaptation" in order to suit prevailing tastes. In the 1950s and 1960s organs were often rebuilt in buildings that were otherwise substantially intact in terms of their pews, pulpits, fonts and sanctuary fittings. How will the current trend for destroying or modifying such fittings be viewed in the future?

### **Changing demographics: losses and gains**

In addition to the loss of heritage through rebuilding, organs have also been lost upon the closure of churches, or the reorganisation of buildings. These losses have been significant, particularly in the capital cities where demographic and social changes have been more pronounced than in smaller rural centres.

In total, about 40 per cent of Australia's organ heritage has been either seriously violated or destroyed totally. (Even so, this percentage is almost certainly lower than that for Britain or the United States).

In Sydney, for example, losses through building demolition or sale over the past 50 years might include organs formerly in St Paul's Anglican Church Redfern, St Silas' Anglican Church Waterloo, and the fine instruments that once graced Methodist churches in Balmain, Burwood, Haberfield, Stanmore, Waverley and William Street Sydney. The list could be expanded considerably: Newtown Presbyterian, Rozelle Presbyterian, Newtown Congregational, Dulwich Hill Congregational, Summer Hill Congregational, and so on.

The threat of continued redundancy is ever present. Churches continue to be closed, while in other cases, congregations decide they do not want to retain their organ. The task of saving and relocating disused organs is one that has been taken up in recent years, not only by our association, but by churches themselves and organbuilders. It is therefore pleasing to note some gains. It is amazing what a difference education, genuine concern and wise planning can make.

We earlier spoke of the impressive corpus of restored organs, particularly in New South Wales and Victoria. There have also been many successful instances of organ relocation, usually combined with restoration. Recent examples include the 1995 transfer of an excellent 1881 Hele & Co organ from the former St Peter's Anglican Church, East Sydney to St Finbar's Catholic Church at Glenbrook, in the Blue Mountains, and the removal of a threatened and partly-vandalised 1901 Fincham organ from Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Port Melbourne, to St Joseph's Catholic Church, Edgecliff in Sydney's east during 1998. Moreover, in the past two decades there have been almost a dozen successful examples of redundant organs from Britain finding their way to Australian churches: a modest example is the charming 1891 Peter Conacher organ from Huddersfield, Yorkshire, which was restored and installed during 1983 at St John Mark Anglican Church, Chester Hill, in Sydney's west.

In dealing with the relocation of pipe organs, it is important that expert organbuilding advice be obtained. The use of amateurs in carrying out organ projects is to be discouraged, because an organ's complexity dictates the need for a professional approach to tonal and mechanical finishing. It is also essential that architects be open to taking advice from organ consultants, organbuilders and organists. Sometimes when organs are moved to new buildings, or relocated within an existing building, an inappropriate space is provided for the organ. It is a common trap for architects to think of the organ as an item of furniture with a physical and visual impact only. The organ, first and foremost, is a musical instrument and decisions must be made with music-making in mind.

In some instances where new organ cases or other items (such as consoles and their cabinets) are required, a narrow, and in our opinion, a quite wrong approach is taken in the interpretation of the Burra Charter. In the worst instances, modern casework, often ugly and impractical in execution, and bearing no relationship to the musical style of the instrument, is specified, simply because the recreation of an historical design is regarded as *passé* in the architectural community.

The musical community, however, has no problem with the concept of historical copy, as authenticity in performance practice is a feature of the music of our age. The recreation of harpsichords, Baroque wind instruments and Renaissance strings using surviving examples as a guide, is considered not only worthy, but essential, for the interpretation of music. Obviously the environment in which the organ case is to stand must be considered, but in general, it should reflect the tonal period in which the organ is conceived.

Following the period of losses and gains the organ community - comprising organbuilders, consultants and players - has widely embraced a very conservative approach to the maintenance, repair, renovation or restoration of pipe organs. Casework, consoles, actions, wind systems, pipework and soundboards are almost always conserved with minimal alteration. The *Pipe Organ Conservation and Maintenance Guide* recently published jointly by the NSW Heritage Office and the Organ Historical Trust of Australia, outlines in detail appropriate ways to care for pipe organs.

### **Changing worship patterns: the concept of "relevance"**

Australian church attendance, especially in the Anglican and Uniting denominations, has been in decline for the whole of the 20th century. This decline has accelerated in recent years and some congregations, although strong through the 1970s and 1980s, have now dwindled to number only a few dozen elderly members. It is often claimed that musical styles affect attendance and it is true that in many churches the quality of traditional music, including organ music, has been allowed to grow tired and stale. It is also admitted that in some cases the church of the past was complacent about standards, and provided few or no resources for the training and development of musicians. High standards of traditional music-making can, however, still be found in Australia, and it is essential to note that the largest number of qualified organists is in the 25-45 age group.

A sizeable number of Australian churches expect music to be provided without cost, in spite of the fact that musical competence requires professional input. This is "cultural backyarding", part of the tradition of amateurism that has been a feature of our society since colonisation, as noted almost 40 years ago by commentators like Robin Boyd (1962). Amateurism served us well in some contexts, but appears to be unsuited to the current environment. While it is easy to bemoan low standards in organ playing, low standards in the delivery of popular music can also be found, and there is every chance that a lack of continuing education could lead to future ossification even in this style of music.

Mainstream Protestant churches have observed the meteoric rise of Pentecostalist and fundamentalist denominations which meet in auditoriums and use popular music in a dynamic way. In an effort to reverse numerical decline, sometimes associated with a drift of members to these new churches, the established denominations have understandably attempted to imitate their methods. Their leaders cite research, such as the National Church Life Survey (1996), which shows, not surprisingly, that among younger church members gospel choruses and contemporary music were found to "be most helpful". The survey also found that congregations with an informal approach to worship, including contemporary music, were attracting higher levels of newcomers.

What, however, is new in all of this? The former Methodist Church was well known for its pursuit of popular methods of outreach. As long ago as 1893 the President of the NSW Conference, the Revd George Lane, commented that :

There is the cry for brief, bright services; and we have attempted to meet these demands. We have much singing · To my way of thinking, we have yielded to the popular cry, and we have tried to meet the popular taste, so that now we cannot succeed in drawing a large congregation on a week evening in connection with anything, without singing or exhibitions. Everything must give way to these. (*The Methodist*, 16 September 1893, 2.)

The adoption of popular music in worship goes back to the 1870s with the introduction of gospel music and "services of song" after the style developed by the evangelists, Moody and Sankey. In the 1960s "beat services" and "teenage cabarets" drew young people, but only for a period.

In some centres, such as Balmain and Newcastle, neo-gothic Methodist churches were demolished as long ago as the turn of the century, with mission halls erected to replace them. These were filled with huge crowds Sunday after Sunday for three or four decades, but both mission halls were closed in the 1980s, while adjacent continuing Presbyterian churches, which retained their buildings from the outset - together with internal arrangements - remain in use today. This comment is not designed to devalue the work of the missions involved - they obviously served their age well, but their style could not be sustained.

The important point to make here is that popular movements have been transitory in the past and are likely to be so in the future. Therefore a church removing or neglecting its organ, just to satisfy the wishes of one generation, could well be making a mistake, particularly given the expense of replacing organs at a future juncture. This does not deny the inevitability of change. Quite clearly there is a need for churches to embrace contemporary music, while at the same time educating young people to be positive about the heritage of their Parish, their denomination and the wider church. There is no evidence to suggest that young people are disinterested in heritage - in our multicultural society they are taught to respect diversity and be tolerant of the values stemming from varying cultural traditions. Why should this approach not be embraced by the church?

It would appear that intolerance of the musical traditions of the church is being largely promulgated by the baby boomer generation which, in some quarters, is still rebelling against the way its parents did things. The current rush to dismantle everything "traditional" or "churchy" in some sections of the established church largely comes from this age group. It is also disappointing to note that positive images of traditional culture are ignored by sections of the church media: an outsider reading the Uniting Church's NSW magazine, *Insights*, might well think that our society is a pop music

monoculture. Our society does, however, have a flourishing arts community standing alongside commercial culture.

We should not view the conflict between tradition and change in isolation. In the United States, where religion's role in society has had a different history from ours, there is every extreme of worship practice imaginable. Even so, pipe organs, hymnody and choral music remain central to the praise of a very large number of thriving congregations in that country, in addition to the use and development of contemporary music. The lessons are ones of co-existence, mutual respect for differing types of music, and the pursuit of standards of excellence in the presentation of church music.

Another important issue to arise concerns the use and positioning of organs when liturgical space changes. In many Anglican and Catholic churches (post Vatican II) new directions have led to a re-ordering of many building interiors. Organs have not been so much at risk with such change in Catholic churches, because they are usually found in a position of safety in a rear gallery. The relocation of pipe organs forward to the centre of liturgical activity has, however, occurred in several parishes, to facilitate a closer relationship between priest, cantor, choir and congregation. Pipe organs have sometimes been left unused, with an electronic organ put into service in the sanctuary. The question then arising is whether the pipe organ should be retained and serviced, or neglected. This issue is a pertinent one, because many Catholic churches now have disused and unplayable pipe organs gathering dust in their galleries. Provided instruments are not damaged, this outcome can, however, be satisfactory from the conservation point of view in the short term, as the potential for restoration and re-use remains. The *Pipe Organ Conservation and Maintenance Guide* should be consulted and its principles adopted.

## **Balance and inclusion**

A utilitarian view - one that says nothing has any value unless it can be used - has led not only to the destruction of buildings, and organs, but the demoralisation of older church members. Conflict and tension has done nothing to enhance the strength and vitality of the church. While renewal through innovation is accepted as a way forward, we believe that this can be achieved without the total destruction of musical traditions. It is ludicrous to suggest that a heritage of over 1,000 years of notated Catholic music, 500 years of music stemming from the Protestant reformation and 250 years of evangelical music, can and will be excised totally from worship.

In 1994 St Matthias' Press in Sydney produced a *Church Musicians' Handbook*, edited by Sally Threthewey and Rosemary Milne. While this volume might be criticised for scarcely mentioning organs, it contains a valuable chapter by David Peterson, a Moore College lecturer. Peterson concludes:



There have been some exciting and creative contributions to the treasure house of Christian music in recent decades. But it would be foolish to sing only modern songs and abandon some of the riches we have inherited · To help people understand and appreciate hymns, something of their meaning or of the author's background could be briefly conveyed to the congregation · In the final analysis, a hymn that is well written and appropriately placed in the flow of a service will commend itself to people of all ages. (*Church Musicians' Handbook*, 36-37.)

With all major denominations having recently apologised for their treatment of Aboriginal people in the past, lessons about cultural heritage should be learned. Most researchers and writers record the following attitudes and processes adopted by previous generations to destroy Aboriginal culture:

- a) Ignorance of the culture, its nature, extent and significance.
  
- b) Failure to understand cultural heritage as an important part of personal identity.
  
- c) Undermining the culture, claiming it to be primitive, irrelevant and in the process of dying out.
  
- d) Destroying the culture by separating people from their physical and spiritual sense of place.
  
- e) Removing young people from their families, eliminating links with the past.

While nothing can compare with what was done to Aboriginal people in the past, can we not perceive the same processes and attitudes towards culture, heritage and tradition within the church today? We so often hear the claim that the church's mission is paramount and that culture is irrelevant - the same attitude that demoralised generations of Aboriginal people. While simplistic and absolutist language about thorny issues surrounding the conservation of religious property may not be helpful in solving difficult problems, lessons learned from the mistreatment of Aboriginal people could well provide a useful philosophical starting point.

### **Securing a future for organs**

With the formation of the Organ Historical Trust of Australia in 1977, a campaign to educate churches and the public as to the nature and extent of the country's organ

heritage commenced. The publications mentioned earlier in this paper have done much to promote a positive image of pipe organs: we believe our gazetteer and documentation work are without parallel in the English-speaking world.

Organ conservation has been supported generously by bodies such as the Heritage Council of NSW and the National Trust of Australia, in Victoria. Regrettably, other state equivalents have been slow to follow suit, and we are particularly concerned about the situation in South Australia and Tasmania. Legislative protection has been used in a few instances in NSW to save organs: in two cases, one at Burwood and the other at Neutral Bay, initial hostility to conservation orders has evaporated with time. In both instances the historic organs are in use again, much appreciated by their current owners.

The past 21 years have thus witnessed a refreshing decline in the number of organs destroyed or unsympathetically altered. This trend, interestingly, goes against the general pattern for other items of movable church heritage. While we feel the battle to secure proper standards for organ restoration methods has been won, the problem of redundant organs resulting from church closures and changing worship patterns is the biggest issue for an age of uncertainty. In addition to programs of education, government heritage agencies need to continue or commence funding for restoration and relocation projects, in the context of wider support for church heritage. A visionary project would be the funding, by governments, of a clearing house to store redundant organs until new homes can be found. In the meantime, voluntary organisations such as our own will persevere to ensure that the positive progress we have made in organ conservation continues into the future. For more information, consult our website:

[www.vicnet.net.au/~ohta/](http://www.vicnet.net.au/~ohta/)

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