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David Reeves: Expanded Horizons

From the time I was eleven I found myself at St James', King Street every day. Three days each week we had choir practice, Saturday afternoons we had weddings, Sunday was of course services and most other days I was playing the organ or singing somewhere. We were doing things all the time: very exciting. The King Street organist and choirmaster, George Faunce Allman and his beloved wife Dora (who was my first piano teacher) were the ultimate team. They would improvise, one sliding off the organ stool as the other slid on without any interruption to the playing and I recall many of their little motifs and figures clearly. They were so kind to me. How could a man in his seventies have such an effect on a young kid?



David Reeves at Sydney Town Hall in 1971

George Faunce was not charismatic but his playing certainly was. It was his playing, especially his improvisations at the close of the Choral Eucharist each Sunday, that used to thrill me. The last verse of the final hymn never ended as he took off into the stratosphere. He shifted harmonies chromatically, creating all sorts of enharmonic changes, pedal points and other effects to lift the congregation. He had a number of musical tricks at his beck and call and I think I probably learned them all. The music at St James' could not have been more spectacular and I emulated everything he did in those early days.

When my voice finally had to be accepted as having broken, and I was not required to play elsewhere I would sit next to him at the organ and watch him work. With his immaculately polished black shoes walking about the pedal board, or his straight unmoving posture at the console, he played like the gentleman he was. In my view he was entirely underrated as a musician.

The organ in St James' Church was pretty tired by the time I reached it. The action was very slow and the Swell to Great coupler had the Swell dragging a nanosecond behind the Great. The effect of a full Swell coupled to the great was very muddy. That said, I always thought that the registration and design of that organ (in those days) was beautifully balanced both within itself and within the church that it supported. And its size was appropriate as well in relation to the acoustic of the church and the culture of the instrument. It was of course a rebuild of the previous organ with additions.

The Swell Horn was the feature stop for me. It would growl majestically and when the box opened it would take off like

a bushfire. On the other hand, the Trumpet was the worst Trumpet you would ever find: never in tune, every note differing from its neighbour. Whenever I played at St James I took great care with the pedal board. GFA had worn down the insides and tops of all his favourite notes during his fifty-four years at St James' and the board had a number of surprises for the visitor.

The very first pipe organ I ever played was the Henry Jones organ at St Thomas', Rozelle which my school friend, Peter Meyer, invited me to come and play. A few years ago I went back to have a look and, yes, there it was, still there. Young lads as we were, and wanting to play a larger organ, we went to St Saviour's, Redfern and played its three-manual W.E. Richardson.

When my voice broke I thought it was the end of my life: I was really upset and knew I had been pushing to stay singing the top line twelve months past when I should probably have given in to nature. One Sunday, late in the afternoon GFA asked me to come over to the organ to see "how it's all travelling". As we were finishing up he (or someone who had taken the telephone call) told me that I was to go to St Mary's, Balmain and play for the evening service, hymns, psalm and canticles. This was the very same church where Peter's father was rector. It was an amazing night: the minister thanked God that they had found me to play at short notice!

I know GFA did not want to leave either Shore School where he was my music master, or St James'. It was a terrible end to what had been so thrilling. Max Morris succeeded him at Shore. Max was not really an organist but he kindly played my simple compositions at chapel services.

As the days drew to a close at St James' a King Street parishioner, Mrs Kathleen England, arranged for me to accompany services at Sydney Hospital on a harmonium. Soon after, I was invited to become organist and choirmaster at the Garrison Church, Millers Point where I remained for my last years at school and on to the Conservatorium of Music. Whilst at the Con I won the two coveted organ scholarships, the Alice Bryant Organ Scholarship and the Organ Society Scholarship for Overseas Study. My win in the Ernest Truman Organ Competition in 1963 (run by the City of Sydney Eisteddfod) really set me on my way. Work started coming in.

During and following my years at the Con I was briefly director of music at PLC Croydon and then at Abbotsleigh. That too was a wonderful period for me as we were able to do so much. Performances of Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Bach's *Magnificat* started a wonderful period of co-operation between Knox and Abbotsleigh, PLC and Barker. Also in that period I was invited to St John's Wahroonga where the first Pels organ had just been completed. It was there that I met my beautiful wife, now of fifty years standing. I also started young Philip Swanton off on the organ. We moved the lessons to Knox when its organ came into being and in Year Twelve he completed his A Mus A. I am so proud of him and all he is doing at the Con. Similarly, I am thrilled that others such as Sam Blanch, currently Director of Music at Townsville Grammar and Dr Lawrence Harvey, a Professor at RMIT, have been so successful in their musical pursuits.



"Started off": Philip Swanton with his first organ teacher recently

At the Con I studied piano with Alexander Sverjensky who was keen that I should concentrate on piano rather than organ. My second study was clarinet: Doug Gerke was my teacher and he formed a jazz band and invited me to play piano - quite a blast, and I remember some very late nights - but I studied organ with both George Allman and later Norman Johnston who became a very good friend. I had lessons on the Sharp practice organ at his home in Ocean Street and there were always books of paintings lined up at the console. Later, when we had a hobby farm near Wyong, Norman came to stay three or four times. The first thing he did would always be to go for a walk, sit by himself and think. Sometimes he would be away for hours. Not many really knew Norman. I am not sure if I did either, but I think I came close. He was searching for something and I will never know if he found it. He was a perfectionist. He would ask me how to get an audience, as though he wanted to be a better entrepreneur for his concerts.

My work on the grand organ at the Sydney Town Hall kept me very busy between 1962 and 1978, particularly the Combined Church Choirs *Messiah* performances. It was a great joy to let the organ have its sway during the 'Hallelujah' and 'Amen'. I also became accompanist to the Sydney University Graduate Choir in 1962 and I performed as organist with Norman Johnston's Oriana Singers in both the St Matthew and St John passions.

For some years I had been performing jazz in a number of venues and clubs around and in Sydney. In addition, there were two other organ postings: to St James', Turramurra and St Michael's, Vaucluse prior to my first journey to London in 1968. In London I became organist and choirmaster at St John's, Notting Hill until my father became ill and I returned to Sydney. However, as 1968 drew to a close I had decided that I did not want to go the cathedral route or possibly become an international recitalist. I did not want to be owned and I think by then I had decided to develop my own musical projects, and somehow that has been the way it has gone.

Arthur Jones (of JW Walker) was very good to me in the UK and took me around half the organs of England including all the major organs in Liverpool, Arthur's home town. I especially remember the mighty organ in St George's Hall. I thought we would all be arrested that day for disturbing the peace.

At one stage I planned to build my Sydney home around a redundant Willis organ I bought from a London church that was being knocked down to make way for an expressway. Arthur Jones oversaw its disassembling and packing up for the long trip to Sydney. However, I could not proceed with such a plan so early in my life and I sold it to Wangaratta Cathedral.



Recording at St John's, Launceston in 1978

Projects that really excited me in the early seventies included producing, editing and making the 'Pilgrimage' Album. This was the official music and recording of the visit of Pope Paul VI to Australia, the first Pope so to do.

The Hanna-Barbera animated film of *Silent Night* (I think 1971 or 72) was fun. I cannot forget recording the music including the opening chorus of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*. Bill Hanna had come out and he made a very impressive entrance into the Town Hall prior to recording. I was seated at the organ as usual, waiting to record. At the end the great man called me down to tell me that it was terrific but did I not think the organ a bit grand if it were supposed to be the organ of a tiny church, as in the story? He was quite right and so we all moved down to the Scot's Church in Margaret Street and recorded it all again.

Operation Young Composer was an initiative I devised which was sponsored by James Hardie Industries and which assisted several young people in the world of composing. One of these was Neridah Tyson who is now a successful Australian film composer.

The Bainbridge-Reeves Academy of Music at which many North Shore children learned instruments was opened in 1969.

Music is all the same to me whether I am playing Bach on the organ or backing jazz singers in the nightclub: there are jazz notes and rhythms in Bach. All musical form is intimately linked in my view. And for me it all started with the organ. There is a little of George Faunce Allman in everything I have written. In 1985-6 I was commissioned by the Bicentennial Authority to compose the soundtrack to the promotional film for the tall ships celebration on Sydney Harbour for 1988. Following that I moved into the final creating and then producing of our mammoth production (for me at least) of the 'Seven Little Australians' musical. It played to over five hundred thousand people and became Australia's first major box office success for a home-grown Australian musical.

I began to lose contact with much of the organ world, especially in Sydney as I was almost entirely based in London. I was composing and conducting, widening my horizons.



Millennial oratorio composer: David Reeves in London in 2000

When I sit at an organ console I still think of it as a blank page or a white canvas. "What can I create on this blank canvas?" The orchestra of stops sits silently with the invitation to take it anywhere I wish, whether improvising, performing my interpretation of something a master has represented on paper, or playing a hymn with all its possibilities.

In my small world it has led to all my scores, orchestrations, musicals and opera. I have composed nine musical theatre works: some successful, some not. It is as simple as that. I had

always had an interest in Thomas Becket and TS Elliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. I wanted to turn the story into an oratorio but it became very clear to me that Elliot's text was far too full to fit the musical form and style of work envisaged for performance in Canterbury Cathedral. I therefore started writing my own text, as always thinking within the desired cadence and culture of how I saw an oratorio in today's terms.

I asked Martin Neary (Organist & Master of the Choristers Westminster Abbey) if he would conduct the finished work featuring his English Chamber Singers, possibly the best group of its kind in London. He was enthusiastic and immediately agreed. As I had brought him in early in the work's development we were able to record some choral arias and choruses early in 1999 at various studios around London.

We made a studio recording of the oratorio and then performed the work live in Canterbury Cathedral right near where the murder took place. Sir David Willcocks played the organ in the 'Murder' organ solo in the first recording and wrote an extraordinarily gracious review. The live performance occurred at the turn of the new century and was the first performance of its genre at Canterbury this millennium. It was the highlight of the 2000 Canterbury Festival and was premiered under the auspices of HRH Prince Charles, also raising funds for the Prince's Trust.

Another oratorio followed: *Planet Requiem*, which was commissioned by the 'Festival of Peace' in Assisi, Italy in 2004.

Recently the Con asked if they could do *Seven Little Australians*. They wanted me to reduce the score so that the orchestra is brought down from twenty-six to about twelve players. I went back to the Con for the first time in nearly fifty years and met the dynamic Dr Narelle Yeo and the Dean of the Conservatorium, Professor Anna Reid. My, how the Con has changed! I am absolutely on board with the condensed production tour envisaged and their vision for the future in working with the new regional conservatories. I dropped what I was doing and reduced the score before their first (very successful) show in Wollongong recently.

I love what I do and I have never counted the hours. My tiny legacy will be my music. I have given it my all and it has given back in spades.

(David Reeves was interviewed by the Editor at Chatswood on 22 May, 2019)

54-rank Casavant - Létourneau pipe organ for sale with 10-year warranty: \$1,079,000

Orgues Létourneau is offering a 50-stop, 54-rank rebuilt pipe organ in like-new condition for AUD\$1,079,000. The instrument's core is Casavant Frères' Opus 2518 from 1959 with electro-pneumatic wind chests; the revised specification incorporates up to sixteen new stops built by Létourneau. The price includes installation costs, on-site voicing, an allowance for casework in red oak, a rebuilt three-manual console with a solid-state switching system and 100 memory levels, and a ten-year warranty. Transportation from Canada is not included. This organ requires approximately 570 sq. ft. with 20' ceiling for 16' ranks. For more details and the proposed specification, visit www.letourneauorgans.com, email info@letourneauorgans.com or call 450-774-2698.