

# David Rumsey: the Virtuoso as Educator

---

*Ed: You were a pupil at Newington where I later taught. In my day the College seemed to value sporting prowess far more than music. How did you get on?*

DR: Well, it is perhaps time this story was told ... as an eight- or nine-year-old I had had rheumatic fever. Earlier, a boy died of this in a pillow-fight at Newington so they took a rather nervous care with me. I was both a dayboy and boarder at various times. We lived at Telopea, later Glenorie, where my parents grew roses. They sang in Methodist church choirs and also in the Hurlstone Choral Society. Actually, I was not too bad at athletics and in rugby I could be fast, playing either scrum or wing on demand. When I'd had enough football (it never took long) I would excuse myself and go to the chapel and play. They understood. With my rheumatic fever history they had to. Eventually I just stopped playing sport and went practising. Clement Hosking, the then choirmaster, and Donald Hollier, organist, greatly supported me. Along with some of the teachers, and the chaplain, wittingly or unwittingly, they all helped cocoon me from sport and other, undesirable thrusts of the school. Hollier was the perfect organ teacher for me at this time. An all-embracing musician, he later rocked Newington by putting on a hugely successful performance of Britten's *Noyes Fludde*, showing the true value of music in this hitherto mostly uncultured environment. He was a tremendous inspiration, and also taught me harmony and theory. Prophetically perhaps, he had studied in Vienna in the fifties - my destiny in the sixties. He had enormous personal charm along with musical daring - even harmonic guts you could say. His hymn variations were way out, eccentric, even provocative, but inspiring. In the Leaving Certificate in 1955 A.E.H. Nickson examined me in sixth grade organ at Newtown Methodist Church. I remember playing Bach and Karg-Elert for him. His report was good; I still have it somewhere and treasure it greatly.

*Ed: You went on to the Con after school?*

DR: No. Actually I went to Sydney University and did engineering for nearly two years, but I had no contact with George Faunce Allman and the Music Society then or at any other time. I was a Film Soc member - my academic downfall, actually - showed films and played piano for revues. However, I kept up the organ at Newington's Chapel. Later I moved to St John's, Ashfield where the Revd F.A.S. Shaw was rector; John Seddon followed. Both were supportive and I enjoyed working for them. Seddon, now living in mezzo-retirement at Lake Macquarie, baptized one of my granddaughters recently. I formed a boys' choir which did much for the Ashfield Parish at the time, and, so they tell me, long after. I had started at the Con in 1956 but eventually enrolled full-time from 1960. All lessons there were from Norman Johnston, on Hollier's recommendation. Some of this time I also spent as a recording technician working with AWA and some on my father's rose-farm.

*Ed: How good a musical education did the Con provide in the sixties?*

DR: well, I was happy with it, the lectures were good, although the resources were terrible. There was no organ worth mentioning and a library that seemed to be top-secret. Early in the century an organ had been ordered but it went "Full Fathom Five" on its way out from England. I used to practise in the Newington Chapel and sometimes on the T. C. Lewis organ at Petersham Congregational Church, now at PLC. I liked both instruments - both had mechanical actions - but the Lewis organ especially. I became friendly with Ted Pitchford through these connections, a treasured memory. Significantly, there were good "clean" classical elements to the Lewis organ as well as quality romantic voices. The Con Director, Sir Bernard Heinze, was very supportive and, at the same time, apologetic that there was no organ. Interest began to mount after a few organists had come through, some winning "Student of the Year" prizes and going off on successful careers: John Gordon, Norman Johnston, Michael Dudman, Robert Smith, Hollier as pianist-organist, and others. I followed later. Thus the profile of organists rose in the late fifties and early sixties. The teaching was farmed out: Allman at St James, Norman at East Sydney. Once enrolled, I trod the path out to East Sydney for the most pleasurable part of my weekly activities. The Con eventually got an organ. There were long deliberations in the early '70s. Pogson had showed much promise but there were other good contenders. The decision to award him the contract was made by committee: Michael Dyer, Norman, myself, Francis Cameron (Deputy Director) and Joseph Post (Director). It was deadlocked and Joe Post used his casting vote in favour of Pogson. In the event the organ was weak and understated and has gone through a number of transformations since then, sadly losing its Rückpositiv in the recent adaptation to the rebuilt Verbrugghen Hall.

*Ed: Was the Con's teaching comparable to that of the Royal Academy or Royal College of Music*

DR: I cannot answer for the British institutions but it was easily as good, judged by my experiences later in Europe. The Con had quite a few things going for it then. For example, Norman was interested in Bach, classical French and earlier music. Harpsichord playing was in an awakening through Dorothy White and Nancy Salas. This gave us solid, broad-horizoned musical outlooks. For organists it was a time of change, too: Karg-Elert appeared on exam repertoire lists, mainly thanks to Nickson I guess, but a welcome departure from the mainly British works which had been prescribed until then. Norman mostly steered me away from the latter, although I did some and enjoyed them, Vaughan-Williams, for example.

*Ed: After finishing at the Con you went to Europe rather than Britain. Was his because your Con diploma was not recognized in England?*

DR: Partly. I had heard some horror stories about the treatment of Australians in British institutions and an abhorrence of the

Australian cringe mentality made me veer away from that world quite early on. In fact my qualifications were fully recognized on the Continent and the organs and organist careers there were far more attractive to me than the progression through "organist and choirmaster" to "master of the music" or whatever. I won the Vasanta scholarship, as had Hollier and Dudman, and this paid my way to Europe, aided with a bit of luck on the stock exchange, something Newington had taught me! I asked for an introduction to Marchal but Norman said "no, just go over there and look around": one of the best bits of advice I ever had. Marchal was no child-in-arms by then and the world was moving on. A lot can change in a decade and Norman had sensed this accurately, along with my needs. I was a bit taken aback, but I went with a frighteningly open mind, wondering what would happen to me without introductions and guidance of this kind. By a fluke of providence I attended the organ summer school in Haarlem (the brochure just appeared in front of me one day during my first short stay in London - about June-1963 - when I was wondering what next I would do). Haarlem opened a world of marvels for me - Bach, French classical music, Frescobaldi, Improvisation - the "trio" were there: Heiller, Alain and Leonhardt. I played, then asked both Marie-Claire and Heiller to teach me and they both agreed. Heiller had no place for me for almost two years so I studied in Paris with Marie-Claire for a while and then returned to Copenhagen to continue with Jørgen-Ernst Hansen at St Andreas'. He was not a luminary in the sense that Alain and Heiller were, but was an excellent mentor. More importantly his was the world of Marcussen and Frobenius organs and much lively debate over organ reform. I became fully entrenched in the whole Scandinavian experience at this critical moment in organ history - and that included the 1610 Compenius at Hillerød and other historic instruments. Hansen and a whole army of Danish organists encouraged me very strongly to go to Heiller. Fine - I had a place promised but was forced to bide my time. I returned to London after another Haarlem event in mid-1964.

*Ed: And what about the British way?*

DR: Going to England was never going to have done much for me - it was essentially only a small variant to what I knew in Australia. I had no ambition to be a choirmaster, although music came to me through generations of choral singers - and I still occasionally enjoy taking a good choir practice, even now in Switzerland. Soon after arriving this second time in England I visited Michael [Dudman] at Ely, drank fine whiskey with him for hours on end and talked about it all. This chat began to confirm things in my mind. I respected, but did not envy Michael from his descriptions of what he did and how he did it. Anyway, our conversation put me once and for all off staying in England. I returned to London that evening to sober up in more ways than one. In fact I did take a London church appointment while waiting for Heiller to have a place for me in Vienna: St Margaret's, Kensington if I recall, expecting to be there for at least year or two. Its organ's electric action did not come to life under my fingers like the Danish and Dutch organs had. Fortunately rescue was closer to hand than I realized: an unexpected vacancy in Heiller's class cropped up after only about a month. He offered me a kind of right of first refusal to this place but it had to be immediate. Of course, it was the opportunity of a lifetime and was accepted instantly -

terminating my services at St. Margaret's rather more abruptly than I originally envisaged! They took it well; appreciated to this day.

*Ed: When you arrived in Vienna what did you make of the organ in the Stephansdom?*

DR: The magnificent old Walcker was gone long before this, a victim of war and an exceptionally bad rebuild - or whatever it was supposed to be - in the 1950s. It was held up to ridicule by almost everybody except those responsible (surprise?). Heiller was never the organist at St. Stephan's nor at any other significant church. He was basically a teacher, composer, performer and conductor on the world stage. When he was in Vienna he mostly attended his own church without playing there.

*Ed: Is it true that Heiller's pedagogy included an insistence that there is only one correct way to play a piece of music as opposed, perhaps, to the 'Vive la différence!' attitude of the French?*

DR: Not really. There is a phenomenology to all this that maybe needs relating. After Albert Schweizer's early Alsatian initiation of organ reform the Nazis came to power in Germany. They actually had their own organ committee pre-WWII, using the instrument ritually and developing it along neo-classical-eclectic lines (mostly with electric actions). This embedded it in all manner of "authority" associations, both new and old, church and state. The Nazis had their organists and many prominent players were party members although some, like Karl Straube, annoyed them intensely by maintaining Jewish friendships. This was the reason he had to give up at St. Thomas' Leipzig. So here was the world's first fully political embracing of the Organ Reform Movement now adding to the church's hegemony in this arena. That's one reason Reform re-appeared quickly and with some purpose after the war: the 1930s research, much of it Nazi-driven, was valid even if the politics were not. Another reason was that classical organs were far cheaper to build, all things considered, and post-war there were a huge number of bombed-out organ galleries to be re-provisioned. So organ-playing and building survived in Germany through the 1940s and into the 1950s significantly better than elsewhere. By 1950 just about everybody was again looking for authority figures. Heiller became one of them, not of his own intention, but because he was probably the most significant pioneer in performance practice, had a tremendous mind, an unassailable technique and a remarkably convincing instinct for both pedagogy and musical performance. This was most notable with his Bach playing and that was what Reform was mainly about at that stage. He was the first prominent organist who could really control the new actions, and mechanical action was very much part of the post-war revival. His approach to the organ was a blend of the scientific and the artistic. It all somehow meshed perfectly in Heiller, the organ as a kind of universal holistic entity: history, technology, voicing, original editions, musicology, top-rate performance, theology, brilliant pedagogy - and more, all rolled up into one. Anybody looking for an authority figure could easily see in him a guru who could teach them 'the right approach to the organ' in all its facets. He simply told us *his* way - at our request. Many

thought this was the only way to do it and in a way it was true because of his consummate excellence. Not quite everyone agreed, most notably some German organists who became very jealous of him. In Hitler they'd probably also had more than enough of authority figures, and Bach was their property, not that of a mere upstart Austrian. In the US he and Dupré were then the leading European touring recitalists - but there were two major differences: Heiller got the better reviews and Dupré effectively gave no master classes. Heiller gave innumerable masterclasses, educating a whole new generation of American organists (also specifically against the Dupré edition's approach to Bach *inter alia*). This holistic authority of Heiller attracted Dutch, Scandinavians, Americans, Australians, New Zealanders and Swiss in particular but caused that degree of envy in Germany. In fact his approach was far more liberal than most of the French who required each student to be a kind of disciple. Here there was no freedom to disagree, a kind of opinionated absolutism existed. There was freedom to discuss, even disagree with Heiller: I had some wonderful exchanges with him, others did, too. These were invariably fruitful and never once did I hear him say "you must do it my way". He had the humility to weigh everything constantly anew in the balance and change his views if need be. And change he did: his authority was enhanced in spite of, or even because of that. I was in Europe for three years and in Vienna from about September '64 to April '66. It was good fortune - this came within what is now acknowledged to be the best years of Heiller's life and work.

*Ed: How did you feel about returning to Australia?*

DR: I was delighted to get back. I fell on my feet with a job at Adelaide University then, after three years, at the Con in Sydney. By then I had a good grasp of Europe and its organ ways - I'd had many illuminating experiences, and I enjoyed telling everyone about them. This was obviously very mutual: people here seemed insatiable for information. Later Rex Hobcroft became Sydney Con Director, a person of great music-educational vision. He restructured the Con. When he proposed a School of Organ and Church Music it attracted applications from all over the world. I was eventually awarded the position and actually became Norman's boss. He did not apply, but it was a curious situation. And he then did a lot of good work in our newly-formed "Department of Organ and Church Music", including choral activities with the Church Music course students. I hope it is a credit to both of us that we made the best of what was a potentially serious minefield. Modern "interventional" management tricks of academia and business would never have worked: just leaving Norman to do his own thing was not only the best way, but the easiest and only way. Mutual trust was paramount here. For a while there were lots of students, twenty to thirty, including both church music and organ students. It worked well until the "rationalization" of Australian academia in the 90s. We had by then educated almost our entire market, the University looked upon the church music Associate Diploma as academically unworthy, and many churches were in any case starting to look in other directions than the "traditional" for their music. But we came through - I am told it is still by far the strongest, perhaps the only, academic unit of this kind surviving in Australia today - and credit to Philip Swanton is due here.

*Ed: What about the amalgamation of the Con with Sydney University?*

DR: In my view it was a brilliant concept, but disastrously handled. The enforced abandonment of the Associate Diploma in Church Music for one thing, not only spelled our part-demise but was a catastrophe for community music. Even so there was always enormous potential for this amalgamation in my view. The Con was mostly a training institute for a bunch of specialist soloists and music educators and lacked the musicological approach which the University had. The University was mostly training broader-scope musicians with a more musico-scientific approach and could well have benefitted from more performance majors than they had. The music education component was arguable - Uni way was post-Grad, Con integrated and specialist. Take your pick - although one problem with the Con was an educational tail which wagged the musical dog. My view was to train organists and integrate organ music into the broader mainstreams of music and learning - the Uni offered great potential for this. But the amalgamation just became cat versus dog, tail or no tail. Heads needed to be cracked but weren't. So I arranged a few interdisciplinary seminars (mainly with the Department of Religious Studies and the English Department) and continued to take students on tours to Europe. These trips effected the same or similar ends: I was always particularly keen on that kind of educational initiative because simply playing historic organs always taught the students far more profoundly in a much shorter time. I recall many moments of silent illumination on students' faces in Europe when they mutually felt the instruments and their entire environment telling them directly what, how, why and where this was all about. These moments were the most memorable in my teaching career - and the easiest. In Sydney most lessons began with "yes, just imagine ..." I supported the merger anyway. It had great potential for the organ department - our access, for example, to the Great Hall organ, or Fisher Library and opportunities for cross-pollination on main campus were all there for the asking. One cathartic point in this was my "Bachfest" of 1998 where we had students from NIDA, early-music musicians, organists and everybody else in a huge cross-disciplinary fourteen-hour dramatic-musical presentation of Bach's life mounted in the Great Hall. While the Uni administration encouraged the Bachfest, the Con by then would not support any of it, Bachfest, European trips or even decent new organ resources for the new building - not that they had to do much. So the merger never worked properly. Nor did it for staff careers. Suddenly the University wanted everyone to have higher degrees, ideally a Ph.D. This was not a fair assumption back then. Virtually none of the performance staff had Ph.Ds. It didn't bother me. I still don't have one and am now employed in the Swiss academic system which has a clearer understanding of the history and value of my qualifications and experience! But Sydney University insisted and it began to eliminate some of the best talent we had. Don Burrows had no formal qualifications at all - for whatever reason Australia's finest jazz musician was one of the first to go! Now the University's Music Department seems to be fizzling out and the Con seems bedraggled. I left around 1998 - along with others - essentially through lack of support and leadership vision. Many of us perceived it as a sick institution then and I doubt that has changed in the meantime. Yet I have no

personal complaints: I've had a really good run both in Australia and around the world, with a fantastic cap now to my career in Switzerland.

*Ed: You were organist at St Alban's Epping and commissioned Australia's first Letourneau organ. Why Letourneau?*

DR: I chose Letourneau because he was going to do what I wanted at a good price the Parish could afford. These were generally new directions for Australia at the time – suspended action, hammered metal, unequal tempering, that kind of thing. Good for him, good for us. Letourneau had recently left Casavant and came to Sydney to revoice the Con organ so he was very much on the spot at the critical moment. Planning was thus easy. Epping is actually his Opus 2. Opus 1, which is almost identical, is not a patch on it in my view. He also built another organ for me in Vienna. It is okay, but it neither met my best expectations nor even fitted its gallery. The best organ I ever played of his, all things considered, was at Saint-Léonard (St. Gilbert Church) in Quebec, which I inaugurated in 1993.

*Ed: What about the Opera House organ?*

DR: It's fun playing there in orchestral and choral concerts, but I generally don't enjoy playing it as much as I would like to because it isn't up to the power or tonal qualities needed for any major repertoire, least of all the big 19<sup>th</sup> century oratorios which are the mainstay of concerts there. The magnificent opening of Mahler VIII at the Opera House, for example, is more akin to using the sound of flea-bites than starters' pistols at an athletics carnival. (Thanks again to Newington that I can use this metaphor). Sydney Town Hall is by far the superior instrument for the 19<sup>th</sup> century repertoire, and it's more intimate with the entire orchestral/choral stage, which means it meshes better as an ensemble instrument and supports the choir far better (they generally can't even hear it at the Opera House).

*Ed: What music do you most enjoy playing?*

DR: I enjoy playing a wide repertoire from the thirteenth to the twenty-first centuries on organs that suit the pieces best. While I adapt as best I can to any situation I am given, I'm frustrated by organs that are a mismatch to repertoire which is foreign to their best capabilities. That's not their fault, it should be noted, organists seem all too ready sometimes to demand changes to organs rather than listen, understand and extract the best from them.

*Ed: Tell us about your "Gothic Organ"*

DR: I commissioned it in 2009 from Dutch builder, Winold van der Putten. Check my website. It is an exercise in metallurgy – specifically medieval, pipes of lead made as pure as medieval lead could be – as well as music. The earliest-mentioned lead pipes were probably those at York Minster, early 14<sup>th</sup> century. Lead has a very particular sound, especially for principals. In a magnificent moment E. Power Biggs once referred to this metal as producing "a brave sound". The description is delightfully odd, but hits its target very well. I suspect that by about 1280, the time of the *Rutland Psalter*

organ, the English at least were using lead pipes. I had become somewhat fed up with all those squeaky little portative organs, with anachronistic tuning slides and the wrong pipe metal, if not wood! So I wanted to make an organ with lead pipes, cast on sand and then hammered, with Pythagorean tempering, made and scaled according to medieval treatises, true gothic keys and an octave of pedal pulldowns à la Praetorius' reports of Halberstadt in the middle ages. I inaugurated this organ, with its Gothic-roses in the casework – a memorial to my parents who loved music and grew roses – on what would have been my mother's birthday, April 23<sup>rd</sup> this year. Kimberly Marshall gave the second recital on it. She, I, and everybody here just love it, especially the Basel early-music groups. It should eventually get a second 8' rank using a constant-diameter scaling. It will then be suitable for much 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century repertoire. I keep it in the crypt of the church I play in because it won't fit in our home.

*Ed: What is the attraction of Basel and Switzerland?*

DR: Europe is where it is "on", where it began and is still going strong. Switzerland is right in the middle of this and has many well-maintained historic organs in a tonal rainbow from 15<sup>th</sup> century Sion to some great new 21<sup>st</sup> century instruments. It offers organists and consultants good work and they make me feel very welcome here. There is great support and appreciation. Hah! And with a seven-second acoustic in the major church I play in, who could refuse? Even my tired old voice sounds like Caruso! Wonderful! It is a great place to play services and do concerts, and the people are very supportive. Moving to Switzerland was a perfectly natural process for me and even the Swiss papers referred to it as my "home-coming". That's nice, and there seems to be much truth in it. Where I live is right on the Swiss, French and German borders. I can see three countries from my window. Some French students invited me – quite out of the blue – last week to let them show me around organs in Alsace. Such excursions are always immensely interesting and the musical interactions highly stimulating. There are also invaluable library facilities for research here – notably so in Basel. And I am lucky: I do things which are very important to the Swiss, such as my involvement at Seewen on the roll-playing Welte organ with all those incredible historic performances (see articles in previous SOJs, *The Diapason*, *La Tribune del'Orgue* etc. – all, and more, on my web-site). Although I do not teach formal one-to-one organ lessons any more – I exist mainly from playing, research, and consulting – I nevertheless sometimes get called on to lecture or participate in seminars, thus finding myself still in the position of an educator. The trip to Alsace, or occasional requests to hear somebody play a piece through, such as recently when a delightful hour was spent on the Bach Passacaglia on behalf of a young colleague – she was about to play it in a recital in Frankfurt and wanted an opinion or two – these are all spice to my life here. A constant stream of visitors contact me about hearing the Seewen organ and its rolls – from Denmark, Sweden, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, USA, Australia and Switzerland itself ... everywhere really ... and most provide much stimulating discussion. This all keeps me well in these loops and slays any residual pedagogy dragons I may be harbouring. Friends from Australia also call in, both socially and professionally – former students such as Brett Leighton (Linz, Austria). David Blunden lives here and John

Liddy has just moved from Bangkok to Geneva. Philip Swanton (Sydney) is due through again soon. I have regular contact with John Leggett (Drammen, Norway). Missed Michael Murray (Boston, USA) last July but he "sat" our flat for us. Sarah Kim (Paris) stayed overnight a few months ago. Basel offers an amazing variety of excellent concerts - tonight I will be attending a Hydraulis recital (the Aqincum organ reconstructed). All of this, mingled with a bit of wandering

around the alps, the best chocolate and public transport system in the world, languages, alphorns, yodelling, or taking a day trip on a lake ... in 2000 I would have been incredulous had you suggested this would ever be my life-style, but, after a decade here, it all somehow seems perfectly natural.

September 2, 2010