

## Obituary

Norman Johnston

10<sup>th</sup> November 1917 Noumea - 25<sup>th</sup> March 2012 Sydney

Published in the Sydney Organ Journal Volume 43 No. 3 Winter 2012

(Only some of the graphics are reproduced here to keep file-sizes manageable)

The death of Norman Johnston takes the last of the pre-1920-born generation of Australian musicians of his class from among our ranks. He was a broadly-talented yet unassuming artist, a very special person who lived a long life with all of its diverse circumstances, including a strong rejection of self-publicity. This now places him on one of the less visible pedestals in Australia's hall of honour. Lament this obscurity as well we might, it would undoubtedly have had his fullest personal endorsement. A very private individual, he was quiet, independent and thoughtful. Maintaining his performing skills until he was 90, he kept a remarkably alert mind right until the end.

Born to an expatriate Irish-Australian family in Noumea, Norman Johnston was educated in Sydney - Shore School - from the time he was 15. On his arrival in Australia in the early 1930s he found himself in a new land which itself was going through a significant metamorphosis - socially, politically and culturally. There were trends evident then which would especially affect music-making, and had particular relevance to our organ and choral cultures. Here he found a unique niche for himself.

This cultural change was partly foreshadowed when, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Belgian was appointed as the first Sydney City organist. It was a surprising choice when so many English and American organists, fully capable and well within the Anglo-Saxon "Town Hall Organ" cultures, were available. Just prior to World War I Tasmanian Lilian Frost had become the first Australian-born organist of stature ever to venture for an education outside the British Empire: she supplemented lessons in London with some from the famous Charles-Marie Widor in Paris.

The first world war had also been a major watershed in putative colonial, and with it, cultural separation - against the express wishes and untiring efforts of then Prime Minister, William ("Billy") Hughes. Politics having failed, it was almost as if the artistic and cultural world had to persevere and galvanise the changes. During the 1930s Melbourne organist, A.E.H Nickson, brought considerable late-romantic German influence into this arena. Later, another Melbourne musician, Leonard Fullard, nurtured in the same epoch as Norman Johnston, formed a group called "The Oriana Madrigal Choir" (1948). He followed this up with an annual Melbourne Bach Festival from 1950.



Dupain photograph 1939

In this environment, the country starting to cross-pollinate and germinate new cultural seeds, Norman Johnston began organ lessons with Lilian Frost. He held his first post at Scots Church, Sydney. Here his milieu, persona and future place in Australian culture were neatly reflected in a photograph taken of him at the Scots church organ console by the great Australian photographer, Max Dupain.

Perhaps elements of Norman's character and destiny are already detectable from that wisp of a smile and those thoughtful-looking eyes. Here is subtle and significant imagery, if not prophecy, but it was also an indicator that this young musician associated with, and particularly admired, people "of genius". Dupain admirably fulfilled that requirement.

Norman enlisted in World War II and fought for Australia - not actually his country of birth, but one to which he now offered his loyalty. As an air gunner he survived the war against the most alarming statistical odds. This was a long interruption at a critical stage in his life: it cost him 5 years, from age 22 to 27. On return, now effectively as a mature-aged student, he continued his musical education in Sydney from 1946 and became the Conservatorium's second ever organ graduate in 1949.



In 1945

By then England had also turned away from its centuries of German and Italian musical influences and was focussing more attention on France. The timing was perfect: a sojourn in Britain for Norman soon turned into a musical retreat to Paris. The building blocks of his post-war life were now falling into a clear, almost pre-destined order. His British mentor in the early 1950s, Felix Aprahamian, was influential in steering him across the channel for further tuition. The young organist and choirmaster, by then fully bilingual, soon put the British Empire behind him and began to drink deeply from the well-springs of Gallic traditions. Being Francophone from birth there were no linguistic obstacles here - it must have been something of a homecoming in many respects. He arrived just at a time when Marcel Dupré (who had toured Australia in 1939) still ruled the Parisian organ world, Maurice Duruflé and the Demessieux were in full flight, while Olivier Messiaen and the Alain family were rising rapidly to prominence. Norman could also count organists such as Jean Guillou and Jean Langlais among his closer personal acquaintances. The music of Langlais not only became recommended repertoire for Sydney organ students, but choral works such as his *Salve Regina* were among the significant milestones of repertoire promoted in Australia by Norman.

Most of the Parisian circle were musicians that Norman undoubtedly saw as having "genius" - one of his rare, but always humbly and thoughtfully-bestowed accolades. Marchal was the *mâitre* he chose on Aprahamian's prompting. Marchal, and his teacher, Eugène Gigout, have sometimes been noted for their independent and thoughtful approach to music, qualities which Norman seemed also naturally to possess. For him "reason" as well as "genius" were highly valued qualities. There are discernible kindred spirits here: all three of them became leading organists of their generation and "musical scientists" to varying degrees. Interestingly, all of them lived notably long lives, Norman the longest.

He returned to Sydney in 1953 and settled here in spite of some serious private and public setbacks. Along with his artistic and cultural presence, the loyalty persisted in spite of alluring alternatives elsewhere and many obstacles here. He set about precipitating important changes in the dual arenas of choral and organ music.

His "Oriana Singers" were formed. They quickly became Sydney's leading chamber choir. Norman took many initiatives with them apart from the Langlais mentioned above:

Messiaen's "Cinq Rechants", Tallis' 40-part "Spem in Alium" and an ill-fated Bach St. Matthew Passion performance in 1963 were amongst them. Another Oriana landmark in this context was a performance with The Renaissance Players of Machaut's "Messe de Nostre Dame" at the Sydney Proms in 1967. Whether touted as such or not, many of these were Australian firsts.

Work as a pedagogue, introducing new and challenging ideas to his organ students, had also begun on his return. In 1955 he was appointed to the Conservatorium staff and became a highly sought-after teacher for most of the ensuing half-century. Naturally French influences now took a special place alongside the entrenched British curriculum in that arena. This also subtly furthered cultural rifts. His more advanced students later typically chose continental Europe rather than England for their post-graduate work. He was a pioneer of early music in Sydney along with some noted contemporaries - harpsichordists Nancy Salas and Dorothy White might be singled out amongst them.

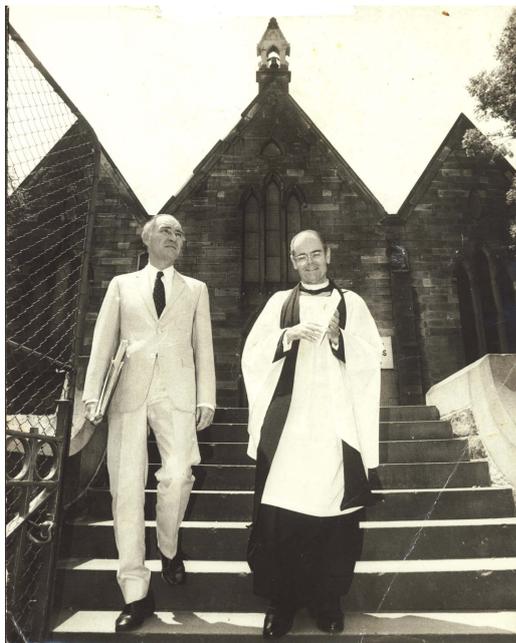


Conducting an *Oriana* concert ca. 1960

The 1963 Bach Passion - a most significant Australian essay in early music revival - had to be cancelled in the middle of final rehearsals because selling tickets for "public entertainment" on Good Friday was suddenly found to be against the law. Norman was given an ultimatum by the authorities to abandon it. He had no choice. Our forefathers had brought this law into existence presumably to ensure that the devil's work was not done on that day. In fact it was here used to prevent perhaps the most Christian of the world's great art works being made available on the one day of the year for which it was appropriate. So much for legislation - this law was definitely an ass. The outcry was massive. It was reviewed, and the work was presented in the following two years.

We all owe full credit to Norman Johnston forever for getting that law changed. It is a great shame that, as a young artist, initiator and sponsor, this bombshell had to land on his doorstep. Selling tickets for performances was only to defray costs. Grants on anything approaching today's scales did not exist then. He had to sustain the losses. Nor were there ever any bankers' bonuses later in life for Norman. He was never rewarded with a truly full-time, tenured position, existing almost entirely from isolated once-only fees, hourly rates, honorariums or retainers. His was a tough, pioneering artistic life - reminiscent in some ways of Carl Linger, another loyal Australian musician.

Today some of Norman's achievements in the promotion of early music might be overlooked, eclipsed by modern digitally-edited, packaged and professionally-promoted recorded performances. The recent explosion of them, and that of the musical knowledge which enables them, was not available to him. Yet our present-day performances of these works all needed solid foundations on which to build, and Norman was one of the Australian pioneers in that important corner of our cultural history. He shaped positive attitudes, spirits of inquiry and left a legacy for the future of this cause within our community which helped integrate it as part of our development as a European-derivative nation.



At St. Peter's East Sydney (where Conservatorium organ lessons were held through the 1960s)

Sometimes he lived by his own set of rules in such contexts - an oft-quoted saying of his was: "always proceed from the known to the unknown." This applied here. He was particularly a supporter of the "research leads to better performances" approach, now the main thrust of the West's best musical institutions. He, Dorothy White and Nancy Salas might all have been granted the stature of an Australian Wanda Landowska or Arnold Dolmetsch had local circumstances been more in their favour.

He became strongly involved in the activities of the Organ Institute of New South Wales. This was an important Australian "academy" that existed in the period from 1962 to 1976. Like its classical models in England, France and Germany, it had its membership and circulated scientific papers, bringing research into the public arena for discussion. Organs were tested, lectures arranged and presented, new and old music performed in concerts. Specially-commissioned new Australian organ works

were also programmed and played - another factor in the Johnston loyalty equation.

This was the kind of activity which was central to his core: "reason" and art embracing each other and dancing in full tandem. It was so strongly embedded in this sensitive and reflective artist that it became something akin to a synaesthesia. Perplexing to many, he would hold up pictures of great artworks or architecture to his choirs and tell them to "sing like that". The world-famous German choral conductor, Jürgen Jürgens, once saw him in action and was totally flummoxed by this. When later asked how the rehearsal went, Jürgens reflected quizzically: "fine - although before I started he mostly just showed them pictures."

The Organ Institute also counted Colin Sapsford (organist at Christ Church St. Lawrence), Vincent Sheppard (a medical doctor with extensive interests in the organ and its music) and Howard Pollard (scientist, organist) amongst its leading figures. Through these connections, especially Sheppard, a strong Netherlands influence came into Norman's life, linked closely to the Alsatian Organ Reform Movement. The Organ Institute provided much kindling to Organ Reform in Australia.

The famous Beckerath organ in the University of Sydney's Great Hall was a significant by-product of this phenomenon. Norman was directly responsible for its acquisition. Appointed as University Organist in 1962 he again broke ranks and chose neither French nor British, but a German builder for the new instrument. The organ became an important Australian cross-cultural milestone and remains one of Sydney's most successful and often-used "public" instruments. It is also regarded by some as one of the finest organs that Beckerath built anywhere in the world. Norman's insistence that an Australian builder be co-contracted was yet another token of his loyalty. One objective was specifically to provide an interface between the best specialist instrument-building skills available in a kind of reciprocal antipodean exchange. Perhaps "reciprocal antipodean" fringes on tautology, but it was a University organ and Norman saw to it that educational factors were going to operate on as

many levels as possible here. In its way this was also part of an enlightenment approach that was rather special to him. It fulfilled his motto of “proceeding from the known to the unknown” admirably. Similar loyalties were later manifested in his strong support for an Australian organ builder at the Conservatorium.

He continued as University organist until 1994, playing for innumerable graduations - including the occasion of Messiaen’s *Honoris Causa* in 1988. That event neatly closed some interesting life-circles. He also organized, or played himself, hundreds - who knows how many? thousands? - of recitals, many of them on this instrument. A private objective of his was never to repeat the same musical item at any graduation ceremony. This was unnecessary but typically the kind of personal challenge he gave himself.



At the console of the Great Hall organ

Those members of faculty who had to regularly attend graduations may well have found this a blessing.

Yet it would be a deception to give the impression that his quiet, peace-loving life-style went along with any kind of weakness. It was sometimes frustrating to those working with him, but he clung, at times tenaciously, to his views once he had worked through them and come to his own logical position. There was a kind of roll-call of people and musical works that he disapproved of - it was all too easy to stumble across this. An awkward silence usually ensued if a touchy topic was broached. He had something of *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mr. Darcy in him: “My good opinion once lost is lost forever.” But, as with Mr Darcy, there were ways of regaining it. The rational Norman could and did achieve this. He was capable of a kind of insightful graciousness, even when someone had let him down badly. On one such occasion his only comment, delivered with total equanimity, was “the man has no humility, therefore he cannot learn.” No anger. No sarcasm. Profound human perception. Ultimate wisdom. Subject closed.

Apart from the great shock and crisis of the 1963 Matthew Passion cancellation, the eventual disbanding of his Oriana singers, and perhaps a lack of (unsought) public recognition, there were other major setbacks in his life. His failed attempt to save the Kincoppal-Rose-Bay Puget organ from the hands of incompetents around 1960 was a bitter blow to him. He knew such instruments from his French sojourn. “Mr. Darcy” was well in control here for decades afterwards when he just refused to talk any more about it. In his final years the clam-up on this topic seems to have been but twice relaxed, although after a moment of lamentation came the customary change of subject - the body language clearly said “Closed for business on that topic; moving on ...”. It was lamentably easy to trigger this defence mechanism and unwittingly terminate a valuable line of conversation. We all had to respect that. We had no choice.

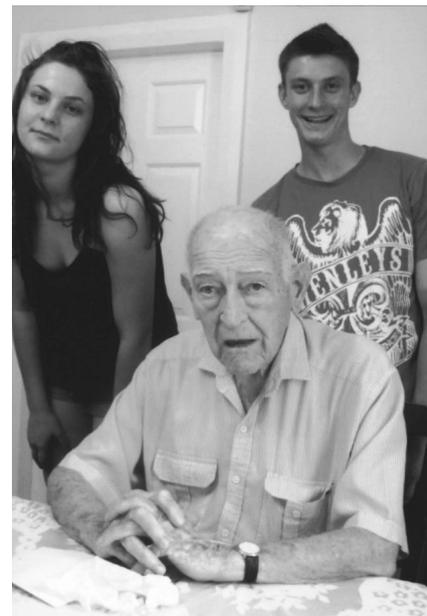
Amongst his most memorable attributes were his smile - a very “reasonable” smile, not cultivated, just natural to him - and a slightly French-influenced English pronunciation (or

was that from the fine elocution he taught his choirs?). Smiling - along with synaesthetics that would have brought Oliver Saks to lunar jubilation - was a technique to ensure that his choirs sang the way he wanted them to. It was a happy visage that he presented on these occasions, his glistening eyes recessed in ever-bushier eyebrows as his age advanced. It transformed eventually into a mature facial radiance of that special inner intelligence, engagement and life-curiosity earlier captured by Dupain.

Norman is often credited with representing the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century French organ school in Sydney. With his birth place on French territory, native fluency in that language, an essential part of his musical training and an obvious love of romantic and modern French music, this can only be predictably axiomatic. His annual performances in the 1960s of Marcel Dupré's "Stations of the Cross" at Christ Church St. Lawrence - shared with other organists of the Organ Institute - is just one further demonstration of clear affiliations here.

However anybody who would categorize him as representing only this tradition does him a serious injustice: Norman the musician, philosopher and aesthete embraced a lot more than just some blurry concept of "French romantic organ music". The intellectual and philosophical style with which he approached life in general and music in particular conjured up far more of the 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment than 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism. Here he was on the wave-length of the great philosophers, scientists and artists who formed "academies," as he did. Culinarily he aligned with a broad 20<sup>th</sup> century *nouvelle cuisine*. Furthermore his musical interests were by far not confined to the organ - the Oriana singers was a kind of investigative musical performance academy as well as a leading ensemble. Through this multiplicity of interests he took time out to reflect on the deeper meanings of life, painting, religion, music ... and he did this as only a true artist can: by first contemplating them, then performing them, living them out.

He thus applied a more rationalist than romantic approach, not just to 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century French music, but to Bach, early music, organs, art, cooking, architecture and living generally. He was certainly no blind Francophile. Not one of the listed tenderers for the University of Sydney Great Hall organ was French. For that he thoroughly investigated the leading builders around the world at the time. These were mainly Swiss, Netherlands and Danish. The contract ultimately went to Germany. The instrument has a strong eclectic-Teutonic and not much Gallic influence - 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century for that matter. His work in choral music embraced the French but was substantially also outside any such restricting national perimeters - "Oriana" derived from late-16<sup>th</sup> century English madrigal culture (Thomas Morley's 1601-published *Triumphs of Oriana*). The Matthew Passion is an undeniably Germanic music to its core. To a substantial degree the 1950-60 wave of madrigal singing in Sydney happened in a kind of symbiosis with his choir, anticipated only slightly during Norman's absence in England by Melbourne's Leonard Fullard. The Sydney Oriana performances of Gelineau Psalms could be mentioned in a related connection here. The overriding influences for him were a complex cocktail of the best available of the old and an open inquiry into the



The final years - with grandchildren  
Camilla and Andrew

new.

The corollary to all this was his passion for discovery. The application of an enlightened, “reasonable” and scientific approach to the performance of music and the building or playing of musical instruments was the parasol under which all of it sheltered for him. From whichever country or century.

His legendary cooking, his endless curiosity, fine and intelligent sensitivity to sound, keen interest in art, literature, architecture and their relationships to music, will be well remembered by those who encountered him in life, the fortunate inheritors of a unique line of pedagogy. With him music mingled comfortably with cross-cultural experiences. Encompassing all of this, the broader society in which he lived and worked, although possibly less aware of it now, can be thankful on many levels for this loyal, quiet and unassuming artist.

It was a very long life’s voyage for him, too long in his own view, but one of constant exploration and deep aesthetic, indeed synaesthetic experiences. He shared these freely with his students and all he trusted. One way or the other everybody was a student of Norman’s. Monteverdi was one of Norman’s “people of genius”. We might therefore fittingly recall Seneca and his band of pupils in *L’incoronazione di Poppea*: their singing of “Non morir, Seneca” could so easily become transferred to our own feelings with the loss of Norman at this time. But there are differences, not least that, with Seneca the state demanded the hemlock, while with Norman the state refused it.

So it is that we can now finally say “Adieu, Norman - with thanks, in most affectionate remembrance”.

David Rumsey  
Basel  
28th April, 2012.

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