

# David Rumsey: Global Advocate for the Organ

Kimberley Marshall

Plutarch quoted Socrates as saying “I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world.” My dear colleague David Rumsey was similarly defined, not by his native Sydney or Australia, but by his international perspective, advocating for organ culture across four continents. Born in 1939 to rose horticulturists Heather and Roy Rumsey, David had a remarkable career as an organist and pedagogue. He started engineering studies at the University of Sydney, but eventually followed his passion for music, working with organists Donald Hollier and Norman Johnston. He flourished as a musician, winning Student of the Year and earning distinction as the recipient of the Vasanta Scholarship, funding study abroad for outstanding students in New South Wales.

In 1963, David took this opportunity to travel across Europe, studying with Hanson in Denmark, where he learned Danish, and with Marie-Claire Alain in Paris, where he learned French. When a place opened up in Anton Heiller’s studio, David moved to Vienna for three years, mastering German and forging close ties with Peter Planyavsky and Jean-Claude Zehnder.

In 1966, David returned to Australia, where he took a job teaching at the University of Adelaide. Two years later he began teaching at the Sydney Conservatorium, a position he held until his retirement in 1999. He was committed to developing organ culture in Sydney and eventually became Founding Head of the Organ and Church Music department, founding a new sacred music course and creating an early music seminar at the Conservatorium. He was devoted to his students and made many European tours with them, ensuring that beyond the study of organs, they were able to experience the language, general culture and especially cuisine of the locales they visited. He likely paid thousands out of his own pocket to enable his protégés to have formative encounters halfway around the world. Brett Leighton’s moving tribute to his former teacher stresses the importance of David’s hands-on mentoring.

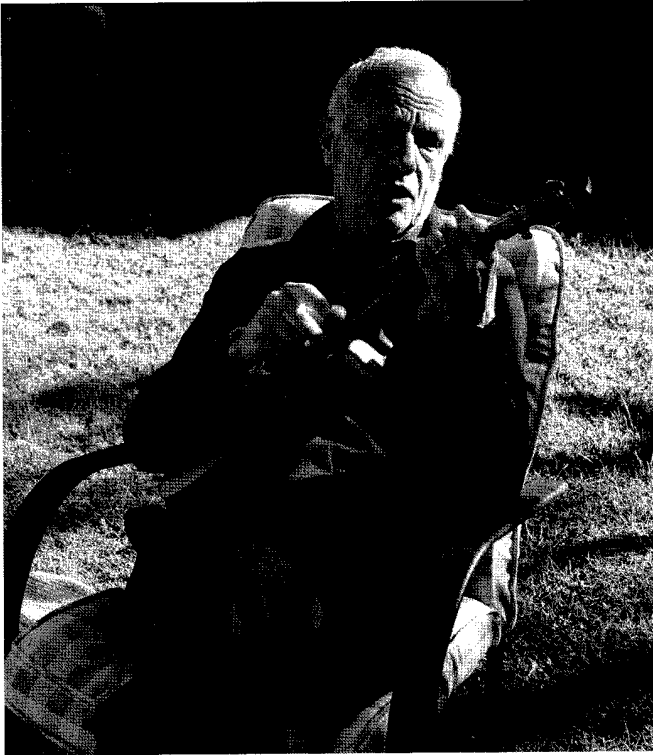
David Rumsey’s ebullient curiosity and keen musical insight were immediately apparent when I first met him in 1987. He was travelling through the United States and dropped by Stanford University, where I was starting my career as Assistant Professor of Music, to inspect the Fisk organ in Memorial Church. This instrument was remarkable for several reasons: it was Charles Fisk’s last organ (he had died in December of 1983 before it was installed in 1984); it contained timbres from different European Baroque traditions, with both French and German reeds; and most famously, it combined two tuning systems. Fisk included



Seven-second reverberation: playing at Laufen

pipes for 17 notes per octave, so that by using a large lever above the console, the organist could shift between differently tuned pipes for the five chromatic keys. This made it possible to play in two temperaments: 1/5-Pythagorean comma meantone and a well-tempered system. This novel experiment had been applauded by some but questioned by many, who considered it an academic exercise of no great import to American organ culture. As an advocate for the concept and for the use of historical temperaments, I was worried that an Australian, coming from what I imagined to be a predominantly English-dominated organ culture, would be a hard sell. I couldn’t have been more misguided! David immediately revealed himself to be a kindred spirit—he wanted to explore every aspect of the organ, and he knew exactly how to make the most of the two temperaments. I was amazed by his erudition and delighted by his enthusiasm, two qualities that he balanced so well throughout his life.

Three years later, I had the chance to drop in on David while visiting Sydney for the first time. He was as engaged as ever with organ issues and encouraged my plans for research. His collegial support inspired me to apply for a Fulbright Senior-Scholar Award at the Sydney Conservatorium-University of Sydney. On January 15, 1991, I arrived to take up the position, and David generously allowed me to reside in the spare room of his apartment in Epping. This meant that we could collaborate on ways that I might contribute to his organ program, and it saved me unnecessary rent payments when I was touring in Europe. In addition, David insisted that I partake fully of indigenous delights, including frequent trips to the Blue Mountains and an



David also enjoyed his ukulele (Stella Rumsey)

unforgettable meal of Australian specialties, including wickitty grubbs (large white moth larvae) with a delicate satay sauce.

My research at that time concerned the development and repertoire of the organ during the late medieval period, and David was eager to have me share my insights with his students at the Conservatorium. I was surprised to be presenting such arcane topics to a small group of Australian organists, when my work was only beginning to be recognized in my own country.

David's passion for sound and for the history of the organ were insatiable. He loved Carl Dahlhaus' comment in 1968: "The organ is such a complicated instrument that it can never be completely developed; it is constantly generating new forms of itself." He devoted his professional life to studying these many new forms that had been generated over the instrument's 2300-year history. In addition to performing a wide variety of repertoire, he started compiling information about different organ traditions in a computer database. I believe that originally he intended these files as pedagogical tools to summarize salient points for his students. Yet during my year in Sydney, we sensed that there was a great need for reliable sources about the organ's long history that would integrate data about organs, their development over time, the organists who played them, and the composers who wrote music for them. We also wanted to shed light on two areas usually omitted from organ encyclopedias: the earliest documents from the Greco-Roman period through to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the important manifestations of the instrument outside of Europe. Who better than two "colonials" to balance the historical equation?

Thus, our "Lexikon" was born. It started rather informally at first, but by the time David retired from his position at the university, we had drafted a proposal for Yale University Press that was accepted for publication. David's ongoing interest in technology inspired him to set up an elaborate system of macros for the project, and he developed intricate formatting parameters

for each type of article, organ specification, composer biography, musical source, organ stop description, etc. Our linguistic skills complemented each other well, so that he took the German/Scandinavian topics and I the Romance languages. We were both fully committed to using primary sources in our research and making those sources available to English-speaking readers in thoughtful, accurate translations. Over the past 15 years we have been corresponding regularly, sending articles back and forth for comment and revision, sharing our research with each other and planning to disseminate our findings to a wider audience.

With the rise of electronic publishing at the beginning of the new millennium, we saw that the old print model was not the best for this project, so we worked with Yale to see if there might be a way to generate Lexie (our nickname--Yale wanted to publish it as an encyclopedia) in a digital format. Unfortunately, the technology was changing so quickly that the press was not able to adapt to our needs, so we had been pursuing other possibilities while trying to complete this massive project. At present our Lexikon comprises over 4000 articles, an impressive testament to the colleague we lost on February 12.

In my last Skype call with him just weeks before he died, David expressed his gratitude for the rich experiences of his life. As he was reminiscing, I realized that his innate generosity had created many of those experiences. He wanted others to enjoy the beauty in life: he was always sharing his passion for music, food, different cultures and natural beauty. When David invited me to Basel in 2010 to help inaugurate his replica Gothic/medieval organ in nearby Laufen, he insisted that we celebrate my birthday with a visit to Mt Rigi. We took the train to Luzern, a boat across the lake, and a rack-railway to the top. David was the consummate guide to this gorgeous part of Switzerland, our conversation ran the gamut from medieval performance practice to contemporary politics, and his inimical humor made the day a delight.

David Rumsey lived a full life and was grateful to have been a musician. His legacy includes many fine performances and instruments, important scholarship, and beloved students and colleagues around the world. He is a model for a life well lived, taking joy in art and beauty, reveling in human ingenuity, inspiring others, and sharing ideas with friends. One could imagine him writing words similar to those penned by Epicurus on his death-bed, in his *Letter to Idomeneus*: "On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual [health problems] are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations."

David Rumsey will be greatly missed and fondly remembered.

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*Kimberly Marshall holds the Patricia and Leonard Goldman Endowed Professorship in Organ at Arizona State University. Her full biography and discography are found at <http://www.kimberlymarshall.com/>. She shares information about her ongoing work at <https://www.facebook.com/KimberlyMarshall.organist>.*

#### Endnotes

1 Carl Dahlhaus, "Moderne Orgelmusik und das 19. Jahrhundert," in *Orgel und Orgelmusik heute. Versuch einer Analyse*. ed. Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht (Stuttgart: Musikwissenschaftliche Verlags-Gesellschaft, 1968, p42). Trans. Marshall/Rumsey: We spent way too much time quibbling over how best to translate this!

# An Unquenchable Thirst for Music

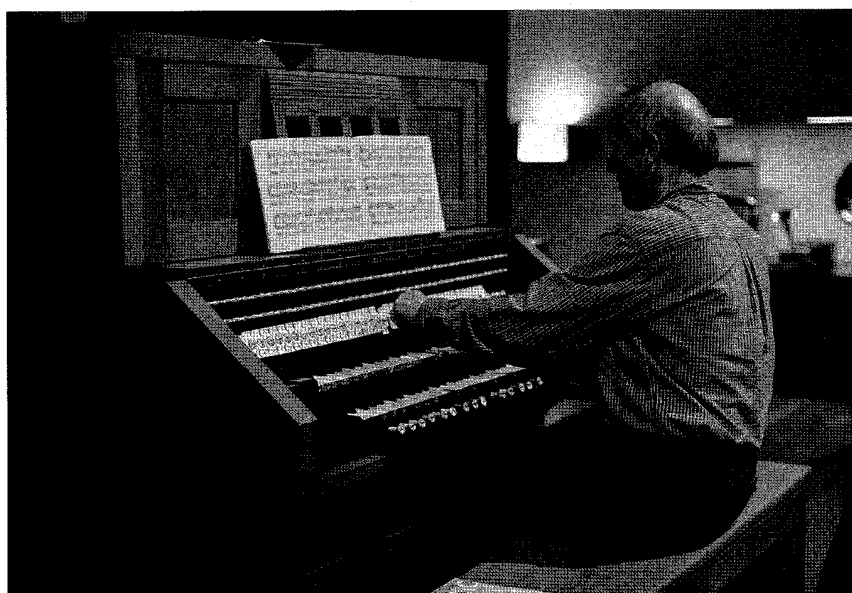
Brett Leighton

Only fragments of the great song come to your ears while yet you are but man. But if you listen to it, remember it faithfully, so that none which has reached you is lost, and endeavour to learn from it the meaning of the mystery which surrounds you. (Mabel Collins: *Light on the Path*, II.8)

My first recollections of David Rumsey go back to the year 1972. I'd not attended his solo recital at the Sydney Organ Festival of that year but did hear him in a concert of several performers towards the end of the series. What immediately struck me was his extremely expressive playing of J.S.Bach's *Orgelbuechlein* prelude on *O Mensch, bewein' dein Suende* gross BWV622. The audible rhythmic freedom seemed in no way artificial or contrived; it seemed simply to convey the content or *Affekt* of the music. After I became his student around Easter 1974 (and this more by accident than design), this was to become a kind of *Ariadne's* thread in understanding and conveying music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

After graduating from the NSW Conservatorium as Student of the Year and winning a Vasanta Scholarship, David embarked upon a journey of learning and discovery that would acquaint him with continental Europe's then most influential organ pedagogues, most particularly Marie-Claire Alain, Anton Heiller, Gustav Leonhardt and Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini. As all of these figures - each in his or her own way - were pioneers of the early music revival movement, David became a second generation proponent of what Bruce Haynes has subsequently called HIP - historically inspired performance. In common with several musicians born in the late thirties and early forties of last century, this placed him in a position of enormous authority and gave him the opportunity to educate and influence many young organists, most lastingly as a lecturer in Adelaide and Sydney.

When he returned to Australia in 1966, the mechanical-action, neoclassical organ - then cornerstone of such venerable institutions as the Haarlem Summer Academy in the Netherlands - was in its heyday. At that time, David embraced this aesthetic, primarily as a means of discovering and experiencing (organ) music in a sound world striving earnestly towards that desired by the composers (one prime objective of HIP). This amounted in Australia to a secularization of the instrument's image. Organ festivals began to flourish in many Australian capitals and a vast number of young people started learning the organ. In all of this, David was of course aided and abetted by like-minded colleagues and organ builders. Composers were encouraged to write for the instrument and much contemporary music was performed. David gladly accepted the role of championing new music and gave numerous premieres and Australian first



Fulfilling research: playing the Welte-Philharmonie organ at the Seewen Museum

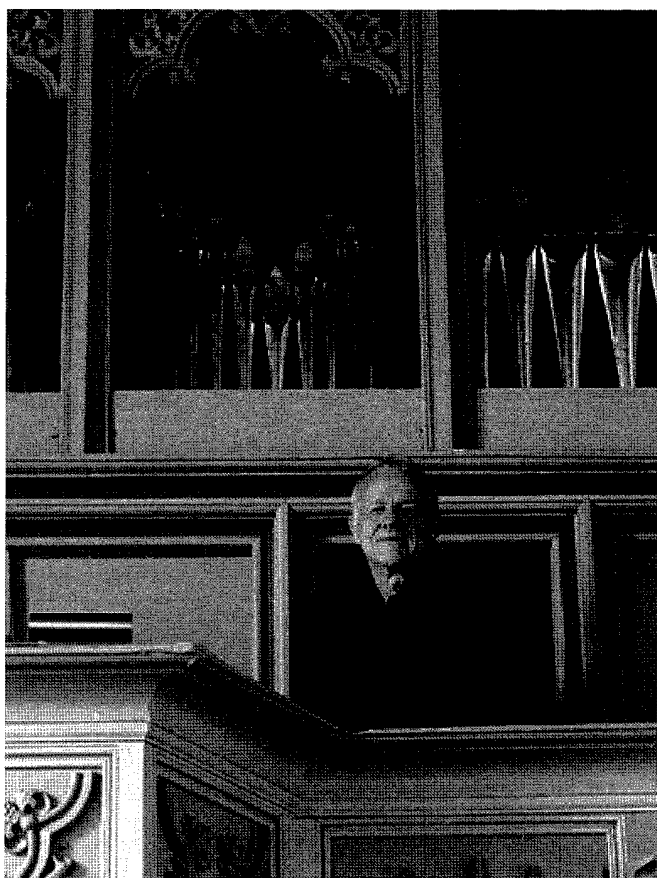
performances, notable amongst them that of Gyorgy Ligeti's *Volumina*, a seminal work of the avant-garde. I still remember listening enraptured to a radio recording of him playing Jehan Alain's *Trois danses* on the Beckerath organ of Sydney University's Great Hall.

David abhorred amateurism. He aimed at offering a professional education to organists which would enable them to do anything they wanted in the musical world. He was a demanding teacher and expected students to inform themselves by listening and reading. Even on private occasions at his home, we listened to many long-playing recordings and tapes of live concerts,

which David and his first wife Christa (nee Brosch) had amassed. The amount of scholarly literature about the organ and its music began to multiply worldwide and, as David was proficient in German, French and Danish, we as tertiary students were regularly confronted with new and fascinating ideas. His desire to promote professional standards subsequently led him to establish a course in church music at the NSW Conservatorium and he strongly supported that institution's incorporation within the University of Sydney.

Much in good teaching depends on chemistry. David had a gift for it, plus a keen mind and a wicked sense of humour. To this day I recall many deeply moving musical performances by my fellow students, each with a personal stamp but so evidently shaped by David's guiding hand. He knew how necessary it is to balance the communication of skills and information with the development of young people's individual personalities.

After I left Australia in 1978, we remained in touch, sometimes more, sometimes less depending on circumstances. Over the years, he was interested and kind enough to attend a number of concerts I gave. His comments were never randomly complimentary but always contained food for thought. By this



Teaching in Germany

time, the neoclassical aesthetic had yielded to an appreciation of the beautiful historic instruments which had inspired neoclassicism. Many of these organs had meanwhile been restored (more often re-restored) and David revelled in their sounds. This was the second act in our friendship.

Once he settled permanently in Europe in 2000, his desire to get to the bottom of things inspired at least three definite areas of investigation. The first of these was the mediaeval organ; the second was the world of the Welte Philharmonie Organ; and the third was an unfinished organ lexicon written in collaboration with Kimberly Marshall. All three fields amounted to an increase in the quality and frequency of our contact.

His interest in mediaeval music increased after his marriage to Elizabeth (nee Jones), an accomplished performer on various mediaeval instruments. We had iconography, we had treatises on organ-building, we had innumerable documents and we had extant parts of organs. Why not reconstruct one as it might have existed in the fourteenth or fifteenth century? So he commissioned the Dutch organ builder Winold van der Putten to do just that. Organ-builders of the fourteenth century employed constant scaling and lead pipes, so David requested these, because he'd found them sorely missing from earlier reconstruction attempts. A lifelong interest in musical temperaments ensured that the two ranks were tuned Pythagorean, i.e. in pure fifths. His great passion in all this was to hear the organ used in ensemble music, convinced as he was that iconographical evidence should be tested in the field.

Through all this, David was delighted to work as a church musician in Switzerland and held a position at the Catholic

Church of Laufen (near Basle) till the end of his life. His gothic organ resides in the crypt there and I once witnessed him skilfully accompany vespers on the instrument, transposing and adapting the hymn accompaniments accordingly. The thirty odd people present instantly turned their heads when the organ began to play, so distinctive is its sound.

David oversaw the restoration of the largest Welte organ the firm ever built and worked as an advisor to the Museum for Automated Musical Instruments in Seewen (Canton Solothurn, CH), where it's housed. At a decisive historic moment, when many of the original Welte paper rolls were nearing the ends of their lives, he and Elizabeth used modern technology to transfer them to computer files. A vast array of organists who committed their performances to rolls before the advent of acoustic recordings can now be heard and their performance practice studied. In all of this, he developed such expertise that I twice invited him to lecture in Austria on the subject, once at the International Max Reger Week (Linz, 2005) and again in 2011. One might say that this marked act three of our personal story.

Through work on the organ lexicon, he informed himself on many issues relating to the organ and its music which the majority of us has never considered. Whenever I was able to recommend a colleague in a particular area of specialization to him, he was profusely thankful and always followed such leads up. These enterprises kept him young.

The Martin Luther Church in Linz boasts a fine Australian organ (built by Rowan West, 2006) with a small vesper series on Tuesdays at 5.15 p.m.. The last concert I heard David play was one of these and comprised a toccata by Girolamo Frescobaldi, a canzona by Dieterich Buxtehude and Bach's Passacaglia BWV 582. Afterwards I joked to him about the playing being rather sprightly for a septuagenarian ... and promptly received a thoroughly Australian retort. Such was the nature of our interaction.

David was a family man and is survived by his wife Elizabeth, his daughters Stella and Marie, and his granddaughters Isabel, Sophie, Rose and Daphne, all of whom he adored. I and many others owe him an enormous debt of gratitude.

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*Brett Leighton was born in Sydney and began organ lessons with Norman Kaye, June Nixon and Alan Tregaskis before studying with David Rumsey at the NSW Conservatorium of Music from 1974 till 1977. He graduated as Student of the Year and was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to further his studies in Vienna with Michael Radulescu (1978 - 1981). In 1979 he won the Paul Hofhaimer Prize of the City of Innsbruck for the performance of organ music by early masters, which had not been awarded in the ten years of the Competition's existence. He subsequently studied the harpsichord with Jean-Claude Zehnder in Basle and Ton Koopman in Amsterdam. Courses and private tuition with Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini, Harald Vogel and Jean Langlais rounded off his formal musical education. Since 1994, he has been lecturer in organ and harpsichord at the Anton Bruckner Private University in Linz, Austria. Concerts have taken him across Europe, to the USA, Mexico, Japan and back to Australia. He has been a visiting lecturer at many European institutions and regularly holds summer courses in Italy, Switzerland and Spain. Numerous recordings as soloist and in ensemble for CD and radio.*