



**“I WISH YOU'D PLAY SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL”:
CONFESSIONS OF AN ORGANIST**

R. J. STOVE

It occurred to me recently that thirty years have elapsed since I first began earning money as a church organist. Perhaps in those thirty years, I may have learnt a few things of some general interest, worth passing on to others.

I've played in many Catholic churches, and in quite a few Anglican churches. But I don't know the first thing about playing the organ in Uniting churches, or Presbyterian churches, or Lutheran churches, or

any other churches. So what goes on there might be different from what I've undergone. I can only talk about what I myself have seen and heard.

My title, by the way, comes from a remark that an elderly lady once made to me after Mass. She asked me if I had been the organist. I admitted that I had been. During the Mass, I'd played various works by Bach, Mendelssohn, César Franck, and other reputable composers. Unfortunately I seem to have irked her by so doing. And she told me, "I wish you'd play something beautiful."

I never found out what sort of piece she wanted me to play. Her advanced age seemed to preclude an unhealthy interest in the collected works of Britney Spears. At any rate, this little encounter confirmed what should've been obvious anyway, and that is, there's a moral from one of Aesop's fables that applies as much to organ-playing as to anything else. That moral is: "Try to please all, and you will please none."

There are three quotes that I think are worth citing in this context. The first one was uttered by Handel, just after *Messiah* had first been performed in London. An aristocrat had told Handel that he and the others in the audience had found *Messiah* to be an "admirable entertainment." Handel replied: "My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better."

My second quote is attributed to Camille Saint-Saëns, the eminent French composer. He had a job at the time, playing the organ in a fashionable part of Paris, and one day the priest complained to him about all this austere music that Saint-Saëns was performing. The priest urged him, as we'd now say, to "lighten up". He told Saint-Saëns: "Monsieur Saint-Saëns, our congregation doesn't want all that heavy music you keep performing. They're upper middle class business types. They like to be entertained. In the evening they enjoy

going to the music halls.” To which Saint-Saëns replied, with some asperity: “*Monsieur le Curé*, when, and only when, you include jokes from the music halls in your sermons, then, and only then, will I include music from the music halls in my organ-playing.”

My third quote isn't from a musician. Instead, it's from Evelyn Waugh, who wrote in his diary near the end of his life: "When I first came into the Church I was drawn not by the splendid ceremonies but the spectacle of *the priest as a craftsman [emphasis mine – RJS]*. He had an important job to do which none but he was qualified for." Well, in a small way, the organist is also a craftsman, or at least, he *should be* a craftsman. The organist also has an important job to do, which none but he is qualified for.

Naturally this is to compare little things with great. The Catholic Church can survive perfectly well without organists. The Catholic Church could not survive a day without a validly ordained priesthood.

Mozart called the organ “the king of instruments”. Like any other king, it can use its power for good, or it can use its power for evil. Or it can be, as it too often is, in the hands of a player who's too scared to use its power at all.

A British writer of the mid-twentieth century, who sported the magnificent name of Marmaduke P. Conway – with a name like that, he sounds as if he should have been hanging around with Bertie Wooster in the Drones Club, throwing bread – once said that "the organist is the general practitioner of music". He was right.

If you don't believe me, consider this. Most organists have to be able to sight-read. Most organists have to be able to improvise. Most

organists have to be able to memorise. Most organists have to be prepared to transpose music up or down, without any preparation. All organists have to be able to judge, within a couple of seconds, how long a particular piece is. If it's running overtime, and it's keeping the priest waiting, they have to cut the piece short (while at the same time not making it *sound* as if it's being cut short). If, on the other hand, there's more time available than anyone imagined, organists have to be able to make split-second decisions to do a repeat, or to include an extra piece. With an organ that has a pedal-board, the player has to be almost as fluent with his feet as he is with his hands.

And that's not counting the decisions an organist has to make about what stops he'll use, how he'll use them, when he'll use them, whether they're loud enough, soft enough, full enough, transparent enough, whatever. A solo pianist never has to worry about all that.

For there to be an organist, there must first be an organ. You might think that would be obvious, but if you did think that, you would be wrong. Organs at Catholic churches come in every imaginable shape and size, from the most majestic masterpieces that wouldn't be out of place in St. Peter's Basilica, to the disgusting little plastic contraptions which are known in the trade as "burp boxes", and which sound like the sort of thing that a Las Vegas crematorium would reject for undue bad taste.

Somehow there's often an inverse relationship between the wealth of a parish, and the quality of the organ. One of my happiest memories is of playing a truly superb church organ, one Christmas, in a suburb which only ever gets into the papers when its feral teenagers decide to have a riot. On the other hand, I can think of a few instruments on Sydney's North Shore which I wouldn't inflict on a dog, because they're so cheap and nasty.

Just as organs come in all shapes and sizes, so too, organists come in all shapes and sizes. The top of the tree is occupied by cathedral organists. A cathedral organist has basically got it made. He has all the rights of any other church bureaucrat. Sick leave, holiday leave, compassionate leave, stress leave, you name it, he has it. In fact he probably has too many privileges. Nowadays, with all this media yelping about “clerical sex abuse, clerical sex abuse, clerical sex abuse”, it's actually easier to dismiss a bishop than it is to dismiss the organist who plays at the bishop's cathedral.

But cathedral organists are very much in a minority. If they get too many privileges, it's fair to say most church organists probably get too few.

The usual procedure is that someone who can play the piano a little bit, gets roped in to play the organ. Never mind that the two instruments are totally different in all the ways that matter. Never mind that you need a completely different finger action on the organ, from what you need on the piano. An organ key (unlike a piano key) makes exactly the same amount of noise, however hard you bang it. In practice, this doesn't seem to matter much, because a great many organists only ever become organists after they've been pianists of a sort. This is a pity, because it encourages the belief that organists are failed pianists.

It's a pity in another respect as well. A lot of organists don't think of themselves as organists, and as a result, they do their playing absolutely without reward. Now I'm afraid that on this subject I've become an absolute trade-union Stalinist (the Fred Kite of the organ world), because I happen to think that organists, if they've properly studied, deserve to be properly paid for their skill. After all, if the parish priest needed a plumber to fix the church lavatory, he wouldn't expect the plumber to fix the church lavatory without payment. If he needed a tiler to repair the church roof after a storm

had damaged it, he wouldn't expect the tiler to repair the roof without payment. Then why does it seem outrageous that an organist – who, if he's any good, will have trained for years – should be paid for the work *he* does?

Actually, that makes it sound as if I'm having a swipe at priests, but I'm not. I find priests to be very sensible about paying properly for organ-playing. It's certain rich laity who tend to give trouble, who get on their high horse about how you “should be playing for the glory of God” or some such thing. Well, when the plumber or the tiler fixes lavatories and repairs roofs without payment, for the glory of God, then I'll start feeling guilty about getting paid as an organist. But not before.

In this respect, the priest is usually the organist's friend. Priests very frequently have a lot of arcane musical knowledge. (This knowledge they invariably lose when they become bishops.) If a priest knows what sort of music he wants, and is willing to put his foot down in order to get it, then the organist will find that his own task is much easier.

Ideally the priest will give instructions well in advance. It's good if the priest and the organist can meet in plenty of time, so that the priest can say: “I want X type of music for Gaudete Sunday. I want Y type of music for Pentecost. I want Z type of music for Trinity Sunday. What have you got in your repertoire that would suit those occasions?” And so forth. With a priest who's prepared to give leadership, an organist can achieve almost anything. With a priest who isn't prepared to give leadership, an organist can achieve absolutely nothing.

To speak of organists is also to speak of church choirs. Sometimes the

organist is required to conduct the choir. This is a big mistake, like driving a car and, at the same time, attempting to direct traffic. It's greatly preferable if the choir has its own director.

If the choir does have its own director, then he or she – it's very often a she – needs to be able to give instructions to the organist as well as to the singers. In other words, the choir director should have the last word. The organist may legitimately advise her, but he should never even think of trying to upstage her, still less of trying to undercut her authority.

At this point, it makes sense to give a list of what the six priorities of all church musicians should be:

1. God.
2. The priest.
3. The music.
4. One's colleagues.
5. Edifying parishioners.
6. Pleasing parishioners (optional extra).

OK, let's say that you've got yourself a choir, and a choir director, and an organist. What next?

Well, this seems an appropriate moment to formulate Stove's Three Laws of Church Choirs:

1. Small is better than big.
2. Young is better than old.
3. Simple is better than complicated.

Many church choirs are just too large for their own good. All too often, they'll consist of a handful of singers who are genuinely musical, and a further dozen or so singers who are basically passengers.

Far better to have a choir of four singers only – soprano, alto, tenor, bass – if those four singers have what it takes. Fortunately, the ones at my own church (St. Aloysius's Church in the Melbourne suburb of Caulfield), really do have what it takes. There are only four of them, and they sound thrilling. You mightn't reckon that four singers can be really loud, but these four can seem *terrifyingly* loud, if they need to, because they are so well focused. And at the other extreme, if they need to sing softly, they can. But their soft singing has so much power in reserve, it can be clearly heard in every single part of the church. Again, this is because they are so well focused.

They also have the advantage of being reasonably young. Unfortunately – and there's really no nice way of saying this – lots of choirs have voices which have passed their use-by date. No voice lasts forever, but there are those singers who can accept this fact with a good grace; and then on the other hand, there are those singers who just can't admit even to themselves that it might be time to take a rest.

If your choir has an old buffer who is perpetually rabbiting on during rehearsals about how well he sang treble solos at the Adelaide Eucharistic Congress of 1927, it might be as well to envisage a polite but firm parting of the ways. Any tendencies on his part to address female choristers as “girlie” are also ominous warning signs.

A chorister who sounds really bad is likely to be also partially deaf. You do not need partially deaf people in your choir. Good choral singing consists of eighty per cent listening to every twenty per cent performing. The chorister not only needs to hear his own part; he needs to hear the other parts. If he can't hear what his fellow singers are doing, he will never be able to blend in with them. If he can't blend in with them, he will probably drown them out. Either way, musical balances will be sabotaged.

Yet another problem with numerous choirs is their habit of trying to tackle music which is really too difficult for them. I cannot for the life of me understand their reasons for doing this. One of the most popular Mass settings in the repertoire – no doubt for the simple reason that it's been in print for years – is also one of the hardest to sing. It's the *O Quam Gloriosum* Mass setting by Tomás Luis de Victoria, the sixteenth-century Spanish composer. Scores of church choirs in the English-speaking world feel obliged to have a crack at it, and I wish I could comprehend why they do. The tenor part is so excruciatingly high that it soars up into the stratosphere. You can't very well transpose the whole piece down, in order to make the tenors' job easier, because that pushes the already very low alto part through the floorboards. The result is usually chaos.

Much better to do a simple piece well, than to do a complicated piece badly. A lot of the choirs who hack and shriek their way through Mass settings like that Victoria one, would sound perfectly impressive if they just sang, for instance, a straightforward four-part hymn at Communion, either with no organ accompaniment at all, or with only a very soft organ backing. There are plenty of non-copyright examples of such music available these days on the Internet. I wish we'd had that resource available when I was starting out. Such straightforward pieces are much easier to rehearse too.

Talking of rehearsals, I wish we could dispense with the all too common habit of rehearsing just before Mass. Unless you have really first-rate singers, it never appears to work. Choristers who've spent the previous week violating the entire Decalogue will suddenly choose this particular time to go to confession, and will simply disappear. The choristers who do stay around for rehearsal will very often sing too loudly, in order to compensate for the absentees. Thus, their voices will probably be worn out for the actual Mass itself. Better to rehearse the previous day, or the previous evening, than to have a mad scramble on Sunday morning beforehand.

If a choir is very lucky, it might have some choice in where it performs while the Mass is going on. The best place to put a choir and an organist, is at the side of the church. The absolute worst place to put a choir and an organist is, regrettably, the most frequent place: namely, at the back of the church.

This is a bad position for two reasons. First, the distance from the altar – especially in a big church – makes it harder for either the choristers or the organist to see what the priest is doing. And the priest's actions will supply all sorts of visual cues, which the choir and organist must be able to perceive. Second, a choir that the congregation can't see, isn't going to be nearly as well disciplined as a choir that the congregation *can* see. If choristers know that the eyes of the congregation are going to be on them, they are a great deal less likely to muck up.

Put 'em at the back, and there's no limit to what troublemaking choristers can achieve. I have been present when a tenor has simply walked out of the choir in the middle of Mass, apparently because he was afraid that if he stood near the sopranos and altos, he would get Girl Germs. I have even been present when a politically extremist goon infiltrated a choir.

That is not a situation which the textbooks ever tell you about. This particular goon ... well, perhaps I shouldn't actually refer to him as "neo-Nazi", but let's just say he had a criminal record for violence against Asians in protest marches, and that he publicly denied that the Holocaust ever happened, and that he was said to have been kicked out of another church because he kept giving Hitler salutes. Anyway, he was uncontrollable.

If he got bored with singing, and felt like playing the organ, he would just muscle and kick and shove his way over to the organ stool and

play the organ. He only knew how to play one piece, so it wasn't exactly a joy to listen to him, and anyway, he kept trying to play the organ during Lent, which organists are forbidden to do, at least in the Latin Mass, which this was.

It really upset him that we had a non-white soprano in this choir. But the bloke who *really* got up his nose was an inoffensive (and white) fellow bass singer. Anyway, this chap tried to reason with the goon, whereupon the goon grabbed him and tried to beat him up. He was so enraged, it took two strong men to prise him off his victim's back. This was in the middle of Mass, mind you. I was playing the organ at the time, and it all happened so quickly – in a matter of a few seconds – that I couldn't do anything to intervene.

At times like that, there is only one thing to be done. You tell the priest what has happened, and you hope against hope that the priest has sufficient backbone to lay down the law. This priest, I'm afraid, didn't. Not sure why, but he didn't. So if you can't get any satisfaction from the priest, even after several attempts, there's only one thing you can do. You walk out.

Sometimes there are limits to what you can learn from books on music. When it comes to simple crowd control, a good book on business management can be more helpful than all the musicological texts in the world. One book I recommend is by an American called Dave Anderson, and it's called *If You Don't Make Waves, You'll Drown: Ten Hard Charging Strategies for Leading in Politically Correct Times*.

What Dave Anderson emphasises again and again, is that if you want to lead, you can't afford to worry about being loved. More choirs have been destroyed through hail-fellow-well-met backslapping, than through the brisk courtesy that organists and choir directors should cultivate.

And of course, it must never even be *whispered* that an organist or choir director is giving preferential treatment to a chorister because he or she has amorous designs on said chorister. If it *is* whispered, then the damage is already done. The preferential treatment might in fact have been entirely innocent. Doesn't matter. It's too big a risk to take, especially in these days of obsessive litigation.

Altogether I might've painted a rather gloomy picture of life as a church organist. Why, then, do I continue with it?

Several reasons. The money's quite nice, for one thing. In this connection, I would like to say a few words in favour of gangsterism. I once played for a wedding here in Sydney which, I have good reason to believe, involved a Chinese triad gang. Limousines in every direction. More elaborate flower arrangements than you've ever seen in your life before. The whole thing bespoke that social conservatism which is part and parcel of organised crime. Anyhow, after the wedding, I did what I usually do. I sought out the bride's father, who is normally in charge of the payment. This bride's father was affability itself. "How much you want?" he asked me, in his *Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Man Chu* accent. "Well, the usual fee is \$100". "Okay", he replied. He pulled out the fattest wad of \$100 notes I've ever seen in my life, and peeled one off, with less concern than if he'd just stubbed out a cigarette. I think that if I'd asked for \$1,000 instead of \$100, he would've given me that too, without batting an eyelid.

But there are other satisfactions too. So many great composers have adorned the organ's heritage: from Girolamo Frescobaldi and Dietrich Buxtehude and Bach and Handel, through Mendelssohn and Franck, through the early twentieth-century Frenchmen Louis Vierne and Charles Tournemire, to Olivier Messiaen and Paul Hindemith:

the list goes on. There are no dull moments.

Fine organ playing can achieve an eloquence beyond speech. I started off with a musical anecdote, and would like to finish with one.

When Anton Bruckner – who combined genius as a composer with genius as an organist – was given an award, fairly late in life, he announced: “I cannot find the words to thank you. But if there was an organ here, I could thank you.” Some of us organists feel the same way.

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