

“A FORTUNATE LIFE IN CHURCH MUSIC”

Garth Mansfield is well known as a joint founder of the ACT Organ School in Canberra and Director of the Wesley Music Centre. He himself chose the title of this article, specially written for *Organ Australia*, in which he looks back over his distinguished career through “reflections and anecdotes”.

THERE ARE MANY different journeys possible for anyone who grows up wanting to be involved in performing church music. I have had the good luck to be around at the right time and place to seize opportunities and venture new things in circumstances that would be hard to replicate today. Hence I can't resist using the cliché in the heading.

I hope my story may give some encouragement especially to young people who have a passion for the organ and church music and are prepared for hard work in making a difference as amateurs or volunteers, while at the same time pursuing rewarding careers in other fields. In my case the careers were teaching, public service and private enterprise.

Church music was in the genes. I had an uncle who was a music teacher, organist and conductor all his life. My dad was always involved in singing in Church and community groups. He took a few organ lessons and conducted some choirs. The first recording I can remember hearing at home was the boy soprano Ernest Lough of the Temple Church choir in London singing *Hear my prayer* and *I know that my redeemer liveth* with George Thalben-Ball accompanying.

After a year or two of piano lessons, I started on the organ with the wonderful teacher and mentor George Faunce Allman at St James', King Street, Sydney. My first organ and choir conducting post suggested by Faunce was as a teenager at St Peter's Presbyterian Church, North Sydney. It was a good tracker organ. Some very experienced singers led me into an interesting repertoire. In my memory, Faunce had a passion for choral conducting which was greater than organ playing and teaching and he encouraged me to get involved in that field.

For a few years I undertook high-school teaching in country towns (geography and economics, not music), but I kept my interest in the organ and played as an assistant from time to time in various churches.

A change of career led me to Canberra in the mid-1950s. Immediately I was roped in as an assistant at St Andrew's Presbyterian in the pre-Uniting Church era. The church had a large congregation with a morning and evening service. Soon there was an additional morning service; the organist for the main morning service retired and I took over and became the principal organist and choir accompanist for two



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choirs. From then on for nearly twenty years, I was paid the princely sum of a guinea a Sunday (\$2.20). This didn't concern me as I had a full-time job in the Public Service and I enjoyed the playing and many special opportunities.

St Andrew's had an excellent acoustic for organ and choral repertoire, but the organ, installed in 1934 when money for the new building had run out, was a small modified Christie Theatre organ. It had an odd specification for a church and a very unreliable action, especially in wet weather, with a blower exposed to the elements. The Board of Management cried poor but thought a new console would appease the congregation. With no change to the action, this wasn't much help. It wasn't long before the board was forced to find the money for a modest rebuild by Hill, Norman and Beard comprising eighteen ranks.

With the rebuilt instrument there was an opportunity to venture a program of concerts by well known Australian and international organists and also



THE WESLEY MUSIC CENTRE IN CANBERRA. IT OPENED IN 2002.

to organise choral performances by local groups. There was also the opportunity to present the occasional major choral work by combining the St Andrew's Choir with local Methodist choirs. It wasn't possible to use orchestral instruments very much because of the lack of available local players and scores, so invariably I had to use dubious keyboard reductions. For some repertoire this was a challenge indeed. A 1965 performance of Vaughan Williams' *Hodie*, directed by a very competent conductor from the National Methodist Church nearby, was a great success. To adapt this large orchestral and choral work for organ only goaded me into more practice than I had ever imagined.

Three years later I took over the St Andrew's Choir as a volunteer. It was possible to conduct and play at the organ console. I spent many hours searching for new repertoire and I was lucky to receive gifts from church members willing to help expand the out-of-date library. There had never been a church budget for music.

St Andrew's was strategically placed to host many national events, including the funeral of a Governor-General and events involving federal politicians and other notables. I just happened to be the organist. For normal services there was no liturgical order printed. From time to time the minister had to be reminded before the last hymn (with some amusement) that "the anthem" (unspecified) had not been sung. But he gave me the freedom to design the liturgy for special music services on Palm Sunday, Advent and at Christmas.

Some months after the Uniting Church in Australia was inaugurated in mid-1977 my wife and I

decided to leave the continuing Presbyterian Church, which St Andrew's became, and move to Wesley Uniting Church down the road. After spending the best part of a year doing next to no church music, I was invited to become the Director of Music. There was a reasonable honorarium which I was able to put into buying music for the choir. This was an exciting challenge that involved working closely in partnership with a well-organised minister with a passion for music. We worked together on a rolling three-monthly or longer music programme tied into the liturgy and special events. I was on clover.

The minister himself had been supported by the church to study in the United States and he encouraged me to apply for a grant to attend an extended summer school at the Westminster Choir College in Princeton. This was a remarkable experience and it gave me inspiration to venture new things in church music.

For over 30 years I was fortunate to have a succession of clergy who were almost without exception enthusiastic and supportive of a busy church and community music programme. Organ and choir performances and congregational singing were given a huge boost when, after four years of research and discussion, I was able to get approval to change a dry church acoustic into a fine space for music. But I had to use private donations, rather than the church budget, to finance the work, which was carried out over a period of years. A major change was the replacement of sound-deadening ceiling tiles with reflective wooden panels. Opposition from some who hadn't wanted to see any change in the church fabric

melted away after the first service.

A rebuild of the Wesley organ was on the to-do list and progressed over a period of years. Meanwhile good fortune suddenly came with the arrival in 1994 of many experienced singers from Brisbane to study at the Canberra School of Music. The catch was that they needed financial help. So, with the help of a very positive minister, we started a scholarship scheme relying on donations from church members and others.

Over the next four years we explored how a scholarship scheme and other music ventures could be put on a secure basis.

By good fortune again we had another supportive minister who backed the setting up of a Wesley Music Foundation in 1998. This has led, among other things, to 110 vocal and instrumental scholarships being awarded up to last year. Most of these were awarded to talented students at the ANU School of Music or secondary colleges, but lately also to home-schooled students.

In the late 1990s, a proposed project to build a child-care centre on church land was unexpectedly cancelled because of a change in Commonwealth government policy. The church's minister at the time suggested that, as an alternative use of the land, a "college of sacred music" with links to a university be established. So was born the idea of a Music Centre contiguous to the Church. After another four years of planning and strong congregational support, the centre opened on the large Wesley site in 2002. There were other developments too, one of which was the completion of a George Stephens organ rebuild. The organ rebuild and Music Centre were funded by the Wesley Music Foundation through pledged donations and a short-term synod loan, without church or government funding. This led to my job at Wesley being expanded to include the volunteer position of Director of the Wesley Music Centre.

Then, without warning, a proposal to work closely with a university on church music courses fell through as a result of university cuts. Fortunately, the Music Centre was viable without this connection, thanks especially to a chamber-music space with high acoustic quality having been planned. This proved attractive to many individual performers and ensembles. To date the centre has hosted around 1200 public concerts and other events as well as teaching, U3A courses and other activities.

One of our most successful initiatives at the Music Centre was the establishment in 2003 of a joint organ-teaching venture with Philip Swanton, Peter Guy and initially Philip Matthias from the University of Newcastle. It was given the title of ACT Organ School. About 50 students have been taught and 16 organ scholarships so far awarded.

For my part, collaborating with and supporting

young musicians is a highly rewarding activity. While I've always loved playing the organ for services, working week-by-week with young singers, instrumentalists (including violin, viola, cello, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, harp or guitar players) and keyboard scholars was, for me, infinitely more stimulating and fun. It also generated much interest and enjoyment for the congregation. If one wants to go down such a path, be prepared for a great deal of hard work and management. But the rewards can be surprising.

With the availability of the Music Centre and changes to the church building and other spaces, it was logical to think about hosting ecumenical events to attract musicians, especially singers, from around Australia. Between 2005 and 2011 the Wesley Music Foundation and Wesley Church, in conjunction with Charles Sturt University, a Uniting Church New South Wales Synod music committee and other participants, organised a series of four national seminars on church music. A peak event in 2009 attracted 210 people and was led by three leaders of world standing – Professor Michael Hawn from Southern Methodist University, Dallas, John Bell from Iona in Scotland and Colin Gibson from New Zealand. This led logically to a week-long workshop in 2011 for theological students and others held in conjunction with Flinders University, South Australia.

I have now retired from all church, Music Centre and Foundation activity and leave it to my successors to pursue the mission. Circumstances have changed in many unforeseeable ways. However, with every crossroad, as a Chinese proverb says, there can be an opportunity of some kind. The roads ahead will be different for everyone. They are not guaranteed to be smooth travelling and you can expect forks in the road with decisions to be made. From time to time you can expect roadblocks, which will have to be moved or somehow circumvented. My advice, based on experience, is not to be deterred by occasional setbacks. Achievement of long-term goals requires a great deal of persistence and patience.

If you read this and are not retired, I hope and pray that your time, place and circumstances will give you the kind of good fortune that came my way over the decades. *Seek and you will find...* and seize your chances as they emerge. ■

Two books by Garth Mansfield, Celebrating Wesley Music Scholars 1994-2009, published in 2009, and Celebrating Wesley Music Centre, published in 2012, are available from the Wesley Music Centre at \$5 each plus postage, payable to the Wesley Music Foundation. For orders or information please call 02 6232 7248 or write to P. O. Box 3217, Manuka, ACT 2603. Philip Swanton will write about the ACT Organ School in the Winter 2015 Edition of Organ Australia.