

Philip Swanton: An Unquenchable Passion for Organ Teaching

by Garth Mansfield*

There can be no doubt about the recipe for highly successful organ teaching. An unquenchable passion for sharing skills and knowledge with students, a belief in their potential and positive encouragement at all stages of their development coupled with innovative communication, boundless energy and honed management skills.

These were among the sentiments expressed by many speakers at a farewell gathering for Philip Swanton in the Wesley Music Centre on 22 September 2017 to mark his “second retirement” from the ACT Organ School. A large group of organ students, former students, parents, Wesley Music Centre staff and volunteers,



Wesley Music Foundation (ACT) Board members, Wesley Church members, organ scholarship donors and community supporters came to farewell Philip for the second time 14 years after he began teaching in the Organ School.

In 2002 I and a number of church organists including Adrian Keenan, then a music staff member at Canberra Grammar School, were becoming increasingly concerned about the shortage of Church organists in the ACT and the lack of organ teaching at the ANU School of Music. After many failed attempts to find a suitable and willing teacher, we twisted Philip’s arm and enlisted Peter Guy, a now Newcastle Cathedral organist, to share teaching on a fortnightly basis in a newly created “ACT Organ School” based at the Wesley Music Centre.

In the first stage from June 2003, the majority of the 8 students were mature age. This gradually changed as younger students were recruited. By the end of 2008 after nearly 5 years of commuting, Philip had already made 60 return car trips to Canberra covering a distance of some 40,120kms, or more than once around the globe. In fear of falling asleep at the wheel, he decided it was time to retire from teaching in Canberra!

His “retirement” was short-lived! In February 2009 Philip resumed the work with 3 students under a new arrangement involving air travel part-subsidised by the Wesley Music Foundation. The number of students grew rapidly so that by 2011 there was a solid core of 12 to 15 students with the focus explicitly on training the next generation of organists, namely school and university-aged students. The extent of Philip’s commitment is indicated by the 300 return plane trips he made from February 2009 to September 2017 and the fact that over the course of his 14 years’ involvement with ACTOS he taught 59 different students and did not miss a single week’s teaching. From the start of the Organ School in 2003, he had taught 69 students.

At the beginning of 2017 the weekly teaching in each term alternated with well-known Brisbane organist Christopher Wrench joining the School’s staff. He and Philip alternated teaching on a week-on, week-off basis for the first three terms of this year before Christopher took over the full teaching load in October.

Philip’s record as an organ teacher is, I believe, without parallel in this country. I have never seen any regime of teaching which reached such a level of excellence with so many students so passionate about organ playing and achieving such remarkable results over so many years. Many a time I have heard students say “I can’t wait until Thursday for the next lesson. It’s the best day of the week!”

From day 1 in 2003 Philip instituted a regime of teaching with the hitherto unheard of practice of each student receiving after each lesson a detailed electronic record of their lesson and also fed them copious quantities of music to explore. He maintained an amazing level of positive support and encouragement, not only in regular teaching but also in AMEB examinations, workshops, student concerts each term, the Sydney Town Hall Young Organists’ Days, the Sydney Organ Competitions and Sydney Organ Academies.

It is not surprising that so many students reached their full potential with several becoming successive winners in the Sydney organ competitions and a goodly number successfully completing degrees and pursuing professional careers and also many providing practical service in church, school and community music. Currently 5 students are playing for churches around Canberra.

We all offer a big thank-you to Philip for his long-term commitment, energy, teaching skills, endless patience and his amazing contribution to the success of the ACT Organ School over so many years.

We know that organ teachers and organists are prone to resurrections and recycling. That was brought home to me when a friend and well-known “retired” Sydney music teacher and organist in his 88th year played in September for my brother’s memorial

service. That's remarkable, but even more remarkable and perhaps unique, was the fact that he played for my brother's wedding in the same church in 1950, some 67 years ago.

I hope Philip won't resist some form of resurrection in future, but whatever opportunities knock or needs arise in the future, we and the organ community wish him a well-deserved, restful and fruitful retirement from the ACT Organ School. He will be long remembered.

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Originally published in The Sydney Organ Journal Summer Edition 2017-18.