

CONSERVATION OF AUSTRALIA'S HISTORIC HERITAGE PLACES Productivity Commission Inquiry 2005

Submission from Organ Historical Trust of Australia

Preamble

There are around 2,000 pipe organs in Australia. These are located in a diversity of places - public venues such as concert and town halls, theatres, teaching institutions and churches, together with private homes, masonic temples, etc. Many are physical structures enclosed within the space of buildings, often placed in purpose-built chambers and frequently making a major architectural statement within their environment.

There are roughly 600 pipe organs in each of New South Wales and Victoria, with lesser numbers in South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania.

Around one-quarter of these instruments would be of heritage value and significant owing to their intactness, age, cultural associations, rarity or musical qualities.

The majority of these instruments are of indigenous manufacture, but there is a highly important corpus of imported organs, mainly from Britain, but also from several European countries and the American continent. The indigenous instruments range from those built by professional organbuilders within organ factories or workshops to those constructed by amateurs in a domestic environment.

A small number of instruments can be considered to be of international significance, such as:

- The Sydney Town Hall organ, built in 1886-1889 by Hill & Son, London and the largest organ in the world at the time; this instrument survives very substantially intact, with outstanding casework;
- The Robert Blackwood Hall organ, Monash University, built by Jürgen Ahrend, Leer, Germany and opened in 1980; this is the largest new instrument to have been constructed by its renowned builder.

Additionally, there are examples of English organs in Australia by builders who are largely unrepresented by extant work in Britain, for example such names as John Courcelle and William Hamlin.

The Trust has also been approached by authorities in Europe where the accurate reconstruction of organs there has relied upon technical data provided from Australia owing to the intactness of the surviving instruments in Australia.

The pipe organ has been an integral component of our social fabric from the early years of the 19th century. Our corpus of instruments form an important part of our nation's cultural heritage at various levels:

- Associations with music making, musicians and composition;
- Associations with the work of outstanding craftsmen, artists and architects;
- Associations with education and religion.

Pipe organs had immense musical importance in the days before recorded music. Recitals on instruments in public venues, such as town halls, attracted on a regular basis audiences of thousands. City Organists were appointed who were leaders of the local musical profession.

Preservation of theatre organs has also been one of the major achievements of the Theatre Organ Society of Australia. Only one major theatre organ, at the State Theatre, Sydney, survives in its original venue. TOSA has been extremely proactive in relocating and restoring instruments throughout Australia, utilising much voluntary assistance in this process.

Threats

The majority of pipe organs are located in church buildings. With church union, changing worship patterns, denominational allegiances and declining congregations, many church buildings are being sold. It is proving difficult, in some instances, to relocate these instruments:

- Some of these instruments are large and occupy a considerable amount of space;
- Many of these instruments are in poor physical condition and require major restoration;
- There is a lack of places where redundant organs may be stored before they find a new home.

The physical condition of many church instruments is alarming. There are not the resources, in some instances, to carry out essential restoration work and gradually they are becoming unplayable owing to deteriorating mechanisms. Regular maintenance is essential, but this is frequently not taking place. Some are not played upon at all.

Heritage legislation and governmental expertise in some states is insufficient to prevent the alteration or destruction of significant organs through insensitive rebuilding, enlargement or indeed disposal. There have been many regrettable losses, notably the recycling of the pipework and façade of the internationally significant 1929 Melbourne Town Hall organ in an otherwise new instrument as recently as 2000.

Fire has also consumed a significant number of instruments in recent years as churches and halls have been destroyed. Notable losses have included the 1892 grand organ in St

Kilda Town Hall, Victoria in 1991, and in the last year the fine 1904 instrument at Ascot Vale Uniting Church, Victoria.

Human agency saw the colossal organ in the Exhibition Building, Melbourne, built in 1880 by George Fincham, and the 20th largest organ in the world at the time, destroyed through neglect. Had this instrument survived, it would have been the focal point of this World Heritage site.

A large number of organs, particularly in the years following the second World War, were subjected to inappropriate tonal and mechanical changes that have affected their overall integrity and significance as well as mechanical longevity.

At a human level, fewer people can play the organ and its study even at tertiary level is declining. This can be seen as an opportunity for further development.

Assistance

The Organ Historical Trust of Australia is an approved organisation on the Register of Cultural Organisations (ROCO) which has Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status, as administered by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts. It can thus grant tax deductibility for appeals for approved restoration work. The National Trust of Australia has also been able to sponsor appeals for such work, through these provisions, and there are a number of instruments that have been capably restored through this facility. It is essential that this continue as it acts as a powerful incentive to preserve this aspect of the national heritage within local communities.

The New South Wales Government, over many years, has made direct grants to public venues for organ restoration work. This has provided a strong stimulus to local organbuilders to improve their restoration capabilities and enabled many instruments of high significance to receive a careful restoration. The Victorian Government, in a more limited way, has also made funds occasionally available for the restoration of organs on its heritage register. However, elsewhere in Australia, funds are generally unavailable. For example, Tasmania has a nationally important collection of organs from the mid-19th century, but funds are unavailable for essential conservation work: church congregations are small and unable to shoulder such expenses.

Generally, across the country, it is difficult to seek funds for this work. The Heritage Lottery Fund in Great Britain has funded the restoration of a large number of significant organs throughout that country but there is nothing comparable here. Charitable trusts and private corporations are frequently approached for donations, but with limited success. While this may prove viable in some states and areas for prestigious instruments, it may be difficult for custodians in rural areas to enlist an adequate level of support.

Recommended actions

Funding

There is a serious need for funding, at Federal Government level, to be made available for basic conservation work to ensure that significant pipe organs continue to remain playable and any deterioration is arrested. Assessment procedures need to be developed. The significance of an instrument should govern priorities, but also any threats also need to be taken into account. The Organ Historical Trust of Australia is currently sponsoring the reconstruction and relocation of the 1875 William Hill & Son, London, organ built for Adelaide Town Hall, to the Soldiers Memorial Hall at Tanunda; fund raising for this major project has been protracted, with no major support forthcoming from the government sector.

Uniform heritage legislation nationally with tighter controls

There is considerable disparity between the various Australian states. In New South Wales, the legislation has been carefully drafted and heritage orders can prevent any work that is contrary to conservation principles such as the *Burra Charter* or the *Australian Pipe Organ Preservation Standards*. Conversely, in South Australia, some unique examples of indigenous organbuilding have been lost in recent years, such as the only identifiable surviving intact example of Robert Mackenzie's work, while there are current proposals to modify tonally a key early example of the work of J.E. Dodd, certainly of national significance. The internal mechanisms and structure of the 1929 Melbourne Town Hall organ were destroyed only five years ago: heritage permits were so loosely drafted that they made such work permissible and no expert organ conservation advice was sought. In Tasmania, there is only one intact 19th century organ remaining in Hobart; everything else has been rebuilt and altered, even in recent years. There is a low level of local consciousness of the loss of this heritage.

Storage

With the disposal of church property, there needs to be a place or places where dismantled pipe organs can be stored. At present, 'rescue' operations are conducted by organbuilders who are frequently obliged to store instruments in their crowded premises. If instruments are not rescued following sale of properties, there is a serious risk of them being damaged or broken up. Some instruments have even been removed and dumped.

Organ museums

There are many successful pipe organ museums throughout Europe and in China. The potential exists to set up a museum or museums in Australia that would attract considerable interest at a local, state and national level.

Educational programs

Many children these days would never have any direct experience of a pipe organ. The majority of new churches rely upon instruments other than an organ for liturgical support

- this is assuming that young people even attend church. A small number of private schools contain pipe organs in schools or chapels but only rarely are these used for educational programs. While most of Australia's major concert halls contain pipe organs, only a small number of children are likely to hear their organs in musical performances.

There needs to be more opportunities, too, for young people to learn and perform upon the pipe organ.

Recognition

The pipe organ heritage of Australia is recognised internationally through such organisations as the British Institute of Organ Studies and the Organ Historical Society of the United States. Representatives of these bodies have visited Australia, spoken at OHTA conferences and publicised their findings in overseas journals. Many organists and those interested in the organ and its music continue to visit Australia, some for recital tours and some for OHTA conferences. Overseas publications frequently mention the organ heritage of Australia: this year (2005) a monograph on the German 19th century organbuilder Friedrich Ladegast gave some pages to the work of his son, Ernst, in Australia.

Documentation

The documentation of the heritage, through OHTA's series of state gazetteers, some available on its website, enable the location of all known pipe organs to be interrogated. This project was initially completed in 1976, and the gazetteer listings have since been updated as an ongoing project. This enables the significance of each instrument to be established readily, based upon comparative evidence. The classification of organs by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) has strongly utilised such data in compiling its statements of significance.

Research on the history of the organ in Australia is published in the quarterly OHTA journal *OHTA News*. Additionally, there are a number of monographs including E.N. Matthews, *Colonial Organs and Organbuilders* (1969) and Graeme D. Rushworth, *Historic Organs of NSW* (1988).

The OHTA website <http://www.vicnet.net.au/~ohta> has achieved more than 20,000 hits since its inception, showing widespread interest in our organ heritage across the world. This includes a wide range of documentation including articles, images and primary source material.

Benefits

It would be excellent if younger people were able to experience the sight and sound of pipe organs as part of their overall education. Apart from the musical aspect, much can be learned regarding their history, technical construction, style, craftsmanship and indeed the physical principles that influence their sound.

The tourist potential of the pipe organ could well be further harnessed. The annual festival *Organs of the Ballarat Goldfields*, now in its 10th year, has been immensely successful and attracted participants from widely around the country. However, many of the pipe organs that are used are in a declining state of health and some are almost unplayable.

There are important regional groupings of pipe organs around Australia, including:

- The Barossa Valley, South Australia
- The Hunter Valley, New South Wales
- Central and Northern Tasmania
- The Central Goldfields and Western District, Victoria

These would all merit further promotion. Tours conducted by the Organ Historical Trust of Australia, through its annual conferences in all states of Australia over 27 years, the former Melbourne International Festival of Organ and Harpsichord, and by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) have shown widespread community interest and very strong support. This should be further developed.

APPENDIX

Bodies in Australia supporting the preservation of the national organ heritage

Government

NSW Heritage Office

<http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/>

Heritage Council Victoria / Heritage Victoria

<http://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/>

Non-government

Organ Historical Trust of Australia

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ohta/>

National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

<http://www.nattrust.com.au/>

Theatre Organ Society of Australia

ACT

<http://www.users.bigpond.com/cnmc/>

NSW

<http://www.tosa.net.au/TOSASITE/>

South Australia

<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~roscol/>

Victoria

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~organ/>

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10 June 2005