

From the Editor



RJ Stove
(Photo: AM Budianto)

The Spice of Organ Life

Sometimes a quote will turn up, by pure accident, which will illustrate a point better than any words of one's own could manage. From the three-volume 1619 treatise *Syntagma Musicum*, by Germany's Michael Praetorius, comes the following homage to the organ:

'... the organ possesses and encompasses all other instruments of music – large and small, however named – in itself alone. If you want to hear a drum, a trumpet, a trombone, cornetts, a recorder, flutes, pommers, shawms, a dulcian, racketts, sorduns, crumhorns, violins, lyres, etc., you can have all these and still many more unusual and charming things in this artful creation; so that, when you have and hear this instrument, you think nought but that you have all the other instruments one amongst another.'

Leave aside the fact that in 2011 most of us will need a dictionary for part of this extract, so as to remind ourselves – if we ever knew – what 'sorduns' and 'pommers' were. (Double-reed wind instruments, as it happens, very fashionable in Praetorius's own time.) Concentrate, rather, on the extract's overall theme: the sheer variety of colour which we

organists, if the instruments we use are even halfway adequate, have at our disposal.

Do we feel a sufficient appreciation for this variety? Most of us, whatever technical attainments we might have reached, probably fail to do so. Who among us has not heard, at some stage, the types of organ performances which give the instrument so bad a name as to confirm everything that organ-haters ever suspected about us? Hymns where every single verse is accompanied in the same oafish, Brobdingnagian fortissimo ... hymns where, at the other extreme, nothing can be heard from the console except the same unctuous, insipid eight-foot flute sound throughout ... Bach fugues mindlessly thumped forth on the assumption that if 10 seconds of continuous 32-foot pedal bourdon sound is great, then 10 minutes of continuous 32-foot pedal bourdon sound will be 60 times greater ... doubtless all readers of this magazine, like Ko-Ko in *The Mikado*, 'have got a little list' of their own most dreaded organistic sins.

These sins are entirely compatible in some instances with high academic qualifications. Without a single exception, they derive from a defective inner ear. A good rule of thumb is: would such tonal carelessness be tolerated from a pianist, a violinist, or a trombonist? If not, then why should it be endured

from an organist? The answer is, of course, that it should not.

Every public speaker soon learns the wisdom of pretending that there is just *one* person in the audience, and of trying to keep that person interested. We would do well to bear this advice in mind when performing at church services too. The sight of a massed congregation can be scary at the best of times; but it can become significantly less scary if we concentrate on appealing to a single individual in that congregation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there remains in most Australian churches (those churches, that is, which retain organists' services at all) a solid repository of good will towards organ music as such. It is our job to make sure, by our playing, that this good will continues.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. J. Stove'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

RJ Stove
Editor