



This document has come into my possession, by a route that I shall not divulge, which is a shocking exposé of a rogue element within the organist fraternity. However, I publish this by way of a wake-up call. The author is clearly an utter scoundrel, an extinguishing spirit of spiritual revival within any church, a black sheep among the virtuous flock; so, let it be our fervent prayer that the like of such never be found among our parishes.

JOHN RILEY

The secret life of an Organist,

by 'Organicus Grindus'

The organ is a unique instrument. What other in the musical kingdom is often more talked about and even of more interest and merit than the music played on it? Of course, not all share in this appreciation; the organ may merely serve to ensure privacy of conversation, ...to awake one from slumber, ... or to signal that it is, at long last, time to go home. ...But there remain those of us for whom the organ is deeply personal and, through the possession of instruments or CD collections in our homes, become regular recipients of the local 'neighbour from hell' awards.

For surely no other instrument – and the key role it plays – possesses such a unique ability to articulate messages and feelings and empathise with humanity. For example, when the bride's limousine takes the wrong turn down the motorway, a fugue on 'why are we waiting' can have a most profound effect on the groom and his family. If the groom himself has not turned up yet, a rendition of 'There might be trouble ahead', could be a profoundly apposite item to reflect the situation.

But the organist's life is, of all musicians, a rocky and accident-prone to tread. For here is a brief account of my journey up the slippery pole to success. From a tender age, every opportunity was made to hijack the organ at the family church and make lots of impressive noise. Moreover, the temptation to play an organ better than one's own was never far away. From time to time the lure of a fine-looking instrument in an unlocked state would prove too much and with nobody about one would start the motor and have lots of loud fun. Eventually though, one of the clergy or the lady doing the flowers or, worst of all, the organist would appear without warning. With the echo still bouncing round the building, denying guilt or knowledge of the dastardly deed proved to be somewhat futile.

Being caught red-handed and chased out of churches became rather wearisome. However, having gained a place in a music higher education institution... (a dear aunt of mine used to work in the admissions office, near the 'admit' and 'reject' trays as it happened), more bona fide organ playing opportunities gradually emerged. It all started reluctantly in a small way, but playing for mid-week funerals at a local church soon became a regular and necessary source of income, not least to finance a growing passion for organ LP's, particularly the expensive continental imports. This was during a period of increasing tension and turbulence in the local area. The Ladies' knitting circles and Inter-denominational turf wars were hitting new and ever more grisly heights. Meanwhile, many members of the local criminal classes were meeting increasingly mysterious and eccentric fates, usually in remote or unorthodox locations, especially those featuring deep water. One after another were perambulated up the aisle, (which itself acted as a divide as branches of the 'families' glowered at one another from opposite sides). Meanwhile, the vicar would perform great pyrotechnic feats of theology and biblical interpretation in bringing the character and deeds of the deceased into the Christian fold.

The essentially unchurched nature of the congregation would be betrayed by a marked lack of synchronisation in kneeling and standing, genuflecting helplessly in response to every part of the service, or dutifully clapping after the bible reading. The hymn on the other hand became a regular duo spot for solo organ and obligato clergy.

The search for a regular organist post was to lead deeper and deeper into more strange worlds and situations. A chance conversation with a small man called Clive, (who had an even smaller wife called Betty), led to contact being made with a local evangelical vicar, and in a moment of rash acquiescence I agreed to 'help out' with the organ playing. The regular organist had suddenly 'left', but it was only the ensuing weeks and months that would yield some clues as to his exact fate.

Holy Sepulchre church was built on the scale of a small cathedral, except that by the time that they had got to the organ the money had virtually run out, and even the five-second acoustic could not hide its limitations. The church heating system had packed up beyond economic repair shortly prior to my

arrival. During the winter, the congregation had the luxury of a few calor gas stoves. Sixty feet up, however, even three jerseys, a coat and fingerless gloves could not remove the sensation of physical and spiritual numbness.

This enormous building could hold up to 1,000 people, but only rarely did we scrape above three dozen, and on some dark stormy evenings we got down to the real hard core of half a dozen old ladies. This sad state of affairs was not really the vicar's fault. However, his regular sermons on the second coming, which preached that its imminence was such that we might not be here to see the following Sunday, did rather serve to sort out the faithful. His wife was definitely the driving force, (or perhaps even the driving away force) behind the church, as large and powerful as the vicar was small and timid, with a massive flower laden brim hat. She possessed a potent combination of disarming sweetness and sincerity... and sheer domineering persuasiveness that left no one untouched. Only the hardened faithful would stay to the very end of the service. The rest would leave during the final hymn just in time before the vicar's wife sprang to the door to grab everybody into coming to the various midweek functions, which invariably took the form of the same eight or so people meeting under the names of several different groups.

The organ was little more than a bunch of secondhand pipes strung together in the church attic. Access was via a ladder, which for one who is phobic about heights and enclosed spaces created a weekly bout of fear and dread. Various pipes had been removed over the years because of incurable ciphers and it was one of these, a giant 16ft open wood, which I knocked over one memorable Sunday. I narrowly avoided crushing my foot but succeeded in creating an enormous dull crash followed by clouds of dust and a level of excitement and alarm among the congregation probably not experienced since the World War II air raids.

The congregation was among the nicest that you could ever hope to meet. Nevertheless, the many virtues found in the church were becoming more than outweighed by the damp cold, the wretched organ and the ever-present physical hazards. The more that I signalled the wish to leave, the greater the affection and warmth showered upon me by all concerned. The vicar's wife was stunningly expert at dissipating all moral grounds for leaving and inducing guilt that one should have ever considered such a thing. Nevertheless, it was only a matter of time before some bodily injury would be incurred.

Surely enough, one May evening, I lost my footing and came down from the loft with exceptional rapidity and spectacle. Whilst being a thoroughly unpleasant, painful and unpremeditated event, this ultimately proved to be most useful in promoting a case for leaving. Aided by some plausible fabrication about a growing emotional connection with the minister's daughter from a church on the other side of the town, I was finally able to make the break.

Just a short distance up the hill was a totally different world and a very affluent suburb crowned with the Victorian glory of St. Philip's and St. Giles', and here I finished my student days as one of the organists. This very large and popular church had an organ that you would die for, a wonderful choir...and a rich social scene of students and young professionals. Occasionally, students had appeared at Holy Sepulchre, perhaps feeling guilty about being in the extravagantly self-affirming ambience of St. Philip's and St. Giles', but they did not usually last that long. Alas, wealthy potential benefactors were extremely rare, and even my ingenious five-part fugal expositions on the last hymn and other feats of musical prowess seemed to leave any such objects of my attentions curiously unmoved. And so, halcyon student days – and many high hopes – met their perhaps inevitable end...and with it the equally inevitable but nevertheless unpleasant prospect of having to make one's way in the real world.

Rather than pursue the all too inevitable fate of being a music teacher... (the prospect of enduring the subliminal forms of mental torture that I had inflicted on teachers in the all too recent past was sufficient a deterrent)...I decided to offer my services as a 'freelance musician'; aided by a CV that miraculously combined factual veracity with a totally misleading and inflated representation of my abilities and experience. Surely enough, an advertisement in a church newspaper offering my services as organist in return for lodgings eventually secured an 'arrangement' at St Peter's Church in an important university town in Southern England.

The vicar at St Peter's was a very educated and insightful man in many ways, but almost frighteningly absent-minded, confused, inarticulate and inept at any moment of pressure or crisis. His wedding sermons would be a veritable white-knuckle ride that easily eclipsed the best man's speech for revelations of family secrets, postnuptial practical advice, and other content guaranteed to keep any listener in a state of nervous apprehension. One particular highlight was the customary free interchange of the names of the bride, bride's sister and mother, not mention their various family pets and occasionally recently deceased members of the family... all to most interesting and, on one occasion at least, rather tragic effect.

The church itself had a large and lively congregation and was a truly democratic institution, to the point that nobody quite knew how far the delegation actually went, all fuelled by the ethos that the most spiritually inspired thoughts and activities were invariably the most last minute and informally presented ones. There were two unofficial music coordinators, neither of which seemed to coordinate much with the other, with the result that both the music group and organist would start to play a particular hymn or musical item, or both waited expecting the other to be doing it.

The biggest irritation was a particular young electric guitarist whose ego, talent, popularity, volume and wish to impart and project his personality and creative urges almost equalled my own. Even when he had finished his particular spot, his endless tuning, practicing and doodling jammed up every silent part of the service in which I wanted to play. Worst of all, just prior to launching into a well-perfected voluntary that I knew the congregation would love, he would often suddenly receive a 'word from The Lord' or a visitation of the Holy Spirit, these all being manifested in charismatic and unbounded musical form.

All this eventually became too wearisome to constantly bear, and one Sunday before anybody arrived, I undertook a delicate reordering of the wires in the back of his amplifier, (the equivalent in guitar terms of sabotaging the organ blower). However, the effects went some very considerable way beyond what was intended and indeed proved to be most spectacular. Shortly afterwards the guitarist left and ...with I am assured, his bandages now completely removed... was last heard of leading a Christian rock band tour round Russia.

Guitarist apart, playing music before the service became pretty pointless. Half the congregation would suddenly jam the door just after the official starting time. The music groups would invariably arrive late and still be tuning up and testing the microphones at the point when the service was supposed to start. The service would eventually grind into action a little after 10.30 and consist of readings, music, announcements, a dramatic presentation, interviews with members of the congregation, visiting missionaries or other celebrities. This would be crowned by the sermon, which seemed to expand in direct proportion to the visible signs of boredom from the congregation, or in the case of a visiting preacher, the distance that they had travelled to be there. Everything was thrown into the pot without any real coordination or understanding of how each item complemented the other or added to the total length. If we had not reached the final hymn by 12.00, the vicar would panic a bit and summarily chop the final hymn or, worse still the extroit, which the choir had rehearsed for several weeks beforehand. The final voluntary was often interrupted by somebody grabbing the microphone to give an announcement that had been forgotten earlier on, or to inform the driver of car registration something or other that they were blocking the driveway, had left their lights on; or that their children were trying to drive it away.

I am not quite sure what went on in the Sunday school, but whatever it was it got the children very excited. Immediately after the blessing, the doors would be unbarred, and dozens of little monsters would fly into the church at the top of their voices. Some would make a beeline for the instruments and drum kit that the music group had just left and thereupon expend their remaining moments of freedom until being rounded up and bundled into the family estate car.

Part of the 'package' that had brought me to the church was the guarantee of accommodation. After being passed around a few temporary addresses among the congregation, I ended up at what might be regarded as the church hotel. This was essentially based around a caring family couple in their large rambling house. In addition to an ever-growing number of children they accommodated a selection of family members, lodgers, people in various forms of crisis and several animals of uncertain pedigree or origin. Various extensions and creative permutations within the existing walls had made this possible and the periodic arrival of yet another baby seemed to make little difference. People were regularly invited to Sunday dinner since many of the adults went away for the weekend and extra hands were needed to chop the children's food up and generally keep them in order.

Sundays were blessed with various opportunities to invent preludes with subtly embedded melodies related to some aspect of the sermon, or other pertinent aspect of the service. However, on one fateful Sunday, a prelude that embodied a certain secular melody, pertinent to a distinctive aspect of the vicar's wife's somewhat outrageous new outfit was delivered with less than customary discretion and ambiguity. Noting the rapid embodiment of hell's fury on her face – and mindful of the saying that it is better to jump with a parachute than be kicked off the plane without one – I duly signalled my imminent departure. Mindful also of the need to seek a more ordered ecclesiastical environment where one's creative personality and overall profile would perhaps be less submerged, I found myself installed by no less than the divine hand itself at my current post as organist at St. Edward's; a church blessed by its position in a very affluent part of town, and able to provide a most handsome salary. Invitations to Sunday dinner by some members of the congregation are guaranteed, (though, strangely enough, rarely to the same place twice). Together with a free meal on demand at a local hostelry in exchange for occasionally playing the Hammond organ, the non-existent cooking skills are mercifully rarely called upon.

However, the organ upon my arrival at the church was a less happy affair. It had only relatively recently been completely rebuilt and enlarged by a small builder from The Midlands who then promptly retired to Spain and declared himself bankrupt. The instrument promised far more than it delivered and was clearly deteriorating fast. One evening, whilst inside the organ trying to fix yet another cipher, I was overcome by a distinctly cathartic and spectacular orgy of violence and malice that resulted in kicking over and jumping on the offending organ pipe. With the resultant newly found clarity of mind came the realisation that since things were highly unlikely to get any better with this sad instrument, a rolling phased programme of subtle sabotage might be used to force the issue of its replacement.

By coincidence, at around the same time a solicitor joined the congregation, a man of exceptional charm and persuasion. His unerring logic in all matters biblical persuaded many a wealthy individual of the divinely ordained enhancements in this life and beyond that would ensue in return for donations towards certain very good causes. The required funds soon materialised and, after an interregnum which was served by free trials of electronic instruments from every available company from the UK and further afield, our magnificent new pipe instrument was installed.

This is now the pride of our parish and a draw to many accomplished organists...who are only too happy to provide recitals for no fee and raise much-needed funds for a variety of charitable causes of which I am in sole charge.

...And so, like a plughole in an emptying bath, the organ is the centre round which the rest of one's life happily revolves...for only true organists know in their heart that even on the bleakest of days, the sound of the organ will communicate a voice of beauty and truth amid a cruel, insensitive and incurably ciphering world.

What some people have said over the years about the author...

"Dear God...I want this man to play for my next wedding."

Rupert Murdoch

"If this is the person I think it is, heaven help him if he comes near my parish again!"

A senior vicar

"I am still waiting for my cut."

A leading solicitor

"With church members like him, who needs an outside mission field?"

A leading North of England Anglican Archbishop

"If I ever get to do what I would really love to do with my guitar strings, there might be some missing notes from my next solo!"

An evangelical guitarist

"We are hoping to use some experimental sound samples of loud human cries for our next model."

An electronic organ salesman

"If that chap starts up my organ again without permission, he'll be playing pedals only for the next six months!"

A protective organist

"Orders for our fingerprint recognition software for organ motor switches have gone through the roof countrywide!"

An electronic security salesman

"If it were physically possible, I should find reading about this man a truly hair-raising experience."

Yul Brynner

"We are beginning to have some questions about the 'Pyongyang Cathedral Organ Restoration Fund'...and the 'North Korean Christian Organists' Rest Home'..."

A Charity Commission Inspector