

# Notes on the "Suite for the Organ of St. John's, Neutral Bay"

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*Suite for the Organ of St John's, Neutral Bay* is my first attempt at a composition for organ. It was written with the encouragement of Robin Ruys, organist at St John's, and is dedicated to her. Since I had access to the organ in St. John's, it was written specifically for that organ. Indeed I worked out quite a lot of it sitting at the organ console.

I have very little knowledge of organ music, and I was also somewhat inhibited by the weight of tradition behind the instrument. In the end I decided to write a suite of somewhat contrasting short movements, a genre which fits the use of the organ as an accompaniment to worship services. Given this framework, the fairly gentle nature of the St. John's instrument, and likely listeners, I decided not to write a violently atonal piece; in fact the piece has turned out to be very simple, with essentially a single line in each movement, and no contrapuntal elements.

As someone who is primarily an electronic composer, I am very interested in sound, and I attempted to make use of the various stops of the St. John's organ, without engaging in rapid stop changes. I saw as distinctive features of organs in general the two (or more) manuals with different tone colours, and the ability to sustain chords. I also found the organ a very uncompromising instrument, with none of the subtlety of inflection of say a woodwind instrument, which made it a challenge to write anything.

The suite consists of five short movements. The central movement ("Chant") was written first and the others added around it.

The first movement, "Toccata", starts with some slow chords and then moves into a rippling figure on the Swell; after some time this figure moves into triplets and alternates between the manuals, coming to rest on the Swell at the end of the movement.

The second movement, "Hocket", requires the performer to play with the thumbs of both hands on the Great and the fingers on the Swell. In general a hocket is a line of movement divided between two (or more) parts, and here most of the movement consists of the rocking back and forth between the two manuals. I have marked it "Mechanical", as I was reminded of mechanical musical instruments. Light stops are used throughout.

The third movement, "Chant", is perhaps the most complex. Two notes on the Swell are wedged on, and other notes on the Swell are largely operated by the pedals (coupled to the swell and without a pedal stop). The swell box is closed, and the notes on the Swell are intended largely to add dissonant and unstable tone colour to the very slow melody played in octaves on the Great.

The fourth movement, "Meditation", is completely unmeasured. It consists of slow chordal agglomerations built up on the Swell with the swell box closed. The swell box then gives a slow crescendo and decrescendo, and the chord usually shifts in some way at the peak of the crescendo.

The final movement "Crystallisation", begins very fluidly, and explores the unusual timbre of the Flute stop played fast and very low. In the course of the movement, blocks of four-square rhythm gradually become more predominant: the fluidity crystallises out and eventually becomes a trumpet- or bell- like alternation of notes at the end of the piece.

## **Note on the organ at St. John's**

The organ in St. John's is a mechanical action instrument with two manuals and ten speaking stops. It was built in 1912 by Charles Richardson (at which time the church was Presbyterian), and restored in 1993, during Rev. Jane Monro's tenure as minister. The restoration, by Peter Jewkes, was carried out with the assistance of a grant from the NSW Government on the recommendation of the Heritage Council of NSW. The consultant for the restoration was Kelvin Hastie.

### **Specification**

- Great:** Open Diapason 8, Stopped Diapason 8, Dulciana 8, Flute 4
- Swell:** Violin Diapason 8, Lieblich Gedact 8, Gamba 8, Gemshorn 4 Oboe 4
- Pedal:** Bourdon 16
- Couplers:** Swell to Great, Great to Pedal, Swell to Pedal

*Suite for the Organ of St John's, Neutral Bay* was composed in 1999; these notes were written at the time of composition.