

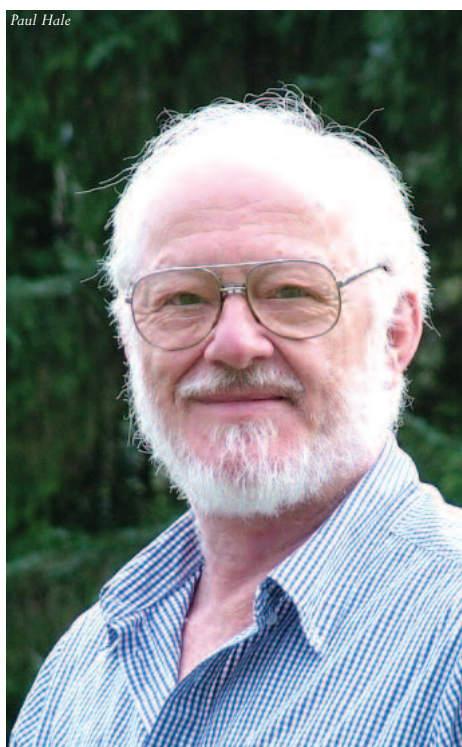
# The organs of Kenneth Jones

Paul Hale

The Irish-born organ-builder Kenneth Jones, whose work is found in every continent except Antarctica, is easing into semi-retirement, handing over control of his busy company (Kenneth Jones & Associates). This is a good opportunity to look back over his long career, so I recently visited him at his beautiful home (self-designed and partly self-built, of course!) in the inspiring Wicklow hills.

‘Something old, something new’ has been an *idée fixe* throughout his career, so I thought that this column would be an appropriate place to survey his output. The front covers of *Organists’ Review* have displayed over the years numerous examples of his striking organ-cases; to our readers his work will be familiar.

As much a musician, philosopher, student of architecture and original thinker as an organ-builder, Kenneth enthuses about the early influences which drew him to organ-building, while musing that it may be an appropriate time to retire because organ design has ‘perhaps reached the end of a cul-de-sac’. An unexpected statement, one might feel, from a man who has been more richly inventive in case-design, layout and mechanism design than any of his generation. ‘There’s nothing new’ he opines ‘someone, somewhere has done it all before’. The modesty of this statement is genuine and it evidences the true philosopher – someone who continually seeks for the truths he knows to be out there. He feels that given the current decline in church-going the only likely productive future fields for the imaginative organ-builder are ‘in historical restorations (and new historical copy organs)’ and ‘new organs for concert halls, such as those springing up in the Far East’.



Born in 1936 to a Church of Ireland Rector, Kenneth heard the organ from an early age and was taught it by his mother, a skilled trained player. Early Telford organs, with their low cut-ups and musical, singing tone delighted him – as they do still, remaining one of the guiding principles of his tonal philosophy. At the same time, the brilliant virility of the 1878 T.C. Lewis organ in Christ Church, Cork, excited and inspired him. It was not just the organs themselves which provided the spur; it was musicians such as the remarkable Calvert Swanton, a skilled amateur and frequent visitor to Paris who championed the works of Dupré, Vierne, Langlais and Messiaen in Ireland, performing them regularly on the 1901 Abbott & Smith at Dun Laoghaire and bringing to Ireland players such as Langlais, Demessieux

and Dupré. The musical environment in which Kenneth found himself allowed him to develop broader interests than purely the organ – piano, harpsichord, singing, chamber music: he was involved in them all.

Boarding-school educated, Kenneth proved an able mathematician so he read for Engineering (and Arts) degrees at Trinity College, Dublin, deciding to keep music as a hobby rather than a career. On graduation he thought – as ever – ‘out of the box’, and accepted an engineering post on the rail system in Nigeria. Bereft of organs to hear or play, he took to the radio and tuned in one day to the English Language Service of Swedish Radio. There he was bowled over by the sound of a Marcussen organ being broadcast and began to seek out recordings of such organs, and recordings of the great historical instruments which inspired them – such as Helmut Walcha’s Bach at Alkmaar. He earned nearly five months leave from the tropics every couple of years or so; much of this time he spent in the Netherlands with the organ-builders Pels & Van Leeuwen, whose work he had come across in Ireland. With them he was to learn many skills such as pipe-making and tonal finishing. With them, too, he visited and studied several of the iconic Dutch instruments, even helping to tune at the Bavokerk in Haarlem, which he still regards as ‘the most beautiful organ in the world’.

Deciding the time was right to leave the railways and start up as an organ-builder, he took a ‘golden handshake’ in 1964, assembled a small team of trainees around him and did just that. Over the next eight years he built twenty-five new organs (most of them modest electric-action instruments) in Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. Two





*National Concert Hall, Dublin*



*Trinity College, Melbourne, Australia*



*Parish Church, Eskra, Co. Tyrone*

tracker organs were designed and built, and with them under his belt he decided to move back to Ireland and set up shop in his homeland.

Once again he assembled a team of trainees: this has always been a Jones characteristic, as he has endeavoured for the whole of his career to seek out latent talent and train the next generation of organ craftsmen. For a

while in the early 1970s a directorship of Nicholson's (the other directors/owners were Denis Thurlow and Raymond Todd) proved mutually beneficial to both firms, but very soon Kenneth Jones & Associates built up an enviable order book, mainly for new organs, in Ireland and abroad. He was set fair.

Kenneth's involvement in music

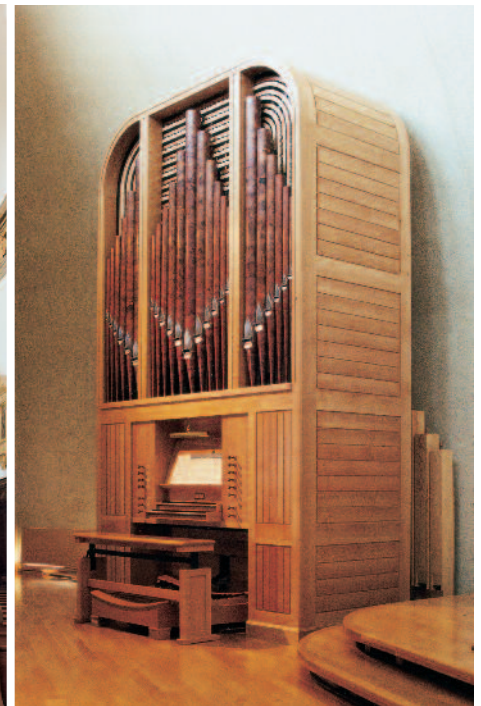
had flourished in Nigeria, as conductor of Pro Musica Lagos, an orchestra which he founded, and this continued in Ireland where he was appointed Principal Conductor of the Dublin Orchestral Players, Ireland's leading semi-professional symphony orchestra. Music has continued to be an underpinning of his craft to this day; recently he conducted the China Youth



*St Mark, Anchorage, Alaska*



*Mount St Mary's, Spinkhill, Yorks*

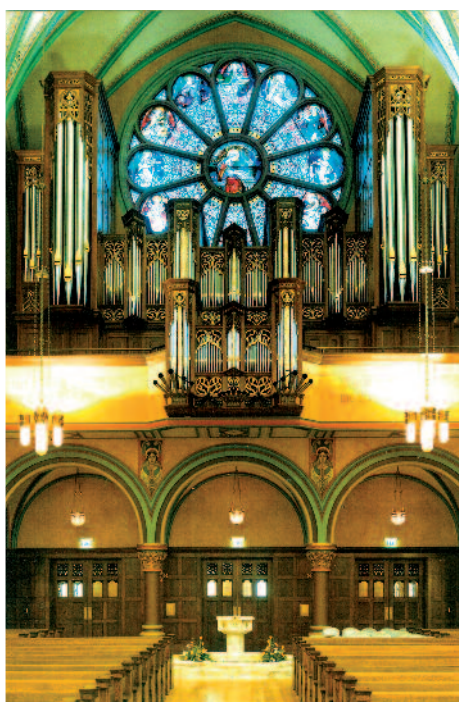


*Fukuyama, Japan*





*Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver, Canada*



*Cathedral of the Madeleine, Salt Lake City*



*Holy Cross, Dundrum, Dublin*

Orchestra at the inauguration of his new concert-organ in Beijing Youth Concert Hall.

His output of new organs has been remarkable – outstripping in number of organs all other companies in the UK and Ireland. Between 1973 and 2006 he and his company built six four-manual organs, fifteen three-manual organs, forty-three two-manual organs, twenty

one-manual organs and a number of house organs. Every one of these is unique and was designed personally – internally, technically and musically as well as architecturally – by Kenneth Jones (just a few of his extraordinarily varied organ-cases are illustrated here). In addition there were twenty restorations (mainly ‘historic’) and nineteen rebuildings. Much of his most interesting work has been abroad – across the USA (several in Alaska), China, Greece, Australia, Japan, Canada, Falklands (Christ Church Cathedral) and so on. In addition to work in the UK, many of his organs have naturally been for Irish clients.

What are the characteristics of a Kenneth Jones organ? Well, the first thing that is abundantly clear is that all has been thought out from scratch: Jones has never been content to make something in a particular way just because others do. This applies to every aspect of his organs – from pedalboard to tuning-slide, from key-action to pipe-scaling, from soundboard to toe-piston: all have been reconsidered from scratch, tried and tested, and then used regularly in his organs. His console design is ergonomically thought-through, as is the shape of his unique pedalboard which successfully combines the best characteristics of straight and

radiating/concave boards. His tonal designs combine – even after all this time – the sweet singing Principal choruses of his youth with the vivacious mixture-work of his ‘Marcussen-influenced’ years. Stop-lists often have a loosely English look, though fully specified with mutations and a rich palette of reeds, and he has gone through periods where particular



*Youth Concert Hall, Beijing, China*



*Glenstal Abbey, Co. Limerick*

enthusiasms are evident. One of these was a reconsideration of the concept of a 'Résonance' department acting both as a Solo Organ and as the Pedal upperwork; examples of this dating from the early 1990s may be found in such otherwise wildly dissimilar organs as those in the National Concert Hall (Dublin) and the University Church (Cambridge). His actions are respected for their elegant, light, responsive touch, aided in his largest organs by a variety of clever 'assists' (pneumatic or electric, usually involving secondary pallets) for the couplers – some of which he has revisited in later years to improve. Stop action is usually mechanical, often with electric solenoids in parallel to enable a combination action. Other firms have attempted this; few succeed. His recent beautiful organ (a recreation and development of a rare organ by Thomas

Elliot, 1817) in Waterford Cathedral succeeds triumphantly in its stop action – each stop having a sensor to ensure its on/off current is supplied just long enough to draw/withdraw it silently, however broad the slide.

Jones's organ-cases are striking: each of his imaginative case-designs is quite different (no 'samey' standard re-used CAD work here); readers over the years will have come to appreciate the enormous range he has shown, from historically-inspired to a variety of 'contemporary' styles. He has also been known, like several famous organ-builders of the past, for managing to lay out an organ internally getting in more than most would have considered possible, yet leaving all accessible. Great challenges in design and layout include, of course, the historic organ at Tewkesbury Abbey, perhaps an instrument by which he will be best

remembered in the UK, for many of his other British organs are in university or school chapels and are therefore rather less in the public eye: Rugby School (for which he received the *Jeu d'Esprit* award of the Royal Fine Art Commission Trust in 2002), Loretto School, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and Mount St Mary's College (near Sheffield) are among the latter.

A book would be needed – is needed – adequately to do justice to the lifetime achievements of Kenneth Jones. All this article has space for is a modest résumé of his career and a small selection of photographs of his remarkable output. In the next issue, we will print more photographs and I will carry on assessing Jones's work by looking in detail at a number of his organs and in discussing with him his views on various aspects of tonal and mechanical design.

## Colin Andrews

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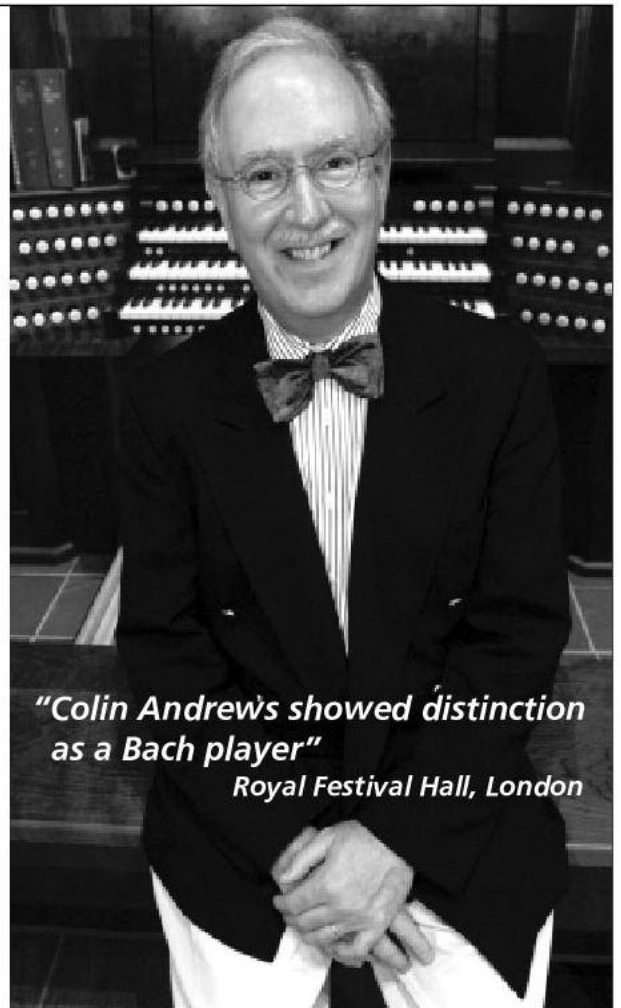
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