

BULLETINS FROM BARCHESTER TOWERS. A TRIBUTE TO MARMADUKE P. CONWAY

by Robert Stove

Feet itching for extra journeys in a time machine? Think you'll slake this yen through mere amateur-hour methods like flinging *Dinosaurs* into the DVD player? Forget it. *Dinosaurs* is for wimps. If you really want a blast from the past, then junk *Corythosaurus*, try Conway. Marmaduke P. Conway, that is.

Who was Marmaduke P. Conway?

You may well ask. His very name's Wodehousian splendour makes him sound like a bread-throwing boon-companion of Bertie Wooster, Bingo Little and Pongo Twistleton at the Drones Club. Standard reference works are no help with him, and even a trawl through Internet search-engines yields only scraps. In fact he served as organist and choirmaster at various English cathedrals – notably Ely and Chichester – for half a century; and once retired, he placed the organ student forever in his debt with a priceless 1949 volume called *Playing a Church Organ*. Well, 1949 is the date printed on the fly-leaf; actually, as we shall observe, most of it could have been issued in 1899 or even 1849, to judge from the attitudes it proclaims. (A few stray references to Saint-Saëns and César Franck having recently dwelt among us are among its rare concessions to the mid-twentieth-century *Zeitgeist*.)

My serendipitous detection of Marmaduke P. Conway occurred through the search for a printed tutor that would help me, as an enthusiastic but long-in-tooth Melbourne organist, to acquire some adequate pedal technique. Just as there exists a certain sort of driver who never progresses beyond first gear, so there exists (indeed, there abounds) a certain sort of organist who has never progressed beyond using his instrument's manuals. To this latter unhappy brigade I, until recently, belonged. In my plan of moving up a notch to Bumbling Pedal-Board-Amateur – as distinct from my former state of Have You Ever Considered A Career As A Paraplegic? – I borrowed from the SOV library the Marmaduke P. Conway *magnum opus*. More of a *parvum opus* really; only 144 pages, including a long repertoire list at the end. But what concentration of matter, and what distinction of manner!

Dr Conway (yes, Yorkshire's Reed Organ and Harmonium Museum credits him with a doctorate) wrote prose of the same indiscriminate, omnipresent majesty that Victorian architects brought to creating railway stations, stock exchanges and public conveniences. (I picture him as a real-life counterpart to Crocker 'The Crock' Harris in *The Browning Version*: bow-tie-wearing, with a mortar-board affixed permanently to his scalp; with a bottomless repertoire of dry Latinate witticisms; and, if married at all, with a genteelly adulterous wife.)

The great merit of Dr Conway is that he operates on the admirable assumption that you know *nothing*. This assumption ensures that he reaches parts other organ tutors cannot reach. Many other volumes will instruct you in pedal-board exercises, the first principles of organ-stop choice, or how to obtain long-out-of-print nineteenth century collections of French Christmas carols; but who else except Dr Conway will intercept such bulletins from Barchester Towers as this?

'One can scarcely expect satisfactory working to accrue from a low churchman or Nonconformist appointed as the *regular* organist for an Anglo-Catholic service.'

[*Society of Organists, Victoria]

Or this?

'He [the master of the choristers] must make his boys like him, and take a general interest in their welfare. This may easily make some demands on his time, and even occasionally on his purse.'

(From that last qualifying clause, cynical twenty-first-century visions arise of treble-voiced protection-racketeers in their serried, surpliced ranks assembled: 'Guv'nor, you buy me a chocolate ice-cream every day for the next six months, and I promise not to tell the Vicar about you flashing your Hampton Wick in the vestry ...'. Nor would today's mass-media lynch-mobs find reassuring Dr Conway's detestation of female choristers: 'for church music *par excellence* they can never rival a well trained set of boys.')

Or how about the following maxims?

'Unaccompanied singing should be the rule wherever possible and no choir should consider its music properly learnt if it cannot be sung satisfactorily without accompaniment... The best accompaniment is no accompaniment.'

Quite true, but if enforced in 2004, that last creed would compel purges on a truly Stalinist scale.

Other passages indicate Dr Conway's marvellous skill as a psychologist (or, to lapse into current abusage, 'motivator'). He makes the important point – otherwise unrecorded in print to my knowledge, but quickly obvious to anyone who for his sins has ever been obliged to help train a choir – that for sheer childishness, boy and girl choristers cannot hope to compete with the average gaggle of adults. He tells you how to get the maximum mileage out of even the shortest and scrappiest run-throughs: namely, by resisting as much as possible the siren-calls (inevitable wherever two or three no-hopers are gathered together) for sectional rehearsals:

'It is unwise to keep other members of the choir waiting for long, while individual parts are being practiced ... Too much talk and not enough work is a frequent feature at some choir practices.'

(Hear, hear. One would relish seeing certain conductors being compelled to write out this particular maxim several hundred times.)

Dr Conway deplores the sadism of church architects who ensure that the organ-loft can be reached only via a creaking spiral staircase. He bemoans the difficulty that anyone six feet or more in height will find playing in an English organ loft at all. He describes how to fend off at the pass those parish councillors who want to give an organ-building contract to their own useless relatives, as if they themselves were nepotistic Renaissance popes. He explains how to get legal redress if the vicar dismisses you from your organistic post (Anglicans only need apply for this one). He spells out an admirable list of don'ts for the budding organist:

'He [the budding organist] will not regard the hymns and psalms as a peg on which to hang kaleidoscopic changes of tone and colour. He will not show his disapproval – sometimes entirely justified – of certain hymn tunes by invariably substituting new

ones for the 'old favourites' beloved by the congregation... If anything goes wrong, as it will, he will not advertise it to all and sundry by prominent gestures or unduly noisy playing.

And he even supplies techniques to propitiate that understandably recalcitrant being: the choir librarian, whom years or decades spent slaving over a hot duplicator – to assuage singers' rampant lust for new sheet music to leave at home – have typically turned into a latter-day Timon of Athens.

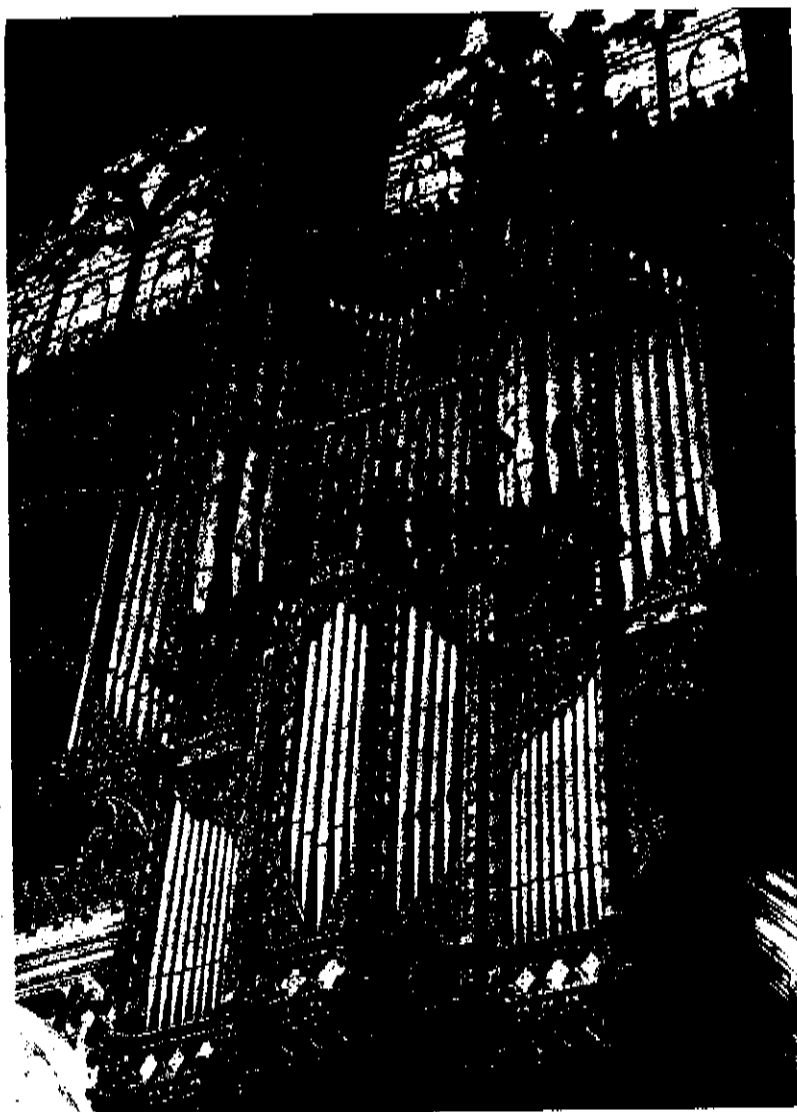
A good librarian is a treasure and should be afforded every help and support by those who appoint him. It may be necessary for him to have one or more helpers, but the responsibility for satisfactory results should be his alone. Perhaps the worst possible system is to appoint several [choristers] to do the work.

Yet ultimately – as *The Browning Version's* audiences will recall: – The Crock became most memorable when compassionate emotion seeped through his carapace of scholastic froideur. So, too, Dr Conway shines most when dilating upon that most wretched of creatures, now vanished with the snows of yesteryear, than which he was far more odoriferous. I refer to the blower. In the centuries before organists enjoyed the luxury of electric power supplies, the blower had the thankless job of operating the organ's bellows. Winchester Cathedral's tenth-century organ (Dr Conway informs us) was so huge that its use necessitated seventy – repeat, seventy

– blowers 'covered with perspiration, each inciting his companions to drive the wind up with all his strength'. More modest instruments eliminated comparable overcrowding problems, but still taxed the blower's patience enough to make the very idea of his 'job satisfaction' absurd:

The blower, alone perhaps among the congregation, had no misgivings as to the possible length of the sermon. Even when two or more men were employed the work was no sinecure; and the organist, if he had any humanity in him, must have often had the enjoyment of his instrument spoiled by the thought of the labour he was inflicting on his 'fellow performers' at the bellows handle. Add to this the indubitable fact that the post of organ-blower was generally given to an individual who could not be trusted with any other responsible work and whose personal habits were the reverse of attractive, and it is not hard to understand the pleasure with which organists in these days realise that the human blower is rapidly becoming extinct.

After reading *Playing A Church Organ* I remain as Pedally Challenged as I ever was; but I should like to think that I might be a marginally better, and perhaps slightly more considerate, musician. If I'm not, there will always be that nightmare image of Winchester Cathedral's three-score-and-ten yelling, sweating organ-blowers to haunt me. Dante would have understood its power over the imagination.



The organ in Ely Cathedral