

Coffee Break

with Bruce Fowkes



Bruce and Karla Fowkes

In 1988, Ralph Richards and Bruce Fowkes founded the organbuilding workshop that bears their names. Located just outside Chattanooga, Tennessee, Richards, Fowkes & Co. specializes in historically informed mechanical-action organs, with major instruments at Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati, Duke University Divinity School, and St. George's Hanover Square in London. I spoke to Bruce about his company's current projects and their organbuilding philosophy.

ALEX HODGKINSON

At Richards, Fowkes & Co., we're currently building a midsize, 45-stop organ for St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Bellingham, Washington. The music director, Dongho Lee, runs a really amazing program out there. She's got a lot of people from the community involved, as well as the church groups. There's a lot going on, and we're excited to become a part of it.

The organ is changing position. The old instrument was in a deep chamber on the south side of the church. Obviously if we built it there we would be faced with the same challenges as the last builder, and the new organ might sound much like the old one. The rector wanted to reorient the chancel, so this was our opportunity. To place the instrument at the front of the building, we're building two cases at a 45-degree angle on either side of a stained-glass window, with the Choir division beneath. There will be two divisions under expression.

The first time we had two expressive divisions was at St. George's Hanover Square in London [in 2012]. Simon Williams, the music director at the time, came to us and said, "We've always wanted to have an organ that would authentically play early music. But we sing a full Mass every Sunday, English choral music soup to nuts. So we need an instrument that can do both." He said that many European builders of historically informed instruments had been commissioned to do the same and ended up building instruments that don't really succeed at either. So that was our challenge.

We took ideas from some of the 19th-century European builders who had rebuilt antique organs and augmented or updated them with newer elements—strings, reeds, and even swell boxes. But they preserved the old foundations, plenums, and beautiful flutes, the core and soul of the original organs. In some cases—Franz Caspar Schnitger Jr., Hinsz, Bätz, Callinet, Merklin—they were sons and grandsons who rebuilt their ancestors' work, creating cherished masterpieces. It's so seamless; everything integrates. They did the same quality of work, incorporating the original voicing into their rebuilt instruments.

This has been our approach since our first instrument at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Greenwich, Connecticut. It's a North German-style instrument that has strings on both manuals and a swell box, so in addition to playing early music it will accompany the liturgies and choral anthems of an Episcopal church. That's been our approach. And when we include 19th-century elements, we try to do it stylistically so that everything really blends seamlessly. Over the years, we've just kept expanding and tweaking this approach.



In the late 1970s, early '80s, everyone thought the tracker action of the past was the future! There was talk everywhere and so much excitement about early music and early music groups. Harnoncourt was at his height, and Christopher Hogwood had just started with his groups. It was a heady time, and there was a lot of interest in us and our specialism before we even finished our first instrument.

The landscape changes—tastes change, of course. When I was a kid, these big old symphony orchestras swam with vibrato. They were passionate, but they were not very precise. It was all very overly dramatic; the style and tuning were often vague! But now, even the major symphonies in this country have been influenced by the early music groups. The precision and musicianship have improved dramatically. And with that has come a tighter, more musical sound.

The same thing has happened in organbuilding. You would never see a builder nowadays just put pipes out on shelves and call it a masterpiece. Currently, most organs are built with nice casework. They tend to have a much tighter chorus sound than ever before. There are warmer basses. When I was young, the factory organs had loud quinty basses with no warmth. Then historically informed recordings of historic organs came along, and you would hear these early organs that had a balanced bass. These instruments have had a direct influence on most of today's organbuilding.

When we are asked to build a new organ, Ralph [Richards] and our design team go in and study the church building to discover the architectural language of the room so that we can use that as part of the case design. Some of the biggest challenges are places that are just devoid of any interesting architectural detailing. Modern rooms can be brutal!

And when it comes to the voicing, we are meticulous. We spend months in the church voicing to balance the instrument to fit the acoustical space, so that you can hear the details and the color. It's terrible to go to an organ recital and halfway through realize I'd rather be drinking coffee or a martini because the organ is either uninspiring or—worse—too loud. We work diligently to find the poetry in each of the stops; that's the challenge.

One of the greatest voicers in the world was Jürgen Ahrend, the German organbuilder who died in 2024, at 94. I visited him at his shop, questioning him about old organs, and basically asked: What is it about how the pipes were made and voiced that makes the magic? Where does the magic come from, and how do you recreate that?

He looked at me and said—there's a phrase in German that would be translated as, "I cook with water." In other words, there are no "fancy sauces." You have to use your ears and just do whatever it takes to get that pipe to make music. That was the best advice I have ever received, because you often hear other voicers saying, "Oh, I don't ever nick," or "I don't use a file," or whatever. There are these supposed "rules," but it's like telling an artist you can't paint with red paint because Rembrandt didn't have that color of red, so leave that out and then you'll be a good artist. But Jürgen said there's no one magic technique. It's just listening and doing the work. We have to listen to every pipe and do what we can to make each one sing. That is the magic.

Alex Hodgkinson, FRCO, is director of music at St. Theresa's Church, Trumbull, Conn., and co-dean of the Greater Bridgeport AGO Chapter.

