

BOOK REVIEW

Simon Purtell, *Tuning the Antipodes: Battles for Performing Pitch in Melbourne*

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Reviewed by John Maidment

The subtitle of Simon Purtell's book admirably sums up the overall situation connected with musical pitch in the state of Victoria. There were most certainly 'battles' and controversies and they continue to this day. While people talk about concert pitch being A440, this is a relatively recent phenomenon and indeed some orchestras currently tune to A444. The Early Music movement prefers a lower pitch, so it is clear that there is no such thing as uniformity or standardisation.

Variations in musical pitch were widespread during Victoria's history. Purtell delves into a multiplicity of source material: newspapers and correspondence but also diverse sources such as the organ builders papers at the State Library and the University of Melbourne archives, military and band papers and contemporary newspapers. The story goes back close to 160 years, not long after the foundation of the Port Phillip settlement, which was later to be called Victoria.

One of the difficulties, perhaps more pronounced here in Australia than in most other places, is that establishing some form of pitch standard is totally dependent upon prevailing climatic conditions. The wide variation in temperature and humidity can mean that it is very difficult to maintain an absolute standard throughout the year. Even orchestral instruments tuned at the start of a performance can vary widely in pitch as they are in use.

Pitch variation was dramatically illustrated with the Fincham grand organ in the Melbourne Exhibition Building. The organ had originally been tuned to Philharmonic pitch A455 but was raised in 1888 at the instigation of Frederic Cowen when it was reported that in hot weather the pitch rose as high as A468, rendering it unusable with musical groups. Interestingly, I have been involved in advising the restoration of the Hill organ that was in Adelaide Town

Hall—the organ is now at Tanunda. It was restored back to the original slightly higher pitch of A445 but in winter, when the temperature in the hall is very cold, it is dead in tune with the grand piano on the stage tuned to A440.

Purtell's book discusses some of the personalities who were involved in promoting pitch standardisation. Dame Nellie Melba was a potent force here, donating to the Conservatorium in Melbourne a set of orchestral instruments that were tuned to a lower pitch, although they were not employed as widely as she would have wished. Later, she harassed the Lord Mayor of Melbourne to have the pitch of the organ in the Melbourne Town Hall lowered, as she claimed that it ruined her voice. Other change agents included Ormond Professor Franklin Peterson, as well as the visiting conductors Hamilton Harty and Malcolm Sargent.

There was not universal acceptance of a change to low musical pitch. George Peake raged a literary war against it in Melbourne newspapers and argued that it would affect overall sound—the brilliance of musical performance would be lost. Added to this was the sheer cost of acquiring new instruments, seen as quite prohibitive for most musicians. Retuning existing instruments was seen also as impractical; the cost of doing this to a large pipe organ, for example, was colossal and would require the insertion of new bass pipes and lengthening other pipes. The Melbourne City Council indeed failed to act on lowering the pitch of the Melbourne Town Hall organ until the early 1920s.

With military and brass bands, there were huge problems of standardisation that existed not only nationwide but even internationally when bands performed overseas with those from other countries. Orchestras progressively adopted A440, especially those under the direction of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Even the Salvation Army, with its wealth of brass bands, was affected. All of this took until the 1970s to achieve.

Purtell's book is arranged chronologically, from around 1850 to the present day. The bibliography and footnotes show an immense degree of scholarship and resourcefulness, as well as meticulous documentation—it is impeccably printed and laid out. It forms a very worthy—and eminently readable—account of the foibles associated with musical pitch in Victoria.

The book follows on from Purtell's doctoral thesis: "'In Tune with the Times": The History of Performing Pitch.' Submitted to the University of Melbourne in 2011, Purtell's thesis was the first to explore the topic of musical pitch in Australia. In terms of comparable studies, Bruce Hayne's 2002 work *A History of Performing Pitch: The Story of 'A'* is probably the most relevant example. The coverage of Hayne's work though is limited to European countries. Purtell's study, however, is highly significant in that it examines closely the situation in a specific area and enables more detailed discussion than might otherwise be possible. Generally, apart from sporadic journal articles, the whole question of pitch is inadequately explored and documented, so Purtell's work is very welcome indeed and forms a worthy exploration of this engaging topic.

About the reviewer

John Maidment was co-founder and chairman of the Organ Historical Trust of Australia until 2016. He has written about the organ in Australia in local and overseas publications, and is co-author of the recent book *Lost Pipe Organs of Australia*. He has advised on new organs and restorations in five Australian states and in New Zealand.