

RAYMOND FEHMEL: MUSIC TEACHER, 1967-1968



Raymond Richard Frederick Fehmel was born in 1897 in Victoria to Richard Friederich Fehmel and May Christian Stent. The Fehmel family origins go back 1803 and John Christian Fehmel in Sachsen, Deutschland (Germany). Richard Friedrich Fehmel came to Australia and married May Christina Stent in 1896. The Stent family origins go back to 1786 and James Stent in Christchurch, Hampshire, England. Thomas Stent came to Victoria in the early 1850s and married Ellen Eliza Sarah Austin in 1858; they raised ten children and May Christina was their youngest daughter born in 1872. Richard Fehmel and May Stent had two sons: Raymond Richard Frederick (1897) and Walter Leonard (1901).

Raymond must have been musically gifted. In 1908 he started as a chorister with St Paul's Cathedral at age eleven. (Two decades later he returned to St Paul's and was acting as honorary assistant organist at the Cathedral.) In 1914, when he was only 17 years of age, he was appointed organist at Christ Church, Brunswick. Later, he filled the position as organist at St Martin's Church of England in Hawksburn for four years. It appears that being a church organist was not a guaranteed source of income, and he resigned in 1920 "due to the increasing demands of business on his time". It appears that Fehmel over time had several 'honorary' positions, which means he was performing gratis - a noble but not necessarily sustainable enterprise.

Fehmel had been working with Messrs Carnegie, of Melbourne, as a 'piano expert' or 'expert demonstrator'. He left the firm in early 1920 and started working as an independent piano tuner, even travelling to country areas to offer his services. For example, in August 1920 he was in Numurkah: "Owing to the amount of business he is receiving, Mr Raymond Fehmel, piano tuner, has decided to prolong his visit by one week, and orders left at this office up till Wednesday of next week will be promptly attended to." It is not known how long this work lasted but presumably piano tuning provided some income.

He returned to Melbourne and filled the position of organist at St Martin's, Hawksburn, and at Christ Church, St. Kilda.

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Raymond Fehmel married Zilla May Williams in 1924. Her parents were Henry Williams and Annie Liversidge. The Williams heritage goes back to 1796 in Gwinear, Cornwall, England; Henry came to Australia in the 1880s. The Liversidge heritage goes back to 1612 in Yorkshire, England; Eldred Liversidge came to Australia in 1859 and married Caroline Elizabeth Day; their daughter Annie was the mother of Zilla. Raymond and Zilla raised four children, including Ruth, David Frederick, and Richard Maxwell.

By April 1922 Fehmel was appointed as organist to Christ Church, St Kilda, in succession to Mr Maconachie, who had earlier trained Fehmel. As well as being the organist during church services, Fehmel instituted a regular series of organ recitals after vespers. In 1923 he was appointed organist and choirmaster at St. George's Anglican Church in Malvern. In 1933 he was appointed organist of the Australian Church, Russell Street, Melbourne.

He received some good publicity in the Melbourne newspapers for his achievement as a craftsman:

"Mr Raymond Fehmel, organist of the Australian Church, and deputy-organist of St Paul's Cathedral, will give a recital on Saturday evening at his home, Sylverly Grove, Caulfield on an organ which he has built himself. The work has taken eight years to accomplish, and it has been a labor of love. When Mr Fehmel was a boy in St. Pauls Cathedral choir his ambition was to possess an organ of his own, and his imagination



was fired by the magnificence of the Cathedral organ. Thus it came about that he studied organ building, and in his spare time made the fine instrument which he now possesses. The organ is valued for insurance at £1000."

In 1937 he enjoyed the luxury of a six-month study tour that took in London, Leipzig, Salzburg, Vienna, and the United States.

TOWN HALL
 Direction — Melbourne City Council

**ORGAN
 RECITAL**

**TO-MORROW (Friday)
 OCTOBER 14**

By
MR. RAYMOND FEHMEI

TWO SESSIONS.
 12.20 to 12.50 p.m. and 1.20 to 1.50 p.m.

ADMISSION FREE

In 1938 he became director of music at the

Australian Church, and was unanimously appointed conductor to the Victorian Railways Institute Choral Society. In the following year it was reported that the Boronia Choral Society was making excellent progress under the baton of Raymond Fehmel. He was also giving free organ recitals in aid of Bush Fire Relief Fund. On another occasion it was for the 2/2 Field Regiment Comforts Fund. Undoubtedly there were more.

By 1940 Fehmel was living in Essendon. He wrote occasional letters to the editor regarding musical trends and concerns, and in May he penned a humorous/sarcastic missive:

"Sir - Last week a distinguished medical man informed us that a machine has already been marketed, which, in a few years, will make pipe organs out of date. Yesterday a distinguished organist told us of another machine, which will drive the orchestra, as we know it, off the map. I now feel impelled to disclose that I who am neither a well-known medical man nor a distinguished organist, am working on an apparatus which will make vocalists unnecessary. When it is completed, voices of all timbres will be available at the turn of a dial. To make it really lifelike, it will be fitted with stops, giving vowel distortion, wobble, and faulty intonation. It will, of course, be incumbent on me to invent a synthetic audience seated in an ersatz town hall. This, I am ready to do. But as art is long and life all too short, I shall leave it to someone else to produce all automatic de-composer, so that the required music may be written for what I feel sure are, and will be, marvellous contraptions."

The 1940s might have seen some change of career and Fehmel might have been working at Melbourne High School. He was still active in promoting choral performance, some of which evolved significantly. Fehmel and Betty Wood established the Mont Albert Choral Society in 1943; the group later became the Youth Operatic Society and performed Gilbert and Sullivan operas at town halls around Melbourne. Their headquarters moved to the Hawthorn Town Hall in 1952 when it became known as the Hawthorn Operatic Society. It then became the Victorian Light Opera Company, Victorian Opera Company before evolving to become the Victoria State Opera Company in 1976.*

Fehmel appears to have taken up more work with schools as musical director during the 1950s. He was Director of Music at Presbyterian Ladies College Melbourne in 1952, where they had an orchestra consisting of strings, woodwind, brass and percussion, the study of the piano was stressed and encouraged. He had been the music master at Melbourne Boys' High School, and had transferred to Camberwell with the students.

Queen greets society

The Queen has sent from Government House, Melbourne, a message of greeting to the British and Foreign Bible Society in the Town Hall tomorrow afternoon.

The society celebrates 150 years of operation on Sunday.

It will meet tomorrow in the Town Hall.

The guest chairman, Mr. Menzies, Prime Minister, will be introduced by Archbishop Booth, Victorian chairman of the society.

Raymond Fehmel will give an organ recital from 2.15 p.m., and the service will begin at 2.45 p.m.

Some more excellent publicity in the Argus appeared in 1954 when Fehmel was performing for a 150th celebration in front of Prime Minister Menzies with a message of greeting from the Queen for the occasion:

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In 1956 he was supporting the Hawthorn Operatic Society and was also the organist at St Thomas' in Essendon, which probably was his local church.

Unfortunately, Fehmel's career in the late 1950s and early 1960s has not been traced. He was teaching at St Albans High School during 1967 and 1968 but there are no details of his activities reported in the school magazines. He was clearly a veteran of his trade, not only referring to his seven decades of life experience, but particularly his six decades of musical talents and performance,

stretching back to 1908. His qualifications were impressive - in a decade when some staff at the school had 'university subjects' as their entry to teaching, Fehmel had achieved Trained Teacher Certificate (Royal College of Music), Member of Royal College of Organists, and Associate of the Royal College of Music (ARCM), which was a professional qualification equivalent to a university first degree, that was awarded by the Royal College of Music.

Bruce Alcorn recorded that the school was fortunate to gain the services of Mr Fehmel as its music teacher, as he brought to the school a wealth of experience and developed the appreciation of music significantly. Moreover, he generously made it possible for the school to possess one of his valuable grand pianos.

Zilla May Fehmel died in December 1980 at age 80 years. Raymond Fehmel died in January 1984 at age 87 years. They are both buried at the Box Hill Cemetery, Whitehorse City, Victoria.



TEACHING STAFF, 1967

FRONT ROW: Mr. Alcorn, Miss Botler, Mr. Shaw, Mrs. Gliddon (Senior Mistress), Mr. Torpey (Headmaster), Mr. Mathews (Senior Master), Miss Crofts, Mr. Williams, Miss Coufts, Mr. Chilton. **SECOND ROW:** Miss Shardey, Miss Baboucek, Mrs. Chenu, Mrs. Whelan, Miss Wannan, Miss Mason, Mrs. Sacco, Mrs. Hovley. **THIRD ROW:** Miss Sluter, Mrs. Kriksciunus, Miss Kazins, Miss Crawford, Miss Stephen. **MIDDLE:** Mr. Morey, Mrs. Fielder, Mr. Shiamaris, Mrs. Hewitt, Mr. Verduci, Mr. Nester. **SECOND BACK ROW:** Mr. Ziemelis, Mr. Yousaf, Mr. Baker, Mr. Maplestone, Mr. Ryan, Mr. Jeremic, Mr. Dobron. **BACK ROW:** Mr. Key, Mr. Webster, Mr. Grieve, Mr. Weib, Mr. Fehmel, Mr. MacLeish. **ABSENT:** Mrs. Burden, Mrs. Sturesteps, Miss Beresford-Manning, Mr. Davis, Mr. Malanluk, Mr. Woolf, Mr. Wilson.

Teaching staff 1967, Raymond Fehmel in back row second from right.

Article written by Joseph Ribarow

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* <https://collections.artscentremelbourne.com.au/#browse=enarratives.3919>