

# MEGALOMANIA

## and the modern organist

Christopher Hainsworth always wanted to play the organ, but he had to wait till he was 12 and his feet could reach the pedals. Now, there is no stopping him, he tells Helen Frances.

**S**TORMS, battles, animal noises and quirky improvisations have become the signature notes of expat organist Christopher Hainsworth. An organ concert is an occasion to test the limits of what he can play and to shock and thrill his audience.

Christopher, 61, is back in New Zealand from France for a six-week visit, playing 12 concerts throughout the North Island, including a special fundraiser in his home town, Wellington. The concert, titled *From Bach to Bacchus*, promises to have the audience rollicking in the pews.

"The image of the organ recital as pious and boring doesn't have to be true," he says.

Programme music, composed to evoke images, stories and emotions, was considered bad taste by purists more interested in musical form than any message it conveyed, he says. Now it is coming back into vogue and he finds his regular departures from tradition hit the spot with audiences.

"*David and Goliath* [a piece from the 17th century] goes down well. You tell the story as you go and bring in effects such as the sound of the stone hitting Goliath's forehead and the giant's fall."

An organ rendition of Rimsky Korsakoff's *Flight of the Bumble Bee* is also fun, likewise the overture from *William Tell* and the theme from *Monty Python*.

"Audiences recognise the music and the identification is important."

The flamboyant organ player also confesses: "I find it impossible to resist telling a few jokes."

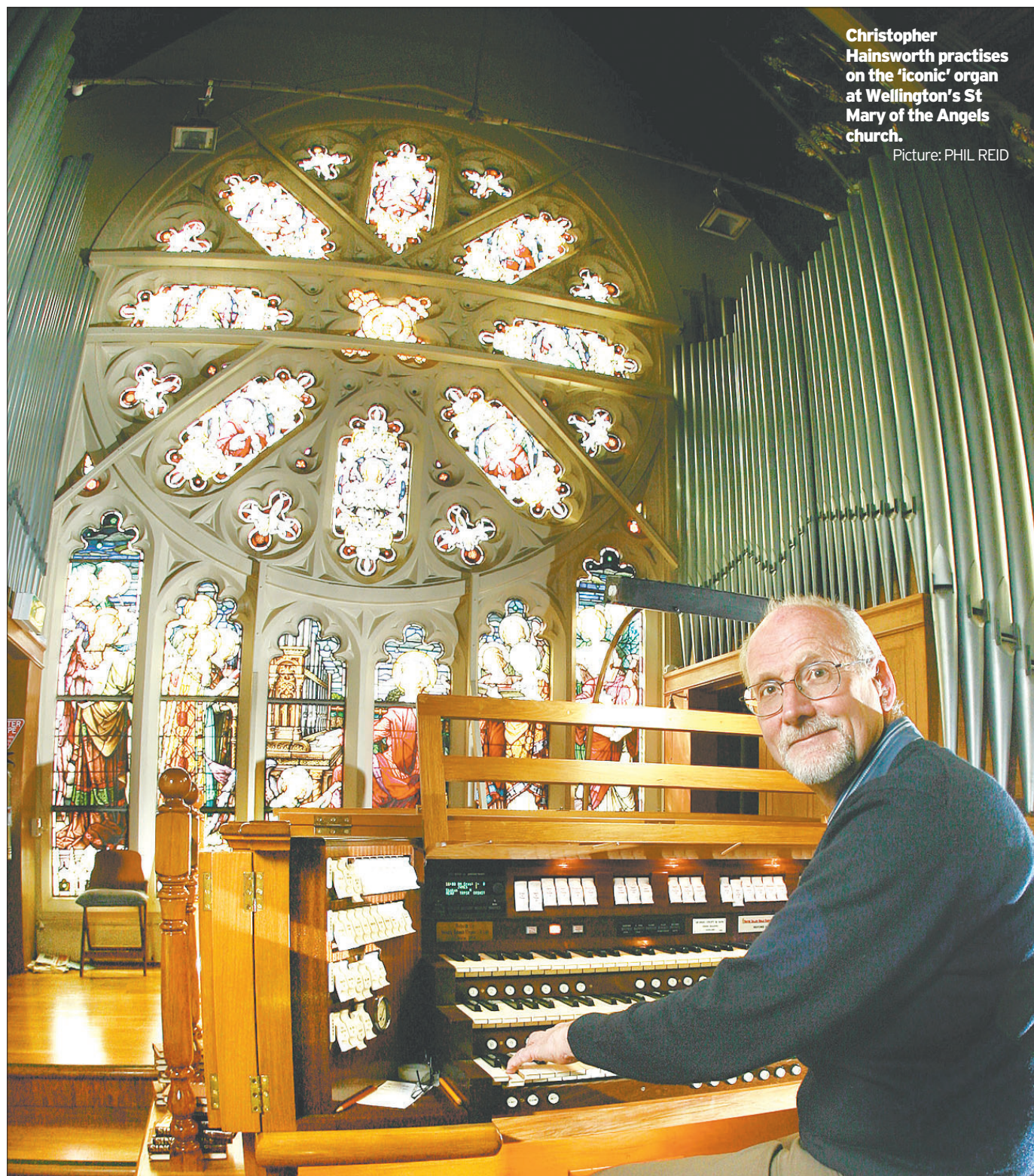
Playing up a storm is a great tradition in the range of organ theatricals, he says. "You've got to use your whole arm and put your feet on all the pedals at once to make it really loud."

His programme at St Mary of the Angels will include music played and taught by Maxwell Fernie, a leader in New Zealand music, who died nine years ago and was one of Christopher's mentors. He taught him the organ at Victoria University. "He was an outstanding teacher and gave me more than a glimmer of what Bach was about."

Fernie pursued a career in music overseas and became organist at Westminster Cathedral in London. When he returned to New Zealand, he built the organ Hainsworth will play at St Mary's.

"This organ is an icon," says Christopher. "It's the first New Zealand instrument that sought to recreate the sounds of Bach and baroque music. Max put a lot of ideas together and produced an organ that is extremely satisfying to the ear. Many people tried to imitate it but never really succeeded."

**C**HRISTOPHER'S passion for the organ began in church, which he attended regularly as a child. "My parents were pillars of the church. I was fascinated by the mystical sounds that came out of the old organ at St Mark's [in Wellington], and by



Christopher Hainsworth practises on the 'iconic' organ at Wellington's St Mary of the Angels church.

Picture: PHIL REID

the megalomania of it all — where you can pull out all the stops and really go for it."

However, he had to wait till his legs were long enough to reach the pedals. At the age of 12 he dropped the piano and took up organ lessons, spending hours practising hymns that taught him his first lessons in harmony. "Music is about harmony and mystery. It strikes notes in your emotions and uplifts them."

His ear for French and love of French culture developed in tandem with his organ studies.

"France always had a fantastic mystique about it. Throughout my youth I heard stories that made it sound a fabulous place. At secondary school, I had an inspirational teacher who brought it alive for us spotty adolescent boys when he talked about beautiful French girls, French wine and smelly cheeses."

Academic success, an MA in French and B Mus (organ performance) from Victoria University, paved the way for a bursary to study in France for two years.

He returned to New Zealand in 1970 with a doctorate from the University of

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Toulouse and the notion that it would be nice to go back, preferably with a pretty French woman by his side.

Fortune smiled and, voila, he met Michele Bernard who was in New Zealand working as a French teaching assistant. They fell in love, got married and in 1981 went to live in France in an "idyllic village" near Bordeaux.

Throwing caution and his academic career to the Gallic wind, Christopher took up freelancing as a musician, playing piano, harpsichord and organ. Son Julien (now a cellist) arrived, fol-

lowed by daughter Amy four years later.

"It was very irresponsible and totally foolish, but it worked. Jacques Lang, the Socialist Minister of Culture, made a lot of money available for the arts and I became a teacher at a new music school near Bordeaux."

In 2003, he was appointed director at the music conservatory in Beziers, till managerial cost cutting and interference irritated him back into freelance mode, where he has stayed.

Freelancing as a musician is easier in France than New Zealand, and so much more "charmant", he says, describing the intimate atmosphere and near perfect acoustics of the Romanesque stone churches where he loves to play chamber music, and the grand resonance of French Gothic cathedrals, in which the "megalomaniac" can pull out all the stops.

■ *From Bach to Bacchus*, concert for the Maxwell Fernie Trust, introduced by Roy Tankersley, St Mary of the Angels Church, Boulcott St, Saturday, April 12, 7.30pm. Entry — buy a programme at the door, \$20, \$15 unwaged.