

St Mark's organ scholar shares his passion for sacred music

Organ Scholarship recipient interview: Nico Tjoelker

Nico Tjoelker commenced his one-year St Mark's Anglican Church Darling Point Organ Scholarship in August 2020 and is passionate about his vocation. "As an organist and church musician, my mission in life is to facilitate Christian worship through sacred music. Having just graduated from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, I am still at the very beginning of my career, and hope to continue building upon my professional skills as a musician through experiences like this scholarship at St Mark's. When I'm not playing for church services, my aim as a musician is to share the joy of music through activities such as playing concerts (in normal times), teaching and composing."

Nico has been interested in music his whole life (23 years!) and began playing the organ and piano when he was 11 years old. He moved to Australia from Texas in 2011 at age 14, and immediately began organ lessons with Philip Swanton, who has been his teacher ever since. Nico is very appreciative of the St Mark's Organ Scholarship opportunity. "St Mark's is the first time I have been an organ scholar at an Anglican church. It has been fascinating to learn about the traditions and music of the Anglican church 'up close', and also to discover that there is quite a lot in common, musically and otherwise, between the Christian denominations." He reflected: "It has been great getting to know the church community at St Mark's, and I am especially grateful to them for awarding me this opportunity during the pandemic era – a time that has been difficult for musicians like me, who often depend on live performance... Experiences like this scholarship will help build my career as a musician, and lead me to a path of eventually becoming a Director of Music, teacher at a university, and concert organist."

Nico plays for the weekly Sunday 8am services, as well as extra services around Easter and Christmas, and fills in for weddings and funerals for the Director of Music, when required. He also plays a scholarship recital at St Mark's once per year and enjoyed this opportunity on Sunday 25 October. Nico summarised the commitment involved as follows: "I practice several hours per week for any given service, but it varies quite a bit depending on what music I have been asked to prepare; for example, whether or not it is a piece I have played before, and the technical difficulty of the music itself. I practice the most during the Christmas and Easter seasons as there is often a lot more music needed for those services, and people have high expectations for those holidays. It is always worth it, of course!"

What does he love about being an organist? Nico shared: "One thing I really enjoy about being an organist is that people are always intrigued about my profession, and it never fails to be a great conversation-starter! I also enjoy the instrument's incredible versatility, and the many hundreds of years of repertoire that has been written for the organ, spanning back to the Middle Ages (unlike the piano for example, which has "only" existed for about 300 years, and for less than 200 years in a more or less modern form!)."

When asked about the challenges an organist faces, Nico felt finding a time and location to practice were the biggest challenges. "Unless you have an organ at home, organists often have to commute to practice. Even if you do have an organ at home, the uniqueness of each individual organ means that you still must allocate some practice for the instrument upon which you intend to perform. I have a two-manual (two-keyboard) Allen digital organ at home for practice, which has served me ever since I moved to Australia."

When he's not playing the organ, Nico is playing the piano! "Music really is at the centre of what I do," he shared, and Nico already has plans to begin a master's degree sometime in 2021. In his spare time he is involved in community organising and volunteer work, reading (especially keeping up to date with recent historical and scientific discoveries), wildlife watching, learning computer programming, and learning German.

Please feel welcome to come and listen to Nico's organ playing during St Mark's Anglican Church weekly 8am Choral Communion service. St Mark's also holds services at 10am (all ages) and 5.30pm (Contemporary). Please visit www.stmarksdp.org for more details