

A Milestone for *The Messenger* in ESO's 50th Anniversary Year

Tim de Zeeuw¹

¹ ESO

In May 1974, Adriaan Blaauw launched *The Messenger*. He stated the goal explicitly: “To promote the participation of ESO staff in what goes on in the Organisation, especially at places of duty other than our own. Moreover, *The Messenger* may serve to give the world outside some impression of what happens inside ESO.” Today *The Messenger* is known the world over, and has reached a major milestone with the publication of the current issue, number 150. It has certainly achieved its goal: the entire collection gives a very interesting inside view of the development of ESO over much of its history (see also the article by Claus Madsen on p. 74).

Coincidentally, this milestone occurs in the year of the 50th anniversary of ESO's founding. On 5 October 1962, following many years of discussion and preparation, a group of astronomers from Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden signed an international convention that created ESO. The aim of the Organisation was to build a large telescope in the southern hemisphere and to foster collaboration in astronomy. This led to the construction of the La Silla Observatory in Chile with first light on the 3.6-metre telescope obtained in 1976. The early issues of *The Messenger* record the last steps leading to this achievement.

In the years since, *The Messenger* has faithfully chronicled how ESO's programme expanded tremendously beyond the vision of the founding fathers. The build-up of La Silla was followed by the construction of the Paranal Observatory, hosting the Very Large Telescope (VLT), the VLT Interferometer and the survey telescopes VISTA and VST. The Atacama Pathfinder Experiment (APEX) partnership operating a 12-metre submillimetre antenna on Chajnantor was a precursor to the intercontinental partnership that is constructing the world's largest radio telescope, the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimetre Array (ALMA), on the same site and with initial operations already started. The next giant step is the im-

minent launch of the construction of the 39.3-metre diameter European Extremely Large Telescope on Cerro Armazones with a projected start of operations in about ten years' time. Meanwhile, the number of Member States has increased to 14, with Brazil poised to join as the first from outside Europe as soon as the Accession Agreement is ratified.

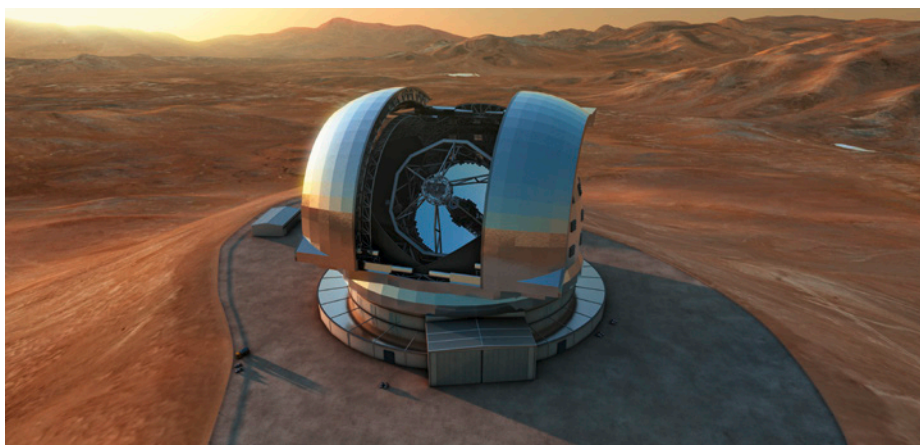
ESO's mission is to design, construct and operate powerful ground-based observing facilities which enable astronomers to make important scientific discoveries and to play a leading role in promoting and organising cooperation in astronomical research. The achievement of these goals would not have been possible without the dedication and engagement of many individuals over the years, in particular the motivated and highly skilled ESO staff members carrying out in-house science, engineering and support activities, matched by effort in technical and scientific institutes and in industry in the Member States, all of it strongly supported by the governments of the Member States and of that of Chile which hosts the Observatories.

Fifty years is a good anniversary at which to take stock — to look back with pride on what has been achieved, to contemplate some of the detail on how it all came to pass, and to learn from the past while forging ahead into the future. The anniversary has been celebrated in a variety of ways — including a scientific workshop (ESO@50, see the report on p. 64), a book by Claus Madsen (*The Jewel on the Mountaintop*) covering nearly all of ESO's history, a richly illus-

trated book by Govert Schilling and Lars Christensen (*Europe to the Stars*), many additional images on the ESO website, exhibitions and competitions, one of the latter with, as a prize, the opportunity to observe at Paranal, and a gala event for representatives of the Member States and key contributors to ESO's development, past and present (see the report on p. 7, with copies of the speeches). In this special issue, four former Directors General also contribute their reflections on the significance of the 50th anniversary: Lodewijk Woltjer (1975–1987), Harry van der Laan (1988–1992), Riccardo Giacconi (1993–1999) and Catherine Cesarsky (1999–2007).

The need for good internal communication over so many sites, together with the need to ensure that the community in the Member States remains well informed about ESO, is as valid a mission as it was in 1974, and maybe more so. While many new channels of information exchange are now used routinely, *The Messenger* continues to have an important role. The layout and the content have evolved over the years and the fraction of scientific and technical articles has increased, somewhat at the expense of the more informal and sometimes anecdotal contributions in the early issues, no doubt caused by the increased size and complexity of the Organisation. I am convinced that *The Messenger* will continue to have an important role, and I strongly recommend this special edition to your attention.

Artist's impression of the E-ELT on Armazones.



ESO/L. Calçada