

Prague - The Baroque Golden Age
Anima Aurea Bohemiae

Review for "The Organ Club Journal" (2009-III)

I'm delighted to be able to recommend two recent CDs from Prague in this issue of the OCJ. Both feature the Czech organist Pavel Kohout. The first CD was recorded in 2007 on the 1673 Mundt organ of the Church of Our Lady before Týn, the second in 2008 on the 1738 Katzer and Weltzel organ of the Church of the Nativity in the Loreto Monastery.

I clearly remember enthusiastic reports on the Týn Church organ from those members who flew to Prague for the start of the Club's 2003 "Danube Tour" - I joined the tour later on, in Vienna. In the OCJ of October 2003 Roger Tucker wrote fittingly: "Its priceless asset is a virtually unaltered organ of 1673 ... and now that it has been superbly restored by Klais it is one of the world's most precious. Although not large (II-29) it has the most majestic, breathing plenum, which I found utterly moving; to talk of the "tingle factor" is not adequate ... It is worth a trip to Prague just to see and hear this unique instrument."

With Roger's words ringing in my ears, I was fortunate enough this August to make it to Prague at last, a city I had only visited once for a day in around 1990. I enjoyed six days there with members of the North Hampshire Organists' Association headed by John Mansfield (returning just in time to prepare this review). Pavel Kohout was our Artistic Tour Leader and he had arranged for us to see, hear and play a rich assortment of organs including the instruments on these two discs, which discs I bought on the spot.

The Týn Church CD, "Prague - The Baroque Golden Age", presents works by Josef Ferdinand Norbert Seger (1716-1782), Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer (1665-1746), Johann Kaspar Kerll (1627-1693), Gottlieb Theophil Muffat (1690-1770) and Karel Blažej Kopřiva (1756-1785). Johannes Klais of Bonn revoiced and restored the organ between 1998 and 2000. The tuning is not given in the booklet, but Hans-Wolfgang Theobald of Klais told me on the phone that it's "a modified Kirnberger III". The pitch is $a_1 = 444$ Hz at 22° Celsius. The 36-page booklet is in French, Czech and English. There are 11 tracks and 63:47 minutes. (*Editions Hortus: Hortus 053*)

Pavel Kohout writes: "The intention of this recording is to help give the music of Josef Seger and the organ of Hans Heinrich Mundt the recognition they deserve. To this end, I have chosen contrasting pieces which demonstrate a variety of compositional forms and the sonorous possibilities of a unique historical instrument. It is hoped that this performance will transmit the spirit of the music as well as that of the instrument."

The Loreto Monastery CD, "Anima Aurea Bohemiae", presents works by Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706), Kerll, Georg Muffat (1653-1704), Johannes Speth (1667-1719), Seger, and an anonymous Toccata dated around 1760. Restoration work was carried out between 1989 and 1992 by the master organ builder Vladimír Šlajch of Borovany using 95% of the original pipework. From the booklet: "Another special feature of this organ is the fact that almost the entire pipework is made from expensive precious metal, including Copula Major 8' and Copula Minor 4' on the Positiv. Wooden pipes are only found in the Pedal (Subbass 16', Octavbass 8' and the largest of the pipes for the Principalbass 8'); and also in the lowest pipes of the Principal 8' on the Great. The Loreto Organ has a total of over 1,076 pipes, of which 38 large pipes are made entirely of wood." The tuning is Werckmeister III at $a_1 = 438$. The 34-page booklet is in German and English with a note on the performer in French. It is the first solo CD to be recorded on this instrument. There are 14 tracks and 60:31 minutes. (*ifo Classics: ORG 7231.2*)

Pavel Kohout writes: "In putting together the programme for this CD I have tried to create an appropriate compilation of organ works that are to some extent specifically tailored to the Loreto Organ in Prague: i.e. a baroque repertoire of original compositions. They ideally demonstrate the splendid sound of this unique 18th century historic organ and cleverly illustrate the synthesis between early Italian, South German and early Bohemian organ building."

Exceptional care has obviously been lavished upon both discs. This applies equally to the sound quality, the texts, the graphics and the CD cases - the photos in the Loreto booklet, in particular, are a feast for the eye. The registration used in each piece has been noted in each booklet. ¹⁾ The microphones are always close enough to prevent the music from sounding "disembodied" from the instruments, while incorporating ample ambience.

Pavel Kohout, who wrote the eloquent (and well-translated) texts on the composers and the pieces himself, is currently studying for his Ph.D. in the historical performance practice of South German baroque organ music at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. A graduate of Prague Conservatory, he also studied at Amsterdam Conservatory and has been awarded an impressive array of prizes. It is clear in everything he says and writes that he cares deeply about the music as well as about the instruments involved on the CDs.

Having told you all this, there would seem to be very little left for me to say! Indeed, words are not only inadequate but entirely superfluous. You will understand when you hear the music.

My first personal impression of both recordings was one of sheer amazement. I had simply not known until now that anything mortal could sound so indescribably beautiful. The whole has become in some mysterious way greater than the sum of the parts - which of course begins with the right music played on the right instrument in the right building by the right player and recorded by the right technician on the right day (this in itself no mean feat).

But it's not simply more than all that; it's cumulative. I think this is because we are invited to as it were *rest awhile* in Pachelbel's world and that of his contemporaries ... rather than being nudged down a supposedly logical (yet artificial) "timeline". ²⁾

The word "gold" appears in the titles of both CDs. Take Track 4 of the Loreto CD, for example, which opens with an intangible, mystical golden glow. It's the Man. II Principal 8' with the Bifara 8', a "classic Italian principal beat". I could scarcely believe what I was hearing. Take Track 3 of the Týn CD, which opens with the subtle golden gleam of the Man. I Copula maior; marvel at the proud dazzle of the Mundt Mixturas or at the two delicately glittery Cymbelsterns ... But I'll leave you to open the rest of these two treasure chests for yourselves.

Pavel Kohout's playing is a class apart and will be a hard act for anyone else to follow. The contrapuntal voices are like spun and woven threads of gold. Suddenly it all makes sense and falls into context. His exciting ornamentation, masterly articulation and daringly sensitive interpretation are spell-binding. This music is not "old"! ³⁾ Pavel Kohout fuses scholarliness and playfulness; in him, humility and inner conviction become perfectly compatible. This is the wedding feast of Grace and Grandeur. This is - Golden Baroque.

Now I really have no more to say. The quotation "Music begins where words end" (Goethe) is the first statement on Pavel Kohout's homepage. Here one can discover more and also enjoy his generous selection of audio and video clips including works by, amongst others, Bach, Buxtehude, Dupré and Rawsthorne (Hornpipe), plus a Dvorak

transcription of irresistible elegance. This will tide you over until you can obtain the two CDs and/or a ticket to Prague.

I don't have UK prices for the CDs at the time of going to print; however, should it prove difficult to obtain them in any country please let me or Richard know and I will gladly be of help. My contact details are on my Networking Homepage. I wish you many hours of enjoyable listening!

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www.MagdalenMaryPemberton.de

Pavel Kohout's homepage (in English): www.PavelKohout.org

Further reading (in German):

- "organ - Journal für die Orgel" 2009/02, Schott Music. "Orgelland Böhmen" - various articles on Bohemian organs. www.schott-music.com
- "Ars Organi" 2002/1, Gesellschaft der Orgelfreunde. Includes a detailed article on the Týn organ by Hans-Wolfgang Theobald of Klais. www.gdo.de

¹⁾ In the Loreto Monastery booklet, the abbreviation "T." (German "Takt") stands for "bar".

²⁾ For example. from Pachelbel as a kind of hors d'oeuvre to Bach to Mendelssohn to Vierne etc. Hearing a piece of Mendelssohn (who knew Bach's music) after hearing a piece of Bach is one thing. Hearing Bach (who did not know Mendelssohn's music) followed by Mendelssohn is somehow different, and presumably influences the effect of Bach's music upon the listener. The next time I am invited to give a little "Orgelabend" comprising the classical "Gang durch die Epochen" I may oblige by beginning with Franck - or Tritant - and progressing era by era to Froberger. This can surely be no less logical than working one's way "forwards" from Froberger to Franck.

³⁾ How could it be? Pachelbel's music either *is* - now, i.e. the moment we hear it - or it is not. It cannot be put in another *place* or impaled on a timeline. Sound cannot gather dust.

- *The original article included the specifications of both organs* -