

ORGANS OF HUNGARY

The grand organ of the Cathedral of The Blessed Virgin Mary and St Adalbert, Esztergom

There are a limited number of certain unfinished treasures on this planet that, even in their imperfection, appear perfect and attract distinguished attention. The Cathedral of the Holy Family in Barcelona and the Cathedral of Beauvais near Paris are among such unfinished marvels of divine inspiration and human achievement. Their common denominator is that albeit temporarily halted, they bear in their core a dream that continues to push ephemeral boundaries of everyday human life. They cradle in themselves the magic potential to abduct us from the ordinary and invite us to enter the extraordinary. Taking Victor Hugo's famous likening of the pipe organ to "some sort of pedestal from which the soul poises towards higher spheres", they are like a runway or tarmac that are ready for the creative spirit for immediate take off to soar indefinitely - at the moment that is worth waiting for.

The Editorial of the latest *Organ Australia* featured the world's second largest cathedral, the magnificent St Paul's in London and its amazing instrument. This article, in both contrast and compliment, aims to offer an introduction to one of Europe's "worst kept secrets", the Esztergom Basilica in Hungary. It is the 18th largest cathedral in the world, housing a unique instrument that is still awaiting completion to become Europe's third largest pipe organ. Since the writer of these lines has had the cherished privilege to spend much of his early twenties around this particular instrument that actually sealed his engagement with the pipe organ, he will unashamedly attempt to plant the seed of interest for discovery in the esteemed reader who chooses to read further below.

The picturesque city of Esztergom lies some thirty-odd kilometres northwest of Budapest, on the right bank of the Danube and in the heart of the Pilis Mountains that cradle this historic city like a jewel in a crown. Its regal attributes are appropriate not only in the geographical sense: King Stephen I, the founding king of the Hungarian state was crowned here in 1000 and he built the first cathedral in the city that was to serve as the nation's capital soon afterwards. It hosted a temporary seat of a former medieval world power that rivalled other European states in not only military but cultural power as well - in the neighbouring town of Visegrád, the 15th century King Matthias once held a court whose financial and cultural wealth rivalled that of the de Medicis in the then far less unified Italy. In a twist of fate similar to when King Matthias narrowly missed out on hiring Paul Hofheimer, one of the most famous organists in Europe of that period, as court organist, one of his archbishops, Tamás Bakócz missed out becoming Pope by a whisker! The chapel bearing the latter's name, built from the spectacular red marble of nearby Süttő, is perhaps the most treasured Renaissance monument in Hungary's national heritage. Few could have imagined that this very chapel was to be disassembled some 300 hundred years later into 1600 pieces in order to be rebuilt within the new cathedral that was to become Central Europe's largest!

The construction of the present cathedral started in the 1820s and was more or less finished in 1856 when Liszt conducted his *Graner Messe*, the Esztergom Mass (German being the official language of the then ruling Habsburg Empire, Gran was the official German name for Esztergom) especially composed for the inauguration of the new cathedral. The organ part was played by the famous Weimar organist Alexander Winterberger, in the presence of Emperor Francis Joseph I and the Viennese court. Strange as fate had it, arrangements for this mass did not go without political mudslinging and intrigue. In the same way as this very court most likely had the first architect, János Packh, assassinated in fear that this cathedral would surpass in its vast proportions any Austrian counterpart, the German-speaking yet Hungarian-in-spirit Liszt was not particularly favoured by this very same court for his deep sympathy with his Magyar compatriots who not so long before revolted to overturn Habsburg rule in Hungary...

The then newly inaugurated pipe organ became the largest at the time in Hungary. The organ builder was Ludwig Mooser of Salzburg who studied with Silbermann and later settled in Hungary to build further pipe organs. The Mooser organ at the Esztergom Cathedral was completed between 1852 and 1856. It had 49 stops, 3530 pipes, 3 manuals and pedals with tracker action. An innovation at that time within the country was the introduction in the instrument of a cone windchest and enclosed swell division on the third manual. The swell shutters were horizontal, and the organ uniquely incorporated a harmonium rank called *claveoline*. Unfortunately, despite its nice and solemn tone, the instrument battled with a number of problems due firstly to its hasty completion to be ready for the cathedral's 1856 inauguration.

During the two world wars, besides bombardment damages, a considerable number of pipes were expropriated (read: removed) for military purposes (read: bullets), so the post-war period found this instrument in a rather deplorable state. The original console and the tracker action were destroyed, while the unused Mooser pipes and structural parts lay either idle or in ruins, or disappeared from the instrument entirely. This already dire predisposition was further aggravated by some subsequent "restoration", in the course of which half of the organ case was emptied and the instrument was virtually replaced by a 2-manual, pneumatic action organ for temporary use. Similarly to the temporary cease of the archiepiscopal seat (forcedly vacated by none other than the legendary Cardinal József Mindszenty, following Communist takeover in 1949), the organ had to wait for its rebirth for nearly thirty years when the atheist regime "softened up" to an extent that it allowed the reinstatement of a Catholic primate in Soviet-occupied Hungary. The new archbishop, Cardinal László Lékai - at the relentless initiation/instigation of the similarly newly appointed organist and choirmaster in 1975, Mr István Baróti who soon realised what potential lay within the remaining pipe ranks - slowly started generating funds towards the reconstruction of the cathedral's pipe organ (considerably due to connections of the former in Rome and Germany, many of whom were of Suabian German origin, previously residing in Hungary but forced to leave the country after WWII...). So from the year this majestic phoenix of pipes that once had seen better days, was beginning to rise to see a more promising future unfolding – slowly and securely, though far from steadily.

Under the direction of Mr Baróti, construction on the organ could effectively start in 1979 – and it started with gusto, relative to the communist state's overall negative attitude and passivity towards subsidizing church organs, just as any areas of religious life in general. The plan was to rely on two phases: restoring the able ranks of the "vintage" Mooser organ, then expanding the specification to a size and sound worthy of the monumental cathedral and location hosting the instrument. The target of the new specification has been 147 stops and over 14,000 pipes. Organ builders Gyula Vági and János Farkas were appointed to this privileged project.

At the end of the year 1980, seven stops restored from the original Mooser instrument were already speaking, while the interim temporary instrument was disconnected for good. The fifth manual's Swell division was nearly complete towards the end of 1986, speaking beautifully on a new, modern five-manual console. However, as the funds became more and more inconsistent, the initial impetus soon followed suit and slowed down considerably, resulting in two or three stops built on average within periods of three years or more. By the time of the publication of the first CD recording by the resident organist on this instrument in 1999, of the 147 stops only 39 were speaking. (On a personal note, the author of these lines vividly recalls how long it took for the pedal ranks of the Majorbass 32' stops to be mounted into the instrument, after laying idle on the cathedral floor for years!). Between 2002 and 2003, the construction saw another more dynamic period. Besides other structural components, the specification was enlarged by 27 stops: 16 on the Manual III, 6 on the Pedals and 5 on Manual IV (information courtesy of Mr István Baróti). By the end of 2006, 85 ranks in the instrument were speaking. At present, due primarily to the selfless perseverance of the resident organist, 89 stops, constituting about four-sevenths of the final specification of this instrument, are complete. However, completion at this stage still remains a dream...

Seeing is believing – one would advise when describing the Esztergom Basilica. The world's 18th largest church - holding the national cathedral title together with her Budapest counterpart, St Stephen's Basilica and both finished by the architect József Hild - is Central Europe's largest and Hungary's tallest, reaching over 100 metres (measured from the Crypt). Surprisingly enough, it is still wider than tall, providing jaw-dropping proportions. Inside, the building is 118 meters long and 49 metres wide, with a dome in the middle whose inside height is 71.5 metres and a diameter of 33.5 metres. Further to the above Guinness-record tackling data, the cathedral includes the world's largest altarpiece painted on canvas: The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, painted by Michelangelo Grigoletti and measuring 13.5 by 6.6 metres. Last, but not least, the acoustics: a chord released on the organ aspiring to compliment her host, has a reverberation of 11-12 seconds...

Hearing is believing – should one say next without much further ado, as any verbal description would not do justice to the real experience listening to the basilica's organ. An organ-in- construction that, due to its capricious refurbishment history, is aimed to sound complete even at a still incomplete stage. The author's own memories related to this – both in the metaphorical and literal sense – immensely inspiring instrument are deeply treasured and provide a returning source of homesickness. However, this may sound nothing more than trivial in consideration of the instrument's record so far of helping to launch world-class organists

such as János Pálur, László Fassang, László Deák or Péter Kováts into “stardom”, to mention but a few whose “workshop” was indeed, this very instrument. It was also one of the few instruments international organ legends like Olivier Latry of Notre-Dame de Paris chose to give masterclasses on in 1996. Did I mention Hugo’s pedestal somewhere above?...

Dimensions of the specification itself – to borrow from a distantly related terminology of organ enthusiasts of a slightly different field – make a frail earthly mortal few weak at the knees. Take a look:

Pedal	I. Unterwerk	II. Hauptwerk	III. Positiv	IV. Oberwerk	V. Schwellwerk
1 Majorbass 32*	19 Gedackt 16'	107 Bourdon 32'	45 Principal 16*	136 Rohrbourdon 16*	77 Bourdon 16'
2 Infrabass 32' M*	20 Holzprincipal 108	Praestant 16*	46 Quintatön 16*	137 Prinzival 8*	78 Gemshorn 16*
3 Principal 16'	8'	109 Bourdon 16' M	47 Praestant 8*	138 Flûte harmonique	79 Gambe 16'
4 Flûte 16'	21 Gedackt 8'	110 Principal 8' M*	48 Rohrflöte 8*	8*	80 Prinzival 8*
5 Kontrabass 16' M*	22 Fugara 8' M	111 Spitzflöte 8'	49 Trichtergedackt 8'	139 Gemshorn 8'	81 Flûte 8*
6 Subbass 16' M*	23 Quintatön 8'	112 Coppel 8' M*	50 Salizional 8*	140 Unda maris 8**	82 Bourdon à cheminée 8' M*
7 Bourdon 16'	24 Harfpfeife 8'	113 Gamba 8'	51 Quintatön 8' M*	141 Cornet V 8'	83 Gambe 8*
8 Salicet 16**	25 Principal 4'	114 Quint major 5 ¹ / ₃ '	52 Octave 4**	142 Nasat 5 ¹ / ₃ '	84 Voix céleste 8**
9 Quint 10 ² / ₃ '	26 Koppelflöte	M*	53 Blockflöte 4'	143 Octave 4**	85 Cornet VI 8**
10 Grand Cornet IV 10 ² / ₃ '	4'	115 Octave 4' M*	54 Gemshorn 4**	144 Holzflöte 4'	86 Couleur cornet V 5 ¹ / ₃ **
11 Octavbass 8**	27 Flûte	116 Waldflöte 4' M*	55 Nasat 2 ² / ₃ '	145 Terz 3 ¹ / ₅ '	87 Octave 4**
12 Aperta 8**	d'amour 4'	117 Rohrflöte 4'	56 Prinzival 2**	146 Rauschpfeife III	88 Flauto 4' M*
13 Gedackt 8'	28 Violine 4'	118 Cornet III 3 ¹ / ₅ ' M*	57 Waldflöte 2'	2 ² / ₃ '	89 Flûte octaviante 4**
14 Violoncello 8**	29 Nasat 2 ² / ₃ '	119 Quint 2 ² / ₃ ' M*	58 Terz 1 ³ / ₅ '	147 Septime 2 ² / ₇ '	90 Dulciane 4**
15 Rauschbass II 5 ¹ / ₃ **	30 Octave 2'	120 Piccolo 2' M	59 Sifflöte 1 ¹ / ₃ **	148 Superoctave 2**	91 Nasard 2 ² / ₃ **
16 Zink IV 5 ¹ / ₃ '	31 Spitzflöte 2'	121 Rauschwerk VIII-X60	Septime 1 ¹ / ₇ '	149 Blockflöte 2'	92 Plein jeu III-IV 2 ² / ₃ **
17 Spitzprincipal 4'	32 Terz 1 ³ / ₅ '	2' M*	61 Octave 1**	150 Nachthorn 1'	93 Doublette 2**
18 Tibia 4'	33 Larigot 1 ¹ / ₃ '	122 Cimpel III-V 1 ¹ / ₃ '	62 None ⁸ / ₉ '	151 Mixtur V-VII 2**	94 Flûte conique 2**
160 Rauschpfeife III 2 ² / ₃ '	34 Sifflöte 1'	M*	63 Undecim-tredécim ⁸ / ₁₁	152 Acuta IV-VI 2 ² / ₃ '	95 Carillon 1 + 1 ¹ / ₂ **
161 Flöte 2'	35 Mixtur IV 2'	123 Trompette 16'	+ ⁸ / ₁₃ '	153 Colorian IV 4 ⁴ / ₉ **	96 Mixtur IV-V 1 ¹ / ₃ **
162 Compensum VII 2 ² / ₃ '	36 Cymbel IV	124 Tromba 8'	64 Scharf IV-V 1 ¹ / ₃ '	154 Trompette magna	97 Cymbal IV 1 ¹ / ₄ **
163 Mixtur IV 2'	1 ¹ / ₂ '	125 Trompeta imperial	65 Terzianscharf IV 2 ² / ₃ **	16**	98 Bombarde 16**
164 Bombarde 32**	37	32**	66 Holzdzulzian 16**	155 Trompette 8'	99 Trompetteharmonique 8**
165 Posaune 32' M*	Cymbelpfeife ¹	126 Clarin de batalla	67 Krummhorn-Schalmey	156 Trompette 4'	100 Hautbois 8**
166 Bombarde 16'	1/6'	16**	8**		101 Musette 8**
167 Posaune 16**	38 Spillregal 16'	127 Trompeta real 8**	68 Rohrschalmey 4'		102 Clairon 4**
168 Dulcian 16'	39 Trichterregal 128	Bajoncillo 4**	69 Clarin claro 8**		
169 Tromba 8**	8'		70 Clarin brillante 4**		
170 Clairon 4**	40 Voxhumana				
	8'				
171 P+I	41 I+III	129 II+I	71 III+I	157 IV+V	103 Tremolo
172 P+II	42 I+IV	130 II+III	72 III+IV	158 IV+V super	
173 P+III	43 I+V	131 II+IV	73 III+V	159 Tremolo	
174 P+IV	44 Tremolo	132 II+V	74 Tremolo		
175 P+V		133 II+II super			
176 P+IV super		134 II+IV super	75 Echo kombination		
		135 II+V super	76 Echo pleno		

M: stops by Mooser

*: ranks already built in

Further to the above, it is to be added that the new electric slider-action organ is 15 metres wide, 12 metres tall; the largest pipe is ten metres tall while the smallest one is just 8 millimetres. It hosts a rare 32' open wood diapason stop of which there are only two in the country. There is a stunning variety of mutations

and mixtures that would make an improviser's day. Besides the discreetly cool yet velvety, widely voiced Mooser foundation stops, the organ incorporates ranks from other notable instruments. These include a Bombarde 32' bought from the Franciscans' Church in inner-City Budapest or the fifth manual's beautifully soaring Couleur Cornet originally from – wait for it – Europe's largest synagogue, also in Budapest...Did Kodály once say that "music knows no boundaries"? The pedal alone boasts four 32' ranks, ranging from the mesmerising Infrabass (perfectly complimenting the 5th manual's strings and celestes) to a Bombarde electrifying a French Toccata, or evoking the spirit of the great Liszt who himself often played on the Mooser stops. Horizontal trumpets? By all means – ranging from the 4' Bajoncillo to the 32' *Trompeta Imperial* (!) on the Great (Manual II) that would make even Napoléon say: *Chapeau!* But, as earlier said: *hearing is believing*, once one has admired the elegantly attractive neo-classical organ case.

What is left to say, by way of a coda, to the somewhat lengthy teaser presented above? If the gentle reader has a chance besides interest, once in Hungary, he or she is warmly encouraged to spare time for this outstanding building and its pipe organ. Most cruises down the Danube now include Budapest further down the river; I'm not sure whether it stops in Esztergom but if not, it is definitely worth doing a little detour to this historic city. Once outside the cathedral (the treasury museum and the crypt is also a must-see inside!), take a walk to the walls of the old castle, ponder on history's twists over the recently rebuilt Maria Valeria bridge (2001) that now both binds and separates not only two banks of the Danube, but also Hungary from Slovakia; savour a sunset overlooking the turn of the Danube; or sit down for a moment sipping coffee from the little cafe on the edge of the Castle Hill (once the service flat of the organist where the author stayed over many times filling in for his organ teacher away, among one-thousand year old walls overlooking part of the city and the Danube!).

Besides church and government subsidy, it is a somewhat peculiar and hardly negligible fact that Mr Baróti, one of the country's most prominent organists and music pedagogues, distinguished Liszt-scholar and organ expert is today yet to see the dream of his *chef d'oeuvre* finished come true. Over more than a quarter of a century, he has designed, maintained, tuned and further built this organ, often with the help of his students and sometimes footing costs from his own pocket. He is turning 70 this year and the chances of seeing this instrument finished and one day inaugurating it with a performance of his beloved *Ad nos ad salutarem undam* by Liszt may still be remote, amidst the capricious and changeable political and economic weather Hungary has known so long, so well. The website this article relied mostly on provides not only an audiovisual background (yes, downloadable excerpts, too) of the grand organ of the Esztergom cathedral, but information on how to support this project should one wish to consider doing so:

<http://www.esztergomorgan.synthasite.com>

Finally, it is Mr Baróti's expressed wish that I hereby forward his heartfelt thanks to Mr Vic Tyler from the Society of Organists in Victoria whose generous contribution toward the project helped make a considerable step forward in the construction of this organ possible. May his example follow suit in making the above 'pipe dreams' come true.

References

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