

The Queen among instruments

The Organ in the Goldener Saal

Since 2011, the famous organ façade, which dominates the Großer Musikvereinssaal, has hidden one of the best concert organs in the world. The instrument is in fact the fourth to occupy the space since the Musikverein building opened in 1870 and provides a tangible link to this institution's fascinating organ history.

It is undoubtedly the central element in Theophil Hansen's visually and acoustically brilliant Großer Musikvereinssaal: the organ, queen of the instruments, the focus for concert audiences in the hall and also – at least every 1 January – for millions of television viewers around the world. Hansen ensured this majestic instrument was prominently located at the front of the auditorium. The organ clearly and consistently forms an integral part of the homogenous and opulent design modelled upon Greek antiquity.

And yet what we see in visual presentation here is “only” the husk, the casing. The organ itself, the instrument as such, is hidden inside and even the visible facade pipes are, and have always been, silent.

Husk and heart

When the Großer Musikvereinssaal opened for the first time at a celebratory event in January 1870, the organ case was still empty. In the course of the ambitious building project, at immense financial outlay, to build its new concert building, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna had initially given less priority to the organ project. However, since the 1868 study plan created for the Gesellschaft's own conservatory envisaged organ playing as an important component of musical education, the plans for an organ began immediately thereafter.

The Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde invited proposals from renowned organ builders, including the famed Aristide Cavallé-Coll in Paris, who however showed no interest in the commission, and also Merklin & Schütze, also from Paris, who at first failed to respond at all to the invitation. A specially assembled organ commission, including Anton Bruckner as the organ professor from the conservatory of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Hofkapellmeister Johann Herbeck and Joseph Hellmesberger, court organist Pius Richter and Leopold Alexander Zellner as general secretary of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, eventually gave the commission to Friedrich Ladegast from Weißenfels an der Saale, at that time regarded as the leading organ builder in the German-speaking world. The organ Ladegast designed with 44 stops was expanded to 52 in total at the behest of the commission, and contained numerous technical innovations intended to improve performance.

Spectacular sounds

The organ's first “outing” was on the occasion of another premiere: on 10 November 1872, Johannes Brahms directed his first concert for the Gesellschaft in his new role as Concert Director. For the central work of this programme, Händel's “Dettinger Te Deum”, Brahms' setting called for the continuo, for which the organ now came into use. Five days' later came the inaugural “organ concert” for the instrument itself. For this occasion, Josef Weilen was commissioned to produce a celebratory poem, performed by Burgtheater actor Josef Lewinsky: “So brause Orgel mächtigen Choral,/ Durch diesen stolzen kunstgeweihten Saal,/ Wie aus der höhern Welt ein Mahnungsruf ...” and after Johann Sebastian Bach's famous Toccata in d minor, performed by the Dresden organist Carl August Fischer, Anton Bruckner gave an improvised performance in all registers.

Before long, however, the organ's technical innovations proved to be problematic. General secretary Leopold Alexander Zellner, who was also an acoustician, organist and composer, examined the organ himself, and attempted various experiments and improvements. “One could find Master Zellner at all times...in his hidden laboratory, where he...devoted himself like a medieval master student to the secret service of the organ”, according to Robert Hirschfeld's book “Geschichte der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde”. In 1880 Zellner gave up and noted: “All my own work, but now I have had enough”

A question of precision

Two decades later, the instrument had to be declared unplayable and in 1904 a decision was taken to have a new organ especially built for the Musikverein. The commission was given to the imperial and royal court organ builders (k. u. k. Hof-Orgelfabrik) Gebrüder Rieger from Jägerndorf in Austrian Silesia, known today as Krnov in the Czech Republic. For this instrument with 71 stops, changes were also undertaken to the organ case and the façade was expanded to include more pipes. The organ console, which replaced the Ladegast console at podium level and was now located in the gallery, was encompassed by the centrally located balustrade that it retains today. In a performance directed by Franz Schalk of Bach's B minor mass on 12 November 1907, the Rieger organ was played for the first time, before being presented as a solo instrument on 11 December by court organists Rudolf Dittrich, Josef Labor and Georg Valker.

This organ too, however, faced misfortune. When a grenade found its way into the Musikverein building in the last days of the war in 1945, the organ was damaged and initially underwent emergency repairs. In the course of renovation by Friedrich Molzer in 1948, the disposition was changed and the stops expanded to 80. Signs of wear and tear on the electronic tracker actions built in at that time affected the precision functioning of the instrument

An organ renaissance

Contemplating a second new organ in the 1960s, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde engaged as artistic consultant Karl Richter, who was popular with Viennese audiences as a conductor and as an organist. The new instrument was entirely tailored to suit his playing and performance style as well as his repertoire. Richter required precisely 100 stops and electronic trackers, although the functional reliability of mechanical trackers had long been established as superior. The commission for this organ went to companies E. F. Walcker & Cie from Ludwigsburg and Werner Walcker-Mayer from Guntramsdorf near Vienna. From the first concert performance by Richter in 1968 until his untimely death in 1981, the organ underwent a true renaissance at the Musikverein.

Thereafter, however, it became clear that the instrument was too narrowly attuned to one particular organist and furthermore, wear and tear concerning the electronic trackers once again created insurmountable problems. Last but not least, the instrument was little suited to its actual (renewed) principal task as an orchestral instrument.

Expert accompaniment

In 2000, it was recognised that undertaking a technical renovation would achieve little and was not financially justified. Thus the Gesellschaft faced the prospect of requiring a third replacement organ. The experiences with the previous organs proved helpful in the planning of the new instrument. A commission jury was chosen, comprising five of the world's leading organists, who accompanied the project from the beginning: Dame Gillian Weir from Great Britain, Olivier Latry, titular organist from the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, Ludger Lohmann from Germany and Martin Haselböck and Peter Planyavsky from Austria. Director of the archive Otto Biba joined them as the nominated expert of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna.

The committee chose the company Rieger-Orgelbau from Schwarzach in Vorarlberg, the successor company to the k. u. k. Hof-Orgelfabrik Gebrüder Rieger in Jägerndorf, which in 1907 had built the Musikverein's second organ. In the concert-free summer months of 2009, the old organ was dismantled and in the summer of 2010, the new instrument was installed. From the opening of that season until an inauguration concert on 26 March 2011, when the organ was blessed by the Archbishop of Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, a member of the Senate of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, the organ voicers were at work over countless night shift hours to regulate the instrument.

Wishes fulfilled

The new organ has been designed primarily with the original role of a concert hall organ in mind: for use as an orchestral instrument in the symphonic repertoire. The quality of its luxuriant and majestic sound as a solo instrument, however, was revealed by Olivier Latry shortly after the opening in a concert for unaccompanied organ in the Großer Musikvereinssaal. He and his organist colleagues of the expert commission, who had presented the new instrument in all its facets during the opening concert in 2011 with a repertoire from Bach to Messiaen, were also the first to sit at the console in the following anniversary season marking the 200th anniversary celebration of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna's founding in 1812. This instrument has two consoles: a mechanical one

beneath the middle of the organ façade on the organ gallery and a movable electronic one enabling flexible positioning in the orchestra.

„May this organ as a multifaceted and regularly used instrument enrich Vienna’s concert life and give back to the lovers of orchestral music a genre that had almost fallen into obscurity.” This wish, expressed by master organ builder and Rieger Director Wendelin Eberle, has been fulfilled since 26 March 2011 in the most impressive of ways. The organ regularly unfurls its majestic sound into the Goldener Saal with the quality worthy of a queen, as the queen of instruments.