

# A NEW ORGAN FOR ST. PETER'S?

The world's greatest designer of organs, a Frenchman who lived in the 1800s, had a dream: to build the largest organ in the world for St. Peter's Basilica. And now a group of German lovers of organ music would like to make that dream a reality...

■ BY ROBERT MOYNIHAN

"Therefore the organ had to resound in the papal liturgy as well."

—Joseph Ratzinger, 1977, lecture in Stuttgart, Germany

Some stories, especially true ones, can only be told in the simplest way. This is one such story.

A few months ago, a young German entrepreneur who has made his fortune selling mobile telephones, emailed me asking whether he could meet with me when he came to Rome in October. I said fine, and gave him my cell phone number.

He called me on October 5, and we met the next day for lunch at Claudio's place, *La Vittoria*, a little restaurant at the bottom of Via delle Fornaci, next to Pina's sandwich shop, which is decorated with photographs of Padre Pio and Cardinal Meisner of Cologne. I was with Micaela Biferalli, managing editor of *Inside the Vatican*, and Angela Ambrogetti and Anna Artymiak, both of whom live in Rome and write on Vatican and Church affairs.

We sat outside on a warm October day, and we talked about this man's great passion: ecclesial hats. His name was Dieter Philippi, and he had the world's greatest collection of cardinal's caps, bishops' mitres, monsignors' birettas, rabbis' skullcaps, and so forth, all collected in a huge volume of nearly 800 pages, weighing nearly 15 kilos, called *The Philippi Collection*, and he wanted me to review the book for this magazine.

"It sounds like a heavy task," I said.

Meanwhile, sitting next to Dieter was a quiet, white-haired fellow, who listened politely to our conversation in almost total silence. His name was Bernhard Leonardy, and he was, like Dieter, from Saarbrücken, where he is director of the International Institute for Organ (IIO) and cantor of the Basilica of St. Johann, which has a world-famous five manual tripartite organ, simultaneously sounding from three galleries. He is also the musical director of the International Music Festival "Organs Without Frontiers" held annually in Saarbrücken, he told me.

"So what brings you to Rome?" I asked him.

"Well," he said, "actually, it's an organ..."

Below, the inside of St. Peter's Basilica with a view of the back wall where the organ would go. Opposite, the original model of the organ designed by Aristide Cavaillé-Coll (Photos by Paul Badde)



"Oh?" I said.

"The largest organ in the world, designed by the greatest organ builder of all time, Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, a Frenchman who lived in the 1800s," he continued. "It's got 20,000 pipes, more than twice as many as the organ in the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, which he also designed..."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"Well," said Leonardy, "that's the point. No one knows."

He turned to Dieter. "Show him."

Dieter reached for his cell phone, entered a web address, and a picture appeared on the screen. He held out the phone to me so I could peer at it, shading the phone slightly with my hand against the bright early afternoon October sun. "Here it is..."

On the screen there was a magnificent organ, its myriad pipes rising, rank upon rank, like the columns of a cathedral.

"It's magnificent," I said. "But where is it?"

"Well, again, that's the problem," Leonardy said. "No one knows. You see, it's only a model. Cavaillé-Coll was a devout man, and he designed and built more than 500 organs around Europe, but it was the dream of his life to build this particular organ, and he spent decades designing and redesigning it until it was as perfect as he could make it. He presented the design to three Popes, Pius IX, Leo XIII, and Pius X. But for reasons we don't really know, the organ was never built, and St. Peter's today is still without an organ worthy of the chief basilica in Christendom."

"But what is this picture, then?" I asked. "It's more than a drawing..."

"It's a model," Leonardy said. "Cavaillé-Coll designed it down to the most trivial detail. It's evidently about four or five meters tall, and it was given to the Vatican, and never heard of again..."

"Ah," I said. "I see. And so you want to find this model..."

"Not exactly," Leonardy said. "Yes, I'd like to find the model, and if you could help us, that would be great. But we





Fotos: Paul Badde



## MUSIC A NEW ORGAN FOR ST. PETER'S?

have another goal..."

"Yes?" I said.

"We want to build it."

I laughed.

"Where?" I said.

"In St. Peter's Basilica, where it was designed to be," Leonardy said.

"But the basilica already has an organ!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, but of a very inferior quality, not anything compared to this organ by Cavaillé-Coll," Leonardy said. "This would be the largest and greatest and most musically gorgeous organ in the world — fitting for the greatest basilica in the world."

Angela, who had been listening, interjected, "We here in Italy have an entirely different musical tradition than you in the north. Our tradition is one of polyphony, of sung music, not organ music. We don't have a tradition of such organs here. We are Romans!"

It was not until much later that I discovered that organs have been built in St. Peter's Basilica since at least the 1400s, and there were organists in the basilica before Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel. Leonardy didn't object too strenuously, but gallantly nodded and said, "Of course, you have a wonderful tradition of polyphonic sung music here, but Rome has also embraced organ music. The issue is that the present organ is of an inferior quality."

"It does sound beautiful," I interjected.

"You don't have a trained ear," Leonardy replied.

"True," I said. "I'll admit that. But even if you could get approval for it, it would cost a fortune," I said.

"In Germany, we have a number of businessmen who are friends of ours who love organ music," Leonardy said. "They have made their money in various ways, one in the cement industry, and they have already helped us build organs in many churches in Germany. But they now are willing to focus on this one project. We think it may cost about 15 million euros, and they are already committed to funding it for this sum. Financing will be no problem."

"I see," I said. "OK. So what is the next move?"

"Find the model. Show it to the Pope. Make him aware of all the time and effort that went into this idea, and let him decide if he wants to make it a reality."

"OK," I said. "OK."

The next day I met with Leonardy again, and we visited the offices of the Vatican Museums, and we spoke for a few minutes with the assistant to the director, Dr. Antonio Paolucci. She said she had never heard of a model of such an organ being conserved anywhere in all the miles of Vatican corridors, but that she would

contact me if she heard of anything. And Leonardy departed for home.

Two mornings later, I was able to meet briefly with Cardinal Angelo Comastri, the archpriest of St. Peter's Basilica, the man in charge of all matters related to the maintenance and upkeep of the basilica. We sat down together in his office in the *Fabbrica di San Pietro*.

"I've come across an interesting story," I told Comastri. And I explained everything Leonardy had said to me about the proposed organ for the basilica, and the model that Cavaillé-Coll had prepared.

"I know about the proposal, and the model," Comastri said.

"Really?" I said, excitedly. "It still exists?"

"Yes," he said. "It's in one of the storerooms at the base of the cupola. It's been stored there for more than 100 years."

"Would it be possible to see it?"

"Yes, but not today. Can you come back on Monday?"

"Sure," I said. "With great pleasure."

"Good," the cardinal said. "I'll have someone take you up to see it. But as for the project itself, there's a problem: the walls of the basilica are somewhat unstable. They simply could not bear the weight of such a massive organ. The project is a beautiful idea, but it can never be built. We dare not risk destabilizing the basilica itself. The danger is simply too great for such an important structure as St. Peter's..."

"Oh," I said. "I see..."

I emailed Leonardy and told him I had found the model and would see it in a few days. And I told him of Comastri's concerns for the structural integrity of the basilica.

"We know that is their concern," Leonardy said. "But we have engineers who say they could put down pylons and then suspend the entire organ from the pylons, leaving the wall of the basilica entirely unaffected. It's technically

a challenge, that's true. But it can be done safely."

On Monday in mid-October, I collected Paul Badde, a German colleague, and together we went into the Vatican, to the *Fabbrica* building, and then, accompanied by a Vatican employee, into the basilica from the back entrance. We went up an elevator, stepped out into a dusty corridor, and then the employee pulled out a massive set of keys and found one to open the door in the wall in front of us. And we went in.

We were more than 100 feet high, along the curving edge of the base of the cupola. If we looked through the windows on our left, we could see down to the floor of the basilica, where pilgrims and tourists walked, tiny as ants. Paul snapped photos.

We walked until we came to a dark wooden stairway. The stairs led down a level below, and opened onto a huge storeroom



James E. Goettsche plays the organ in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican (CNS photo)



with a rough wood floor and ancient marble carvings from the original basilica scattered around. There were even models of the basilica itself which we towered over like giants, as the models came only up to our waists.

"There," our guide said. We turned.

There above us, mounted high on the wall, was the model of the largest organ in the world, Cavaillé-Coll's dream.

Beneath the model were three model doorways, representing the doors into St. Peter's Basilica itself.

"My God," I said, stunned. "This organ would cover the entire entrance wall of the basilica..."

We left that place, carrying our photographs and memories.

The end of this story cannot be told here. Neither Paul, nor I, know whether this project is a valid one. Only a team of experts can evaluate that.

But what is clear is that, in this little story, not only two, but three dreams intersect: the dream of Cavaillé-Coll to build the greatest organ in the world, and the dream of Bernhard Leonardy and his friends to realize that century-old project, but also the dream of Pope Benedict XVI himself, to leave something behind him, to contribute something to the culture and splendor of Rome which will also contribute *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* — to the greater glory of God.

I was able to learn, after some research, that the tradition of organ music in St. Peter's dates back to before the 1400s. And, in fact, after the 1300s, when the Popes were not in Rome, but in Avignon, and whatever organ was in St. Peter's fell into disrepair and disuse, the first great, new organ that was built for St. Peter's in the early Renaissance was built under Pope Martin V in about 1420 (after the end of the Great Schism and the return of the Popes from Avignon) by... a German. His name was Paolo de Henrico, and he built the organ in honor of his father, Henrico Theotonico (Henry the German), a German scribe of Pope Boniface IX.

So could Pope Benedict build a great new organ in St. Peter's? Possibly. We don't know.

But in this context, it is interesting to recall some words the Pope once spoke when he was still the archbishop of Munich. In a 1977 lecture on "Theological Problems in Church Music," Joseph Ratzinger said:

"The Church's liturgy... must have a cosmic character, must make the whole cosmos resound. On this point, (Erik) Peterson's comment, though certainly somewhat exaggerated, is basically quite worthy of consideration:

'And finally it is not by pure coincidence that the mediaeval music theorists begin their treatises by referring to the harmony of the spheres. Since the Church's hymn of praise tunes in to the praises of the cosmos, any consideration of the musical element in the Church's cult must also take into account the sort of praise offered by sun, moon, and stars.'

"What this means *in concreto* becomes clearer when we recall the prayer in Ps. Cyprian which speaks of God as the One Who is praised by angels, archangels, martyrs, apostles and prophets, 'to whom all the birds sing praises, whom the tongues of those in heaven, upon the earth and under the earth glorify: all the waters in heaven and under the heavens confess Thee...'

"This text is especially interesting because it discloses, so to speak, the theological principle according to which the 'organon' was understood, for it was simply called 'the' instrument as opposed to all the others. The organ is a theological instrument whose original home was the cult of the emperor. When the Emperor of Byzantium spoke, an organ played. On the other hand the organ was supposed to be the combination of all the voices of the cosmos. Accordingly, the organ music at imperial utterances meant that when the divine emperor spoke, the entire universe resounded. As a divine utterance, his statement is the resounding of all the voices in the cosmos. The 'organon' is the cosmic instrument and as such the voice of the world's ruler, the *imperator*.

"As against this Byzantine custom, Rome stressed a cosmic Christology and on that basis the cosmic function of Christ's Vicar on earth: what was good enough for the Emperor was quite good enough for the Pope. Naturally, it is not a case here of superficial problems concerning prestige, but it is a matter of the public, political and cultic representation of the mandates received in each case. To the exclusivity of an imperial theology which abandoned the Church

to the Emperor and degraded the bishops to mere imperial functionaries, Rome opposed the Pope's cosmic claim and with it the cosmic rank of belief in Christ, which is independent of and indeed superior to politics. Therefore the organ had to resound in the papal liturgy as well."

This Christmas, therefore, we set before our readers, and before the Holy Father himself, the dream of Cavaillé-Coll: to build an organ for St. Peter's in Rome that would make that great basilica resound with the praise of God in a way it has never resounded before, so that the very stones of the massive building themselves turn into praise of the holy, almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, for "the glory of God and the sanctification of men." ○



**The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb.  
Angels Singing and Playing Music, detail from Hubert and  
Jan van Eyck's altarpiece in the Cathedral of St. Bavo  
[Bavon] in Ghent, Belgium**

