

2023 Spring Meeting in Thuringia, Germany

On April 10th, 2023, members of the European Chapter of the AGO met in Erfurt/Thuringia for the first full-fledged Spring Meeting since 2019. Many of us had not seen each other for four years, so the Opening Dinner was a special event. Everyone was looking forward to a week full of interesting organs, beautiful towns, and, of course, time with old and new friends.

On Tuesday, the itinerary opened with organs in the city center of Erfurt. Our first stop, after climbing up 70 steps, was the Cathedral of Erfurt with its three organs, which are all playable from the main console. Silvius von Kessel, the cathedral organist, utilized this possibility effectively in his performance of Johann Bernhard Bach's Chaconne and an improvisation in the style of Messiaen. After some hesitation – as is rather typical for the first stop in our Spring Meetings – some chapter members took the opportunity to play the organs. After Alexia Tye had made a start with a *Plein jeu* by Guilain, we heard Agnes Goerke, Rosalind Mohnsen, and Alissa Duryee performing works by Robert Prizeman, Richard Key Biggs, and Jeanne Demessieux.

Having climbed the flight of stairs served us well because right next to the Cathedral, on the same hill, there is the church of St. Severi, one of Germany's most important Gothic buildings. It houses a three-manual organ by Klais, installed in a baroque organ case. Although the organ is equipped with only one independent pedal stop, it makes a very powerful sonic impression. After the organ demonstration, also by Silvius von Kessel, our chapter members Helen Rodgers and Giorgio Parolini played pieces by Mendelssohn and Brahms before Christa Rakich was heard with her own composition *Hommage à Schumann*.

Our next stop was St. Crucis with an organ by Volckland (completed in 1737, restored by Schuke), which, with a great variety of foundation stops and mixtures including a tierce rank, gave us the first impression of typical Thuringian organs of Bach's time. Organist Martin Schwabenhaus started with selections from a French Suite by Bach before moving on to improvisations. Participants, among them Christian Michel, Chery van Ornam, and Chapter Dean Johan Hermans who played Böhm, Bach, and Pachelbel, then took turns exploring the organ.

Now was the moment to realize that our organizer Barry Jordan was absolutely right when saying: "Everything gets later on its own." After a really quick lunch, we met at the former monastery of the *Predigerkirche*, where Pachelbel was the organist from 1678 to 1690. To pay tribute to his predecessor, organist Matthias Dreissig played Pachelbel's *Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan* on the brand new Winterhalter organ in the refectory before demonstrating the Schuke organ in the main church. Johan Hermans also chose to play Pachelbel whereas Mike Irvine performed *Petit Prélude* by the 20th century composer Joseph Jongen. Theo Meurs tried out the organ with one of his own pieces before Johan Hermans once more had to start a sentence with the well-known words "On behalf of the European Chapter of the American Guild of Organists..." to thank our host.

The day was rounded off by a carillon concert played by participants Ariane Toffel, Georg Wagner, and Christian Michel. Although it started raining with the first note of the concert all of us enjoyed this event, after which the city carillonneur offered a demonstration in the tower for those interested. At the end of the day, everyone agreed that the first day had been a total success.

After dinner in small groups in different restaurants, cocktails in the hotel bar, a few hours of sleep, and a good breakfast on Wednesday morning, we met at the coach park. Every organizer of a Spring Meeting fears that moment: three buses, but none of them was ours. Fortunately, the bus arrived soon, and we could start off with only a few minutes delay. – “Everything gets later on its own.”

The first town we visited on Wednesday was Gräfenhain, where Giorgio Parolini gave a rather spontaneous demonstration of the organ because Barry had just found out that Giorgio knows the organ very well. The special feature of this organ is the glockenspiel in the façade. Bach himself wanted to have one of these for his organ in Mühlhausen. Wim Riefel tried out the organ with Scheidemann's *Präludium in C* before Bernard Sanders played Bach's *Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier* followed by a performance by Jennifer Chou with a piece from Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*.

What followed then was the highlight of the week: the biggest Thuringian baroque organ in Waltershausen with its unique sound. Theophil Heincke provided a comprehensive demonstration of the organ with works by Bach and Krebs before many (if not to say all) organists of our group spent time on this wonderful instrument.

The last organ of the day was in Mechterstädt where Barry Jordan himself demonstrated the instrument with variations by Johann Gottfried Walther. After that, we went on to the Bach House in Eisenach. There we experienced a short concert on the historical instruments in the collection before heading off to the Wartburg. After a really interesting guided tour through the building, including Martin Luther's monks' cell, Barry was again proven right: “Everything gets later on its own.” What happened then was quite extraordinary. Since the ascent to the Wartburg is much more challenging than the steps up to Erfurt Cathedral, a bus shuttle is provided. Five of our members decided to take advantage of this possibility – which worked perfectly for the way up. After the guided tour, the “hikers” arrived at the bus whereas the other five members were missing. Why? Easy to explain, hard to believe: The bus driver had already finished work for the day and gone back to Eisenach. Thanks to Barry, he came back (even though a bit grumpy) and reunited our group. Here it is inevitable to quote from the booklet: “Bus leaves for Erfurt at approximately 6.15, or as soon as we are all there.” How could our organizer know that in advance? – Spooky!

New day, new experiences. On Thursday, our excursion began in Büßleben, an idyllic town with a big organ built by Sterzing, who was a friend of the Bach family. After an amazing performance of Pachelbel and Böhm played by the host, Tom Anschütz, several AGO members tried out the possibilities and limitations of an organ in meantone temperament, among them Wim Riefel with Scheidemann's *Präludium in d minor*, Lois Holdridge with Buxtehude's *Nun bitten wir*, and Peggy Sniezek and Jill Hunt with works by Bach.

The next stop was Suhl where we visited the noble Köhler organ from 1740 and listened to Philipp Christ, whose demonstration of the instrument included Bach's *Concerto in G major*. Bernard Sanders played pieces from his own composition *Stations of the Cross* before we heard Bach's *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, played by Giorgio Parolini.

The beautiful historic city center of Arnstadt, which is a special place for Bach fans, was our last destination for that day. On the upper gallery of the church there is a reconstruction of the Wender

organ, which includes seven stops of Bach's original instrument. The second organ, a romantic Steinmeyer, is located on the lower gallery. Organist Jörg Reddin provided a splendid performance of pieces by the young Johann Sebastian Bach. Then participants played on the two organs alternately. Works by Ad Wammes, Johannes Brahms, and Johann Sebastian Bach resounded when Jennifer Chou, Cheryl Duerr, Barbara Gulick and Helen Rodgers played the organs.

Friday the day started with a trip to the Saxonian border. Our first destination was Kahla, the hometown of Johann Walther, an important composer of early Protestant church music. The church in Kahla houses a new choir organ by Späth, which shall be part of a bigger organ installation to be completed in the near future. The special quality of the new choir organ is the possibility to switch between equal and meantone temperament. Ina Köllner played variations by J. G. Walther to demonstrate the organ. Axel Wilberg performed one of Hassler's canzonas with meantone temperament before Meredith Baker gave the equal temperament a try.

In St. Marien in Greiz, the participants gained an impression of the newly renovated, romantic organ. Organist Ralf Stiller played pieces by Buxtehude and a local modern composer. There was also some time to visit the beautiful town center.

The final organ of this year's AGO Spring Meeting was the Silbermann organ in Fraureuth. This famous instrument was another highlight and clearly showed the difference between Thuringian and Saxonian style. After the demonstration, almost all participants also played the organ here.

Since the end of our meeting is approaching, and thus also the end of this report, it is time for a little anecdote whose keyword is "toilet". Many readers will wonder why one should write about toilets in a Spring Meeting report, whereas all participants will smile knowingly. Anyone who needed to use the restroom in Fraureuth had to go to a big basin, fill a watering can and take it to the sanitary facilities (outhouse) which resembled a small stone hut. This special experience was the perfect ending of a perfect excursion. Why? Because Barry had to answer the question "Do you know where the toilets are?" at least 100 times in those few days. This time, nobody could miss it.

The Meeting concluded with the closing dinner in the city center of Erfurt where some delicious local cuisine was served.



Although Barry Jordan himself would be too humble to say something like this, we would like to finish the report with a photo and a quote by our member Ariane Toffel:

"Barry saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

... and there was evening, and there was morning – everyone had to go back home.

Axel Wilberg and Ricarda Kossack