

They'll be Bach

Italian pipe organs, Europe's oldest, are making a return

But Italy lacks enough trained organists to play them



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Prospero

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IN MAY, a Dutch organist named Pieter van Dijk performed a selection of baroque pieces in front of an audience of some 50 people. The Netherlands is famous for its organs and organists—local recitals easily attract listeners—but Mr van Dijk's performance took place further afield. The Maggio Organistico festival in Umbria, a region north-east of Rome, aims to draw attention to Italy's illustrious history of church music and show off an impressive collection of pipe organs.

Until recently, the organ in St Chiara's Church in the small town of Lugnano in Teverina, where Mr van Dijk performed, was little more than a pile of pipes. Three decades ago, Wijnand van de Pol—another Dutchman—discovered a derelict organ

in a church in Umbria and resolved to restore it; he soon found dozens of other centuries-old pipe organs that had fallen into disrepair and become unusable. Thus began a movement to bring the region's instruments back to life. Assisted by a growing band of local organ aficionados, Mr van Dijk took another into his care and by 2016, the group—partially funded by a local bank and the government—had restored 20 organs, mostly from the 1700s. Fifteen of the instruments are now in good condition, including the organ in the ninth-century cathedral in the town of Amelia.

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The decline of the pipe organ was particularly surprising given Italy's history as the epicentre of church music. Composers like Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina were commissioned by the Vatican; his compositions remain a mainstay of British cathedral worship. The pipe organ itself—present in churches all over the world—originated in Italy during the 15th century. “Like many aspects of Western culture, organ-building

and organ-playing, too, seem to have their inception in Italy,” explains Professor Paul Jacobs, chair of the Juilliard School's organ department.

But when the French and the Germans became acquainted with the Italian instrument, they began developing it further. While Italian church organs remained virtually unchanged with only one manual (keyboard) and a rudimentary set of pedals, French and German organs soon featured two manuals, and later three or four. The French and German makers turned the Italian organ's pedal keys into a proper pedalboard with several octaves; northern European organists learned to use their feet as actively as their hands. Unsurprisingly, this development was accompanied by more elaborate music for the organ including Johann Sebastian Bach's world-famous catalogue of works, another reason why Italian organs lost their prime position. French and German towns the size of Lugnano in Teverina feature more sophisticated pipe organs than the one Mr van Dijk played.

“The Italian organs didn't evolve as quickly as did Northern European organs, but that doesn't diminish their importance or beauty,” says Mr Jacobs. “They're known for a velvety, vocal sound, and there's a body of music written just for them. They are a portal into the past.” Conservatories around the world pay large sums for

Italian baroque organs: the instruments Mr van de Pol and his fellow devotees have restored form a crucial chapter of music history.

But few, it seems, have much interest in revisiting this chapter. “From time to time the organs are used for church services, but unfortunately there are no local organists who would be able to play them,” says Gabriele Catalucci, an Amelia-born organist who leads Ameriumbra, a group that maintains the restored organs. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic church has allowed the use of contemporary instruments such as the electric piano, which require more modest keyboard skills.

So what is to be done with the organs, if the instruments are only being played at the annual festival? Two of the organs have been bought by foreign buyers, Mr Catalucci reports, “but only two” out of 20. And, as Mr Jacobs points out, organs have a practical purpose: “it’s fine for some organs to be placed in museums, but most were built for the practical purpose of leading the faithful in worship,” he says. Church organs should remain in churches where possible.

Many are hoping that the festival will help to promote the region as a destination for organ aficionados from around the world. With its lush landscapes and walled Roman towns, it would certainly make an attractive destination. But local organ groups alone do not make international tourism happen.

The best solution, Mr Catalucci has concluded, is instead to invite foreign conservatories to use the organs for teaching. “We have enough organs for them to have lessons on,” he says. Regular use of the organs by proficient players would generate more interest and larger audience numbers. International students and their professors already make such multi-day pilgrimages to French and German organs, and recently a group from London’s Royal Academy of Music visited the Amelia cathedral. Mr Jacobs agrees: “Encounters with these instruments could only result in a deeper appreciation for the vast history of our art form.” Amelia is just an hour and a half from Rome: devotees of Italian organs could easily take a break for other baroque pursuits. And who would not want to hear the sounds that accompanied Leonardo Da Vinci’s visual creation?