

SPRING MEETING 2019

WARSAW

On Easter Monday, about 35 members of our chapter converged on the Polish capital of Warsaw (a city well worth investigating) to begin the annual nearly-a-week of socialising, eating, and most of all, organ discovery. Five further members, as well as a husband and two young children, joined us slightly later in the week. The organiser was our member Michał Szostak, and a very professional job he did of it. He succeeded brilliantly in helping us to fill gaps in our knowledge of Poland, its history and culture and especially its organs. This was the Spring Meeting at which there were no unforeseen developments (thanks partly to the Polish autostrada!); we were never late, never unexpected (except in the chocolate shop, but that's another story). Participants came from the USA, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, the UK and Finland.



The traditional opening dinner on Monday evening was held in one of the restaurant spaces of our pleasant and modern hotel, the Gromada City Center. The food was excellent and the area was festooned with balloons marking 40 years of the European Chapter. It was a very special overture to the following days. Most went to bed relatively early, nevertheless, especially those with enough experience to know how tiring the rest of the week probably would be. Also, there was no hotel bar open.

Tuesday dawned clear and bright – your scribe has never experienced quite such good weather at spring meeting! – and all left at 9 am for the short walk to the old town of Warsaw and St. Anne's Church.

The organ there was built by the Austrian firm of Pflüger, which closed in 2015, in 1992. Martin Pflüger, the firm's founder, was an employee of Rieger who went solo in 1979; the firm thus had a short history, and I had not encountered any of their instruments before. I also read in the excellent booklet that "the organ case is mainly a reconstruction made of antique elements", so that all in all I was rather sceptical. Unjustly, as it turned out: the case was a riotously wonderful thing of great beauty, the instrument itself clear, ringing and resonant, with a specification which seemed at first glance stereotypical but in reality revealed a sure feel for blend coupled with character. This was an excellent opening to the week. The instrument was demonstrated by the organist of the church, Kamil Steć, who played a programme with works by Bach, Karg-Elert and (William) Mathias. The Karg-Elert in particular revealed one of the characteristics of the instrument – that the enclosed manual is no "swell" – but the tonalities were all very agreeable and the organ made a fine impression. There was a good hour to play; 11 members took advantage of the opportunity, playing a wide variety of music from Croft to an improvisation on "Victimae paschali laudes" by the talented young Kacper Orzechowski – a name to look out for.

The next stop was a couple of hundred yards further at the Archcathedral of Warsaw. Here we found a largish organ by Eule (Bautzen, Saxony); 60 stops on three manuals and pedals, 1987. This proved to be a typical example of the work of the well-known builder from Bautzen in Saxony at the time of its construction, attempting to combine an essentially neoclassical style with some romantic elements. Titular organist Piotr Rachon played excerpts from 20(!) pieces, sometimes just a few measures, in order to demonstrate his instrument. Nine members tried it out, with music mostly of the 19th or 20th centuries.

After lunch we walked to the Garrison Church or “Military Cathedral”, where we encountered the second real surprise of the day. The organ of this building had a rather mixed pedigree. Originally built by Ignaz Mentzel in 1729 for the Gnadenkirche in Landeshut, (a town in Silesia, then Germany, now Kamienna Góra), the organ, along with the altar, font, bells, pulpit and chandeliers were taken to Warsaw between 1959 and 1962. The instrument had been rebuilt by Schlag und Söhne in 1882 and by Sauer in 1905, then once again by Kamiński in 2005 in “symphonic style”, all suggesting that the result might be less than inspiring. In the end, it turned out to be a beautiful instrument with a free-reed clarinet of staggering sweetness, lovely strings and powerful but mellow and well-blending reeds. All the work had been carried out competently and the necessary revoicing done with style. The organ was quite loud in the space, but not overpowering. Dr. Leszek Gorecki demonstrated it with panache; some of us were amused at the idea of going to Poland

to hear Gordon Young, but the ubiquitous “Prelude in the classical style” sounded charming, and Percy Whitlock’s “Folk Tune” had all the suavity it needed. Twelve participants had a chance to try out the organ; particularly gorgeous was Agnes Goerke’s performance of Oskar Merikanto’s *Bön*, which fitted the organ like a glove. Theo Meurs played his own Partita on *Wij willen de bruiloftsgasten zijn* – simple music full of good ideas. Other music played included pieces by Franck, Brahms, Dan Locklair, a couple of improvisations and, a new name to me, Henry M. Dunham. Margreeth de Jongh contributed a piece of her own, as she did at most organs, in this case the pretty *Berceuse*. Your reporter was dying to get his hands on this instrument, but missed out, being too busy writing.

The fun part of the day began shortly afterwards in the trendy restaurant MOMU and a visit, in two groups, to



the neighbouring Vodka Museum, including a degustation. Three vodkas a person were possible. We enjoyed that, as well as the ensuing discussions as to which was the nicest. Did you know there was horseradish-flavoured vodka?

Wednesday began with a long coach ride to the Basilica of our Lady of Licheń, a Marian shrine and a huge new church – the 6th largest in the world – built in only 10 years, from 1994 – 2004. There was some lively discussion amongst participants about the building itself and the reasons for its inception, but it is certainly a testimony to the vitality of the catholic faith in Poland. The remarkable organ, by the Zych company, is the largest organ in Poland. It is really five linked instruments, French symphonic, German Baroque, Italian, Flemish and Spanish, spread around the building; two of them have their own tracker consoles, but mainly they are played from the 6-manual central console, hidden behind a pillar



in the vicinity of the high altar. The sound of pipes in the main organ reaches this console with a very considerable delay. Since the reeds had not been tuned since winter, it was difficult to gain a true impression of the sound of a tutti, but the organ did boast some very attractive softer combinations which were able to speak clearly in the overwhelming acoustic of this very wide building with its three football fields' worth of polished marble floor. Michał Szostak, who was organist here for 8 years, demonstrated the organ with its 157 stops with music by Bruhns, John Robinson, Lefébure-Wély, César Franck and an improvisation. Participants played Franck, Bossi, Patrick Hopper, Lionel Rogg and, also new to me, one Everett Titcomb.

From the Basilica, the group walked to the nearby pilgrims' inn for a delicious lunch at 3pm. Then the coach left for Łódź, a good distance away. In the cathedral there we found a German organ by Eisenbarth of Passau, a four-manual instrument with 58 stops. House organist Dawid Długosz treated us to Bach, Boëllmann, and Reger, after which we heard participants in Gordon Young, Lübeck, Bach, Sjögren and even Dupré. This was followed by our evening meal in a typical Polish restaurant nearby, "Gesi Puch." To me, it seemed as though the last meal had just ended, but most seemed to tuck in heartily!



Thursday began just a few hundred yards from the hotel in Warsaw's elegantly beautiful Lutheran church of the Holy Trinity, a domed circular building with a fine acoustic and a gentle and beautiful organ by Hillebrand of Hanover. Participants seemed to enjoy this instrument very much, whether playing it or simply listening. There was no organised demonstration here, and this was taken on at short notice by Theo Meurs (his own partita on God, *schenk ons de kragt*), Georg Wagner (Andreas Willscher's *Insectarium*) and Christian Michel (Buxtehude, *Passacaglia*). Participants crowded onto the gallery to try out Bach-Vivaldi, the *a minor* concerto in a rip-roaring version by Katelyn Emerson, Lübeck (*Praeludium in E*) (Mitch Miller), Zipoli, more Bach and a Bach transcription by Guilmant – the sinfonia from *Actus Tragicus*.

From there the coach picked us up and we set off on the longish journey along the Vistula to the tiny town of Kazimierz Dolny. Here we found a fascinating instrument of 1620 with short octaves in all divisions. For

me, this was probably the week's highlight; I wish I'd had five hours, not five minutes, at it. The 8' Principal – just heavenly. Organist Adam Głos demonstrated the organ with early Polish music and an arrangement of the "Halleluja Chorus". There was not very much time to play, unfortunately. Then the coach took us back to Warsaw for an evening in the very simple reformed (Calvinist) church; the organ however was once again a pleasant surprise. A two manual instrument of modest size (just 24 stops) built in 1900 by Schlag und Söhne, it give the lie to many preconceptions about late romantic organ building in (then) Germany. The Hauptwerk chorus was clear and singing – and yes, you could play Bach on it, as incumbent Michał Markuszewski proved with an interesting rendition of the *a minor* prelude and fugue. The instrument really came into its own in Liszt's transcription of the "Pilgrims' Chorus" from *Tannhäuser*, whereas Franck's *Prelude, Fugue and Variation* suffered rather from the lack of an



oboe. The programme culminated in Guilmant's rousing *March on "Lift up your heads"*. Members then played Mendelssohn, more Mendelssohn, then Fanny Mendelssohn, some Bach and – very affecting – Brahms (Giorgio Parolini). Dinner should have been taken at E. Wedel's chocolate shop; this was the only thing that went wrong all week! That didn't quite work out, so people dispersed in small groups, most however ending up just down the road eating schwarma or falafel at "Sphinx". There was beer to be had.

Friday brought the usual mixed feelings: almost relief that the overwhelming impressions will soon be at an end coupled with sadness, for the same reasons. It also brought a visit to the organ building firm of Zych, not too far from Warsaw in Wołomin. We found a middlesized firm of 16 organ builders working under conditions that would seem very difficult to (for example) a German builder. But still with CAD and CC-routers, no paper . . . I had an extremely interesting conversation with the boss; they are certainly ambitious, and technically their work is of a very high standard. Hard to judge the tonal side, it would be interesting to get acquainted with some more recent work – as Dariusz Zych pointed out, Lichen is 10 years old and was a difficult project to start with; he told me, "Today I would think for 6 months before signing the contract."

There was one more organ – once again a pleasant surprize. Holy Cross church in Warsaw is the last resting place of Chopin's heart, but also contains an organ by the Salzburg firm of "Cäcilia", of which I confess never to have heard. Subsequently I have discovered that it was actually a conglomeration of firms headed up by the Mauracher dynasty. Michał Dąmbrowski demonstrated the organ, and the first few notes of the opening Dances from the Lublin Tabulature were enough to make one look up in astonishment. The first Bach Trio Sonata was a brave choice for a rather renitent pneumatic action but there were many interesting and beautiful sonorities to be discovered, as indeed also in Surzyński's Capriccio. The programme closed with Jehan Alain's Litany, which revealed the power of the organ but also a slight tendency to hardness of tone at forte and above. At participants' time, Agnes Goerke began with Bach's *Wachet auf*, segueing in to *Viel Glück und viel Segen* for her son's birthday, a touching moment. Then we heard Brahms, Duruflé (a hard struggle against the action without preparation!), Nowowiejski, Dupré, more Surzyński, and even Clarence Eddy.



There was one last program point which had nothing to do with organs, and that was a visit to the POLIN museum, dedicated to the 1000 year history of Polish Jewry. A one hour long tour did not begin to do justice to this place, filled as it is with suffering but also an intense joy. Everyone should see it, as I hope to do again, but plan a day for it, not an hour.

And then it was time for a 15-minute nap, a shower and the closing dinner held at the traditional restaurant "Dawne Smaki" – Old Flavours, if I understand it correctly. They seemed a little overwhelmed by having to serve 40 or so people simultaneously, but the beetroot soup was delicious. Our dean for 25 years, Judy Riefel-Lindel, used her "bully pulpit" to thank everyone most profusely – except herself, the person most deserving of thanks (next to Michał, of course). She also took the opportunity to announce her retirement as Dean, causing a sharp intake of breath on the part of those who hadn't been forewarned. It is hard to imagine the chapter without her. As always, too the announcement of the venue of next years' meeting was eagerly awaited. And the winner is: Cologne.

It has been interesting and gratifying over the last years to see how the number of players eager to try out even "difficult" organs has grown. Although there are some who are always first in the queue and others who never go near the console, there is a good middle ground of people who are eager to try things out when the organ somehow speaks to them. For me it was enriching to hear quite a lot of music I'd never

heard before; some – and I'd like to single out Rosalind Mohnsen here – had bags full of unfamiliar pieces, many quite easily playable and most by American composers. Margaretha de Jong played exclusively her own music and demonstrated once again how playable and attractive it is, especially the Fandango that she played in Holy Cross! Johann and Giorgio both seem to have unending supplies of perfect music for situations like these, and then there are of course the young professionals like Katelyn Emerson and Mitch Miller, for whom no challenge is too great. It is an honour to share breathing space with them. And fun to sit with them at table, which is one of the other reasons the Spring Meeting is a great invention. See you all next year in Cologne!

Barry Jordan

Saturday was a bonus day for those chapter members who were able to stay in Warsaw for another day:
Report by Roger Schumacher

Michał, in typical fashion, had arranged a full and memorable program. It began with the last visit to a church and that last chance to get fingers onto fine instruments, for this Spring Meeting, at least. This church, a lovely example of the Baroque-Rococo, is officially named the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Józef but is unofficially known as the "Seminary" church. It was the only Warsaw church with the only organ that survived the war 100 percent intact. The church houses a 1928 Wałław Biernacki organ that was ably demonstrated by the church's young organist, Radosław Kustra, playing works by Bach, Buxtehude, and J.N. Lemmens. Afterwards, though our group was half the size it had been during the preceding week, there was no shortage of chapter members eager to dive into the instrument.

A breathtaking view of Warsaw from the 34th floor of the Soviet-era Palace of Culture and Science followed. Then it was on to the impressive Fryderyk Chopin Museum at the Fryderyk Chopin Institute which houses the largest collection of Chopin Memorabilia in the world: more than 7500 items! The day ended with a captivating performance of two Chopin works to mark the 100th anniversary of the independence of Poland (1918 to 2018). Chopin's Piano Concertos in e-minor (Op. 11) and f-minor (Op. 21) were performed by the orchestra of the Polish National Opera, accompanying a superb performance by dancers of the Polish National Ballet. A splendid climax to a thrilling and most interesting Spring Meeting!