

A Swiss Organ for the Sistine Chapel

The Sistine chapel, arguably the best known place of worship in the western world, is receiving a new organ: “made in Switzerland.” The Instrument is being built by the organ builder Hermann Mathis of Näfels in the Swiss Canton Glarus. Josef Schibig from Steinen (Schwyz) is supplying the wood carvings and the Glarn company Inauen-Schätti has constructed an “organmobile.”

“He must be joking!” Josef Schibig, wood carver from Steinen in the Canton Schwyz, remembers well the phone call from Näfels in January, 2000. “Hermann Mathis, the Glarn organ builder, asked me if I were willing to design the ornamentation of a new organ for the Sistine Chapel in Rome within fourteen days. I was stunned.” The 72-year-old craftsman who in his lifetime had worked on well over 100 organs took up pen and paper and began consulting reams of art literature and endless web sites. The Sistine had been until then only an abstraction to him. “The Italian Renaissance - I let the many pictures inspire me and began my sketching which led to a draft for the ornamented pipe shades - with acanthus, birds of paradise, fruits and angels.” The drawings together with cost estimate were delivered on time to Näfels. Then began his waiting for an answer from Rome ...

It Had to be Mobile

Mathis Orgelbau has made a name for itself both at home and internationally. There are 325 Mathis organs of all sizes in houses of worship from Taiwan and Japan to Klagenfurt in Austria, Regensburg in Germany and Einsiedeln in Switzerland. Since Pentecost of 2003 there has been a Mathis organ in the Cathedral of Basel. “But building an organ for this incomparable historic edifice in Rom is a singular honor, even for Mathis Orgelbau.” Hermann Mathis, managing director of the family-owned firm and himself organ builder and voicer is delighted. The company from the Glarn Valley of Switzerland was not unknown to the Vatican; “In 1999 we were privileged to build an organ in the Vatican for the chapel of the Swiss Guard.” Still the request from the Vatican was a complete surprise: “That Bishop Piero Marini, the Vatican Master of Ceremonies would ask us to present a design for a new organ destined for the Sistine Chapel was incredible.” The instructions from the Vatican were clear: a transportable, compact pipe organ that could be moved without disassembly. The organ would need to be moved to an adjacent room during the viewing hours of the Sistine Chapel. Hermann Mathis visited the chapel four times to inspect it, measure it and “also to study the acoustics and let the room work its influence on me.” It was not to be a powerful, room engulfing organ as would have been fitting for the 10,000 m3 space - comparable to the size of an average sized Swiss church - but a relatively small organ with 14 stops on two manuals and pedal.

First a vision, then a plan issuing from room, sound and technique: Hermann Mathis and his seasoned team began their careful drafting of plans, made bids and delivered them to the Vatican. The question of “mobility” was also carefully thought through. And the wait began for an answer from Rome ...

Design of the new Mathis organ destined for the Sistine Chapel in Rom. The complete instrument had to be small enough to fit through the rear portal of the chapel. Double doors prevent access to the interior of the instrument and protect it from damage during transport. The form of the case is simple and is patterned after traditional models. The front is a classical arrangement of the pipes in three towers and two flats with all pipes in natural length. This front display corresponds to the inner construction of the organ: The Great

Organ is in the middle of the case above the recessed two-manual console. The Positive with front pipes of its own has been incorporated in the lower case into either side of the console. The pipes of the Pedal are located inside the case on the rear panel of the instrument.

The case is of traditional solid wood design, using superior quality walnut with pivots and stamped solid wood fillings. The surface is finished with pure beeswax. The forms of the artful carvings are reminiscent of the late Renaissance. The pipe shades cover the upper ends of the front pipes while the carving on the peak of the organ case avoids harsh borders. The medallion of this carving displays the coat-of-arms and insignia of Pope John-Paul II.

Go-ahead!

The go-ahead from the Vatican was six long months in waiting. Hermann Mathis remembers: "The 'Ufficio delle Celebrazioni Liturgiche del Sommo Pontefice' informed me early morning by telephone that Bishop Piero Marini wanted to conclude a contract with me ... at 4pm of the same day I was in Rome with the contract under my arm!"

The entire project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Peter Kaiser (1793-1864) Memorial Trust of Vaduz - Principality of Liechtenstein, chaired by its president Prof. Dr. Dr. Herbert Batliner. We are indebted to the trust council for its commitment to fully finance the construction of this instrument. By backing this endeavor the council fulfills one of its purposes: the preservation of historic monuments and proliferation of cultural assets.

It was also time for the sculptor Schibig in Steinen to breathe a sigh of relief: He could now start work on the culmination of his life's work - a wood sculpture for the Sistine Chapel: "I expected specific design requests from Rome, but there was nothing of the kind."

The Vatican wanted the organ to be ready for dedication by mid-December 2002. For Josef Schibig this meant approximately 10 weeks of work in the summer of 2002. Hermann Mathis also began detailed planning with his builders but ran into unexpected problems with the required means for the mobility of the organ. At first it seemed that the instrument could be moved on air pillows, but this proved to be unworkable. Herman Mathis recounts: "We were in touch with a foreign company that after several months of vacillation finally informed us that they were unable to provide a suitable solution for our exacting needs." What to do now? Hermann Mathis was resolute: "We will find a solution."

Closer Than We Thought

"The solution was closer than we thought! The Inauen-Schätti company, a worldwide specialist in assembly and shipping systems located in Schwanden only 6 miles (10 km) down the valley from Näfels agreed to solve our thorny problem." Arno Inauen, managing director of this hi-tech company that had only recently reinstalled the tethers on Sugar Loaf Mountain in Rio, roofed over a soccer stadium in Vienna, and assembled three Galéts at Expo 02 in Neuenburg was intrigued: "It was a real challenge for us. With the combined efforts of building constructors, machinists, hydraulics experts, mechanics, and metal workers we designed and built a vehicular prototype that met the exacting demands placed on us." It was not a simple task for Inauen-Schätti: After every use the new vehicle had to gently carry the 3.5 metric ton organ up and down several stairs, across the Hall of Kings and the Sala Regia, and finally around various curves in the antechamber of the Aula Benedizione. A hard nut to crack even for the veteran pros in Schwanden!

The transport problem progressed from first rough sketches to a precision design in three months. After two months in production in the workshops the finished product was ready for testing. Arno Inauen: "We will have invested 200 hours of planning and 40 hours of

testing to ensure that the 'organmobile' can reliably begin service in December in the rooms of the Vatican. Those responsible for operating the device will be thoroughly trained. The effortlessly maneuverable and easily operable vehicle has two independent axles. At a speed of about one mile per hour (1.5 km/h) it will require about 40 minutes to cover the distance from storage to the chapel. Four to five people will be needed to the operate the machine.

Arno Inauen, mechanical engineer and general manager of Inauen-Schätti and the technician Martin Stocker test the "organmobile." The meticulously designed transporter uses hydraulics to lift the 3.5 metric ton organ and can move it forward and in reverse. In spite of a length of ca. 12 ft. the device is easily maneuverable, even in cramped quarters, due to the two axles that operate independently of each other.

Working Hand in Hand Toward a Common Goal

Working hand in hand but in the separate locations of Steinen, Schwanden und Näfels work progressed on the organ for the Sistine Chapel with Hermann Mathis in charge. "By the end of October after approximately 12 weeks of work the organ will be completed. The wood of the case, Swiss walnut, has aged in our own storage areas for years. The some 782 pipes (716 of a tin/lead alloy and 66 in wood) are under construction."

The precious shipment of the organ from Näfels, of the wood carvings from Steinen, and of the special "organmobile" from Schwanden will be dispatched to Rome at the beginning of November and installed in the Sistine Chapel on 12. November.

Pre-voicing of the pipes in the Näfels studio is of utmost importance to Hermann Mathis. Then, working only during the night for approximately two and a half weeks the organ builder and sound specialist Mathis will undertake final voicing of the organ in Rome.

The Nocturnal Final Chapter

Hermann Mathis, who also conducts a choir and is church organist in his spare time, will embark on a very special mission as of 25. November: He will start with the voicing of the organ. Patiently and with exquisite attention to detail he will bring every individual pipe to achieve the tone quality it is intended to have. "I provide the organist with a palette of sounds bearing unique characteristics created by the voicer." Voicing has much to do with sure instinct and experience. "Meditation tutors from India claim that the sense of hearing leads directly to the heart and soul of every man and woman. Music triggers emotions." Hermann Mathis will be voicing during the night in the Sistine Chapel. "I expect to work about two and a half weeks on the instrument. As of 4pm after the chapel is closed to the public I can work at the organ. My 'work night' will last until 7 in the morning." A lonely duty in unique surroundings, but for Hermann Mathis a crowning moment. "One of the major functions of our organs is to serve the faithful at their church services and it is the source and purpose of our work to create instruments that will achieve this goal."

The valuable frescos prevent permanent installation of an instrument on any of the walls of the Sistine Chapel. This is where the free-standing organ will be used.

Festive Dedication with a Swiss Organist

The organ will be committed to its intended purpose at a ceremonial dedication with invited guests and a formal organ recital in the Sistine Chapel on 14. December, 2002. Father Theo Flury, monastery organist in Einsiedeln, composer and professor at the College of Music in Lucerne will provide the music for the ceremony together with the organist at St. Peter, James Edward Göttsche, and the boys choir of the Cappella Sistina (Pueri Cantores). Father Theo studied from 1982 to 1988 with the former director of the choir for

exceptional papal church services, Domenico Bartolucci, and often accompanied him on concert tours. In 2001 Father Theo as translator for Hermann Mathis became acquainted with Bishop Piero Marini, who spontaneously invited him to perform on the occasion of the organ's benediction celebration. The Einsiedeln monastery organist will improvise on motifs from three short chorales appropriate to the occasion sung by the boys choir of the Sistine Chapel. Pater Theo: "I feel as if have returned to my adapted homeland after many long years."