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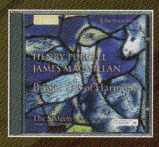

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The Institute of Historic Organs Oaxaca brings new life to instruments like this one in Tlacochahuaya

# Handle with care

Mexico's unstable past left many organs in disrepair: some were converted into bookcases and others provided metal for bullets during the revolution. **Andrew Johnstone** visits an institute committed to undoing the damage

PHOTOS COURTESY IOHIO

The organ was brought to Mesoamerica within a decade of the Spanish conquest of 1521 and was readily assimilated by indigenous musicians and craftsmen. The Aztecs called it 'evatlpitzalhuehuetl', from their words for leather, flute and drum; a Zapotec term was 'pichije quítiguíba', meaning voice, leather and metal. In 1552 a Chocholteco community bought one for the considerable sum of 180 pesos, and identified the expenditure in their account book with a hieroglyph resembling panpipes. Throughout three centuries of colonial rule the organs of New Spain – made by natives and expatriates, or imported from the mother country – were unrivalled in the Americas.

After Mexican independence was won in 1821, chronic instability and tensions between church and state led to the deterioration or destruction of countless instruments. Since opportunities for replacing or modernising old organs were restricted, however, those that survived neglect and escaped vandalism did so with their historic credentials intact. With Dirk Flentrop's restoration in 1975–78 of the two lavish instruments of Mexico City Cathedral, appreciation of the country's organ culture began to grow. John Fesperman's *Organs in Mexico* was published in 1979, a UNESCO survey of the country's historic organs was conducted by Guy Bovet in the 1980s, and a government catalogue, *Voces del arte*, appeared in 1989. The Academia Mexicana de Música Antigua para Órgano (AMMAO), founded in 1990, has established an annual countrywide season of recitals, masterminded four restoration projects, and conducted valuable surveys.

Over 500 historic organs are thus now known to exist in Mexico. Many of the finest belong to Oaxaca (pronounced *wa-ha-ka*), the country's second poorest state economically but one of its most fascinating culturally. Three of the instruments restored by the AMMAO are there (at Yanhuitlán, Tlaxiaco, and Oaxaca city's Basílica de la Soledad) as well as four others restored by Susan Tattershall between 1991 and 1997 (at Tlacochahuaya, Tamazulapan, Zautla and Oaxaca Cathedral). ▷

The IOHIO at work: (from top) cleaning a keyboard, removing dust and dirt from the case, restoring wooden detail

◁ Despite growing appreciation, by the late 1990s it was clear that the immediate need was not so much to promote further restorations as to nurture the playing of already restored organs and protect what remained of unrestored ones. To these ends, in 2000 a new organisation was created: the Instituto de Órganos Históricos de Oaxaca. (Spanish pronunciation catchily renders the institute's acronym, IOHIO, as 'yo-yo'.)

At the helm were two north-American volunteers: organist-archivist Edward Pepe (who in 1979 had co-founded the USA's Westfield Center for keyboard studies), and keyboard player and long-term Oaxaca resident Cicely Winter, who still serves as the institute's director. With backing from the billionaire philanthropist Alfredo Harp Helú, whose own company Banamex had funded five of the Oaxacan restorations, the IOHIO embarked on a programme of intrepid fieldwork, archival research, training schemes and frequent international festivals.

As well as revealing the dates of 13 previously documented instruments, IOHIO investigation has raised the state's tally of reported organs from around 45 to 68. Admittedly, many are beyond repair, especially if they have been put to some new purpose (such as a bookcase, an altarpiece, or even a confessional box) or if their pipes were recast as gun metal during the Revolution of 1910–19. A few, however, including a highly distinctive indigenous organ at Tiltepec, have miraculously retained most of their working parts and may one day sound again.

Whatever an organ's condition, the IOHIO's first priority is protection: transferring it to a new, safer location or back to its original one, roping it off to deter casual interference, alerting government architects if its situation has become structurally precarious, and provisionally replacing lost panels and keyboard covers. Each organ is tagged with labels stating that as an artistic and historical monument it is protected under federal law.

A clean-up operation – supervised by Tattershall, with voluntary helpers marshalled by Winter – keeps deterioration in check and raises local awareness of the instrument. In the process, information is gathered about its disposition, dimensions, decoration, inscriptions, and state of preservation; these findings, already partly available through the IOHIO's website, are to be published in book form in 2010.

Though Oaxaca city is known to have had an organ by 1545, the state's oldest surviving material dates from the early 18th century (excepting the spectacular 1686 casework at the Basílica de la Soledad). Perhaps the last organ was one made in 1899, when the villagers of Alotepec walked for six days to convey its components from the city. All instruments are in Hispanic Baroque style, having diagonal bellows, a single manual with stops divided at c'/c'-sharp, and no pedals. Horizontal reeds are common on larger organs, while all sizes – 2ft portatives included – have accessories of *pajaritos* (nightingale) and *tambor* (drum).

Certain characteristics are peculiarly Oaxacan: the pitch standard is generally a whole tone lower than modern concert pitch; larger cases have curvaceous side panels that modern experts fondly refer to as 'hips'; older organs are exuberantly carved and colourfully decorated (seven of them having grotesque human faces painted around the mouths of their facade pipes).

No organ is too isolated or decrepit to be excluded from a IOHIO festival. Unrestored ones are the subjects of field trips to churches and convents inaccessible to casual tourists, while the seven restored instruments take their share of concerts and masterclasses. At Zautla and Tamazulapan students on IOHIO scholarships have a chance to perform publicly on the 18th-century tabletop organs they use for practice; at Tlacochahuaya the exquisite 4ft stationary organ has been the instrument of

▼ The beautifully painted restored organ in Zautla

choice for recitals by Guy Bovet, Kimberly Marshall, Jacques van Oortmerssen, Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini and Mexico's own José Suárez.

Festivals have reflected the institute's commitment to scholarship. In 2001, an international conference led to a new code of practice for organ restoration in Latin America; in 2005, a symposium on convent music marked the publication of an early 19th-century *Notebook of Psalm Tones for Matins*, possibly the only historic Mexican organ music yet discovered. (IOHIO researcher Ricardo Rodys has since established that the nun whose signature appears on this book, Sister María Clara del Santísimo Sacramento, came from a semi-indigenous family of professional organists.)

At the festival in February 2009 a symposium was devoted to prints and manuscripts found by IOHIO scouts at the tiny village of Yautepec, among them a choirbook of 18th-century polyphony partly in Zapotec. Discussion of the finds was enlivened by performances of some of the polyphonic pieces by the Capilla Virreinal de la Nueva España under Aurelio Tello.

Also participating in the festival was Yautepec's wind band, exemplifying the policy of vigorous community liaison that permeates IOHIO activities. Nowhere has that policy been more effective than at Zautla, where visiting festival audiences are treated to a splendid fiesta, and bellows operation is so popular that the institute's offer to fit the restored organ with an electric blower was politely declined.

Had their forebears ever been motivated to replace the organ at Zautla, the people of that parish would not now be the proud custodians of a historic instrument. In certain respects, then, Oaxaca's extraordinary organ heritage is a monument to past neglect. What is conserved for the future, however, will be a monument to the IOHIO's care. ■

▲ Tlacochahuaya's exquisite organ has featured in recitals by top international artists

## San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya, Mexico

c.1725–30; RESTORED 1867; FURTHER RESTORATION 1990–91

(MIREYA OLVERA, CASE; SUSAN TATTERSHALL, ORGAN)

| LEFT HAND (21 keys) | |
|---|---|
| 1. Bardón | 8 |
| 2. Flautado | 4 |
| 3. Octava | 2 |
| 4. Quincena | 1 |
| 5. Diez y novena | ⅔ |
| 6. Veintidosena/Quincena | ½–1* |
| 7. Bajoncillo | 4 |
| *Pajaritos* | |

* breaking register

| RIGHT HAND (24 keys) | |
|---|---|
| 1. Bardón | 8 |
| 2. Flautado | 4 |
| 3. Flautado II | 4 |
| 4. Octava I | 2 |
| 5. Octava II | 2 |
| 6. Docena | 1⅓ |
| 7. Trompeta en batalla | 8 |

*Stationary 4ft organ*
*Case measurements: H 3.68m, W 2.03m, D 0.87m*
*Compass: CDEFGA–c'''*
*Key action: suspended without rollerboard*
*Stop action: drawknobs (probably from 1735)*
*Wind pressure: 84mm, original stone weights*
*Pitch: a' = 392 Hz*
*Temperament: quarter-comma meantone*