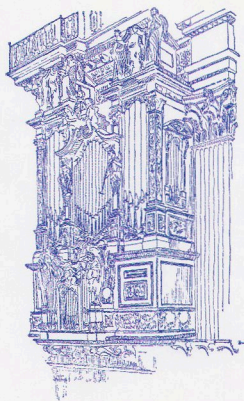


THE



ORGAN

CLUB



JOURNAL

2014 - 2

The Tenth International Organ and Early Music Festival in Oaxaca, Mexico

Guest Article by Barbara Owen

By now, many in the organ world have heard of the **Instituto de Órganos Históricos de Oaxaca (IOHIO)** and its extraordinary work in restoring and documenting the unique heritage of organ building in the southwestern state of Oaxaca in Mexico. While organs were built in various parts of Mexico throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the Oaxacan tradition, somewhat isolated from the rest of the country, was one of the most long-lasting, and in many ways unique. Very briefly, organ-building was introduced to Oaxaca early in colonial days by Dominican missionary priests and friars from Spain, who quickly recognized the well-developed traditions and skills of craftsmanship inherent in the indigenous populations, and soon utilized them in the building of impressive churches and their furnishings, including large ornate and gilded *retablos* (altar-pieces) and, of course, organs. In many of the churches visited, Richard Perry, an authority on Mexican art, was on hand to point out and explain various features.



Barbara Owen (Photo used with permission)

The models were Spanish, but the artistic element is uniquely Oaxacan, and traditions passed on down through generations continued with little alteration into the latter half of the nineteenth century. With regard to Oaxacan-built organs, while many have since been lost or severely degraded, a rather surprising number have remained unused but in restorable condition, often in village churches in very out-of-the-way places, and all are continually being documented by the staff of IOHIO. And, with foundation help, some have already been professionally restored to fully playable condition. These are showcased in concerts by national and international organists during the IOHIO festivals, now held biennially, which are attended by musicians, historians and scholars, not only from greater Mexico and Central America but also from Europe and North and South America.

The tenth festival, held February 20 to 25, 2014, began with an unusual event in the afternoon, held at the **Museo de Filatelia (MUFI)**, an unique postage

museum in Oaxaca City, celebrating a newly-issued series of six postage stamps of varying denominations in the “**Instrumentos Musicales**” series, and depicting in excellent detail six of the restored historic Oaxacan organs. The first Festival concert was held that evening in **Oaxaca Cathedral**, where Spanish organist **Roberto Fresco** excellently interpreted a varied program of Baroque Spanish, German and Italian music to a full house. Although subjected to some serious changes in the 19th and 20th centuries, virtually

5822



all of the pipework in this organ dates from 1712, some appearing to be from an even earlier organ, and in 1997 it was reconstructed largely in its 18th century form, and speaks out authoritatively from above the *coro* at the opposite end of the room from the altar. It should be noted here that all Oaxacan organs, regardless of size, have only a single divided manual (with separate stop controls for each half) and no pedals.

The Santo Domingo Cultural Center (formerly a monastery, the restored church housing a spectacular gilded *retablo*, with a library, museum and meeting rooms in attached buildings) is only a block away from IOHIO headquarters. There, on Friday morning in the **Francisco de Burgoa Library**, an exhibit of historic documents related to organs and their builders was inaugurated with a lecture. These documents, many from various church archives of the 17th and 18th centuries, have shed considerable light on early organs and their builders, even including contracts naming builders (who never signed their work) and providing stoplists.



Oaxaca Cathedral Organ: Matías de Chávez 1711-1712, with other interventions; restoration Susan Tattershall of Órganos Históricos de México, A.C. 1997.
1 manual (split keyboard, left/right) 20 stops.
(Photo: courtesy of David Hilbert)

The afternoon was spent in visits by coach to three unrestored organs in towns near Oaxaca City, and in the evening Cicely Winter, the director of IOHIO, gave an unique concert on the city's other large historic organ (parts of which date back to 1686, and which was reconstructed to its 18th century state in 1997) in the **Basilica of La Soledad**. Very different from the previous day's classical program, it consisted of arrangements of Oaxacan folksongs and dances accompanied by percussion, and was enthusiastically applauded by a packed house, some members of which happily sang along with familiar selections such as *Mi Linda Oaxaca*.

Coach tours are integral to IOHIO conferences, often taking participants to places few "ordinary" tourists ever experience. Saturday's trip took us to the Mixteca Alta region, the first stop being

the Santa Maria church in **Tamazulapan**, where there are two organs – a large unrestored (but restorable) one, and a delightful small table organ in a gilded and painted case that has been restored, and was played by some of the organists present. The room has splendid acoustics, and as part of the IOHIO's early music program, was also the scene of a concert by a superb guitar quartet and a rather amazing marimbist who played transcriptions of Bach works. The next stop was **Yanhuitlan**, where the huge and impressive former Dominican monastery church (recently restored and now a tourist destination), houses a substantial early organ in a highly decorated case, which, although somewhat altered in the 19th century, was reconstructed in 1998. This was heard in a program of Baroque works played by Jesús López Moreno, joined in some pieces by a trumpeter to great acoustical effect in the massive masonry space.

The final stop that day was in the village of **Zautla**, at the church of San Andrés, notable for its unique floral decorations. This church always puts on a



Above, choir procession to the inaugural Mass at the church of Santa Maria, Tlacolula; below, the restored 1791 Manuel Neri y Carmona organ 1 manual (split keyboard, left/right) 15 stops. (Photos: courtesy of Richard Perry)



grand show for us, and did not disappoint. We were greeted by an excellent brass band, dancing (in which we happily joined) and a delicious Mexican church supper, served outdoors by the cheerful and efficient church ladies. This church has a good-sized restored table organ in a beautifully decorated case, played that evening by some of the participants, along with another performance by the guitar and marimba players heard earlier, for which the whole village seems to have turned out.

Sunday consisted of two programs, but both were special. After a later than usual start (allowing for a bit of sleep-in after the previous night's late arrival) we arrived at one of the IOHIO's favorite organs, the early 18th century instrument in the church of **San Jeronimo in Tlacoahuaya**, and no festival is complete without a recital there. Initially found in nearly original condition with most of its original pipework and other components, and housed in a splendidly decorated case, it was one of the first to be meticulously restored under IOHIO auspices. Roberto Fresco expertly showed off its versatility in a program of Baroque Spanish and Italian works – but concluding with three delightful vignettes by Guy Bovet, who had given a recital there a few years earlier.

Following lunch and a brief visit to another unrestored organ, we headed for the major event of the day, an inaugural Mass and concert for IOHIO's most recently restored organ, completed only in the past year, in the church of **Santa Maria** in the market town of **Tlacolula**. This again was a largely intact organ of the 18th century, and during the restoration it was discovered that most of the pipework had come from a much earlier organ, some apparently from the late 17th century. The church was packed for the Mass, which included some choral music and a rather long-winded homily by the Archbishop, and all stayed for the concert of 17th and 18th century music that followed, shared by organists Roberto Fresco and **Rafael Cardenas**, and including impressive solos by soprano Lourdes Ambriz. This organ in particular has a very "vocal" quality, perhaps due to the vintage of much of the pipework, and it sometimes blended so seamlessly with both the soloist and the choir that it was hard to distinguish one from the other. As we left after the end of the concert, the celebration of the event was continued outside by a brass band, fireworks, and mugs of Mexican hot chocolate handed out to all.

Monday and Tuesday the coaches took us deep into the Mixteca Alta. The first stop, at the end of a long and winding dirt road through scenic mountain territory, was the little village of **Ixtaltepec**, where a very intact and early table organ had recently been discovered in a building next to the church, which elicited much interest and examination. This must have been a very musical village, for in the same room was a small early fortepiano that seemed just a short step away from a clavichord, and a number of old brass instruments. Well worth the long drive. From there we stopped to inspect unrestored organs in **Yucucui** and **Tepuscolula** on the way to **Tlaxiaco**, where the final concert was given on the restored organ in the church of Santa Maria by

José Francisco Álvarez, joined in works by Corelli and Bach by violinist Vladislav Badiarov.

After staying overnight in a hotel there, with some time to play the Santa Maria organ in the morning, we retraced our route via stops for unrestored organs in Yucuxaco and Tejupan to Tiltepec, and one of the oldest churches, high on a hill, featuring a front covered with interesting ancient carvings, and housing an intact but unrestored organ and a Virgin and Child *retablo* that is a personal favorite. At the foot of the hill the Cruz Garcia family operates a unique outdoor dining area and kitchen, a favorite IOHIO tour stop, where we all enjoyed a sociable and leisurely barbecue feast as our farewell dinner before returning to Oaxaca City. Some stayed an extra day to visit an archeological site, guided by Dr. Marcus Winter, and a few planned to go to Mexico City, where one of the restored organs in the Cathedral was to be inaugurated on Sunday. But your writer had to catch a morning plane for home in the frozen north, where weekend duties awaited.

IOHIO and the organs:

www.iohio.org.mx

Information on organ stamps:

www.mufl.org.mx

Travel and culture:

colonialmexico.blogspot.com



Painted facade pipes of the 1700? organ at Santo Domingo, Yanhuitlán, Mexico. Builder is unknown, restored 1998 1 manual (split keyboard left/right) 22 stops
(Photo: courtesy of Richard Perry)