

Three wonderful organs in Le Marche, Italy

Bill Halsey

On a recent trip to Pesaro, in the region of Le Marche in Italy, where I went to work as an accompanist with singers and visit some historic organs, I saw a number of Callido organs, both at Sant'Agostino in Pesaro and elsewhere, but I was also curious about organs outside of the classical period, both the very early (sixteenth century) and the late (nineteenth century) ones. My contact in Pesaro, Giuliana Maccaroni, the organist at Cristo Re, had given me a list of interesting Marchigian organs, one of which was a Morettini (1855) at the Monastero della Fonte Avellana in Serra Sant'Abbondio. During research on the Internet, I found that there was a later Morettini from 1889 at the Duomo of Cagli, in the same area, and also in Cagli, at the church of San Francesco, an organ from the last decades of the sixteenth century, attributed to Baldassare Malamini.



1855 Morettini organ, Monastero della Fonte Avellana, Serra Sant'Abbondio

I arranged a trip to see all three of these instruments. The Internet is an amazing resource, but it still takes a little persistence to track down all the necessary telephone numbers. The *parroco* (parish priest) at the Cagli cathedral readily and graciously granted me an appointment at the cathedral, but he also told me that San Francesco was closed and not under the control of the diocese, but rather of the city government, which had been restoring it. After several failed attempts to call the city, I finally figured out that the offices were only open in the morning; I got through and they transferred me to the *ufficio cultura* (cultural office), where a very nice lady explained that, yes, I could visit San Francesco, but she wasn't sure that the organ was playable—it might have been completely dismantled for the restoration.

Serra Sant'Abbondio, Monastero della Fonte Avellana

The Fonte Avellana monastery is a famous and very old institution; it is mentioned by Dante. The monastery is up a winding road in the foothills of the Apennines. The buildings don't look particularly old, just very solid, made of massive great stone that blends in with the hills. I was carrying a Tascam Portastudio 424 MKII in a giant artists' briefcase, and my wife, Jane, who takes notes and works the recording equipment, was pulling a

rolling suitcase containing the rest of my equipment—Rohde microphone, phantom power unit, electricity converter, and organ books and shoes.

The monastery has a little gift shop near the parking lot, for the summer visitors. It was open—more or less—during the winter, and I asked the man there where to go for my appointment. He pointed me to the church, and said "Ring the bell and ask the porter." As we walked downhill to the church, I couldn't help thinking of Brother Melitone in *La forza del destino*: "Siete voi il portier? E ben goffo costume appersi, parmi . . ." "Are you the porter? This guy's really stupid! If I opened, it seems to me . . ." But the brother who opened was anything but a Brother Melitone. He was a friendly, somewhat athletic-looking young guy with tennis shoes on. He led us down a series of corridors to the church, where the organ sits in the left transept. It immediately surprised me how much it looked like a Callido. Same narrow bench, two rows of stop knobs, *tira tutti*, and a narrow stand for music, so that even one normal size score often falls off.

I noticed a normal-size console next to the Morettini, and asked what it was for. The brothers (another young man had joined us by now) started laughing. They said it was an electronic organ their or-

Serra Sant'Abbondio, Monastero della Fonte Avellana Morettini 1855

Stoplist as it appears on the stop knobs:

V.U.	PB
Vla	PS
Vc	VIII
Ci	XII
Tr	XV
Ott	XIX
Dec	XXII
Tromba	XXVI
Bom	XXIX
Trombone	CB

Notes:

Principali Bassi to D#3
Principali Soprani from D#3

Notes on ripieno stops:

VIII and XII throughout
XV to C4, C#4 breaks back an octave
XIX to F3, F#3 breaks back one octave, C#5 breaks back two octaves
XXII breaks back at C#3 and G#4
XXVI breaks back at F#3, F#4, F#5
XXIX breaks back at C#3, C#4, C#5

Notes on solo stops:

V(ox) U(mana) starts at D#3
V(io)la to D3, a string stop, 4'
V(iolon)c(ello) to D3, reed
C(orno)i(nglese) from D#3, 16', reed
Tr(aversiere) from D#3, soft flute
Ott(ava) from D#3, 4', soft flute
Dec(ima) from D#3, 2 1/2' soft flute
Bom(bardino), ends at D3, 4', reed

Notes on the pedal stops:

Trombone, doesn't work, presumably a reed on the pedal
C(ontra)Basso, pedal 16' flute

52-note keyboard, C1–G5, lowest octave short
18-note pedalboard, C1–G#2, first octave short
Ripieno lever
Divided at D3, D#3

Chiesa di San Francesco, Cagli Late 16th century, attributed to Baldassare Malamini

Principale
Voce Humana
Flauto in XII
XQuinta
XNona
VigecimaII
VigecimaVI

Keyboard, 4 octaves, C1–C5, first octave short, 45 keys
Pedals 1 short octave, 9 pedals, C1–C2

Santa Maria Assunta, Duomo of Cagli Organo Morettini, 1889

Great

Fl Arm
Principale 16'
Viola
Principale
on appel:
Ottava 4'
Pieno I
Pieno II
Tromba

Choir

Fl dolce
Ottavino 4'
Saliciale
Clarino 4'

Pedal

Basso 8'
Violone 16'

Couplers: GR to P, CH to GR, Appel, unknown, GR octave doubler

Two keyboards, C1–G5
Pedalboard C1–D2

ganist had brought in order to play Bach. One of them sat down on the bench, and said, looking at all the controls, "Look, it's Air Force One."

Then it was time to turn the Morettini on. They looked at each other. "Where's the key?" I thought, "Oh no, I've come all this way, and I can't play the organ." But eventually the key for the power switch was found. When I first heard the organ, again I was surprised. Callido's organs, toward the end of his career, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, have a very Romantic lush sound. This organ was clean and dry like a Renaissance organ. Of course, there was no reason for the organ to sound like anything else but a traditional Italian organ. The French organ renaissance hadn't happened by 1855, and Callidos in Le Marche are concentrated along the coast. I found out later that Morettini was a Perugian company first founded by Angelo Morettini and then taken over after his death by his son Nicola. This organ was from a time when they were building organs together. By 1889, Angelo had died and Nicola was running the firm, and it appears that eventually one of his descen-

dants gave up the organ business and spent all the family's money in South America. But during their heyday, they were quite prominent. They beat out Cavallé-Coll for the contract to build an organ for the pope.

I played a fugue by Galliera and—just to show it could be done—Bach's *Pas-sacaglia in C Minor*. On a subsequent trip to Serra Sant'Abbondio, I went over the stoplist carefully, even though it has also been published in *Organi storici delle Marche*. Like a Callido organ, the upper partial *ripieno* stops (sometimes also called the male stops) break back by an octave for the high notes.

The organ is divided, like most Italian organs, but some bass solo stops, like the Bombardino, a reed, are 4', while the soprano solo reeds, like the Corno Inglese, are 16'. An esthetic seems in play here where extremes are to be avoided, so that, playing a solo on either the soprano or bass reed, you end up in the same tenor register, which is (from a certain point of view) a better register for solo melodies than either extreme high notes or extreme low notes. Among the female (solo) stops, there is a very interesting

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Malamini organ, Chiesa di San Francesco, Cagli

trio of soft flutes, 8' traversière, octave and tenth.

After I had finished playing, the monks invited Jane and me for lunch—a delicious meal of sausage and polenta—and conversation. There were about eight monks, of varying ages.

Cagli, Chiesa di San Francesco

The next morning we drove to Cagli. I had an appointment at the Ufficio Cultura at 9 am to be taken to see San Francesco, and then one at 2 pm to see the cathedral. Cagli is a charming town set on a hill overlooking a wooded shallow river. Towards the uphill side of the town is a very interesting *rocca* (fortress), where the walls bend outwards. I think as a defense against cannon balls. There is also a 19th-century theater that has stage machinery from Verdi's era. His favorite director worked there, and it is still used for trial runs of many theater productions. The cultural officer had a young lady accompany us with a ring of keys for San Francesco, but she still wasn't sure the organ was playable.

The Malamini organ is in a back choir loft (*cantoria*), and its case is amazing for the use of *trompe l'oeil*. The pipes seem to be surrounded by classical marble columns, but it's all illusion and painted wood. After some searching, I found the switch for the blower and had one of the most amazing experiences I've had in a church. It wasn't just the organ—that was amazing enough—but also the experience of playing late 16th-century music on it, surrounded by the artistic treasures in the church, the combinations of *trompe l'oeil* with painting and bas relief, etc. I played Merulo and various other pieces. The Merulo was almost an exact contemporary of the organ. The tuning of that type of organ makes Merulo sound interesting and anything with modulation—I played some 18th-century music too—sound rather terrible. Merulo and Frescobaldi usually sound boring on an organ tuned in equal temperament; even though intellectually I knew that the old just intonation made certain minor (or major) triads sound like different chords, rather than all the same chords up or down the scale, it was still a revelation to hear it on an actual organ.

Cagli, Duomo

After lunch, we went to the cathedral, but had to delay things somewhat because they were having a funeral. And not just any funeral—it reminded me of the policeman or fireman funerals I'd

played for in Brooklyn. It seemed like the whole town had come out, but there were still plenty of people hanging out in the town square. Eventually, however, we went up to the organ loft.

There had been many changes in organ building since 1855, obviously, and the firm of Morettini had not been left behind. The French organ renaissance was in full swing by then, and I wasn't surprised to see a two-manual organ with a French-style console and an *appel* for the ripieno and solo stops on the Great. There was no expression pedal however, and no Rückpositiv, just two manuals on the same windchest. I played the Galliera fugue again, a Padre Davide *Elevation*, and the *Cantilène* from Vierne's *Third Symphony*, in honor of the French influence. Those are obviously in very different styles, but my wife said they all worked on the organ, though in different ways. Padre Davide from Bergamo was a slightly older contemporary of Donizetti who wrote some very flamboyant organ pieces. It's easy to dismiss him; however,



1889 Morettini organ, Duomo, Cagli

some of his stop combinations are very unusual. I can't say the two Romantic organs I played on in Le Marche (the one at the Cagli cathedral and later on the Mascioni reworking of Callido in Fermo) really had the right stops to play him, but the cathedral in Cagli came close enough that I thought I had a new insight into the Davidian esthetic.

These three organs—all quite different from one another, but all equally connected to the artistic and religious circumstances of their construction, all quite modest affairs by American or even French standards—taught me that the value of an organ is not measured by bigness, number of pipes or flamboyance of individual stops, it is measured by the quality of the individual parts and the harmony of the whole. This is why, when playing music on these organs, one never notices what is absent, only what is there. ■

The author wishes to express thanks to all the church officials, city officials, priests and the brothers of Serra Sant'Abbondio who graciously opened their doors and their organs to an unknown American.

Bill Halsey was born in Seattle, where he studied piano and composition from an early age. He fell in love with the organ after hearing a Corrette suite played on the Montreal Beckerath, and began organ lessons in his teens. While a student at the Sorbonne, he had the good fortune to gain access to the two-manual unmodified tracker-action Cavallé-Coll organ at Saint Bernard de la Chapelle, in a northern arrondissement of Paris. This fueled his interest in historic organs, and after spending fifteen years serving in organist positions at St. John Cantius, St. Peter Claver, Church of the Assumption, and the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, all in Brooklyn, New York, he took a permanent leave of absence to explore historic organs, first in France, and later in Italy.



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