

Mañas, Vladimír

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# The Choir Lofts in the Church of St. James in Brno (Between the Late 15<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

Vladimír Mañas / manas@phil.muni.cz

Ústav hudební vědy, Filozofická fakulta, Masarykova univerzita, Brno, CZ

## Abstract

This paper examines archival records reflecting the existence of at least three choir lofts and performance practice there during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It introduces new sources: besides archival records, results of research in situ, i.e. in the church of St. James in Brno.

## Key words

Church, organ, choir loft, manuscript, singing

Several new areas of research appeared along with the discovery of two codices from St. James Church in Brno when the catalogue of manuscripts from the St. James' parish library was published by Stanislav Petr in 2007.<sup>1</sup> Five years later, an introductory paper on both manuscripts by the authors Horyna and Mañas appeared in the journal *Early Music*. This study gives insight into the structure and repertoire of both manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> As these contain a large proportion of hitherto unknown works, or different attributions of known works, detailed papers on individual items soon began to appear, starting with an important contribution on the life and work of Dionysius Prioris by Theodore Dumitrescu in 2011,<sup>3</sup> followed by transcriptions (two masses attributed to Brumel edited by Clemens Goldberg) and master's theses about the works of Gräfinger, Stoltzer, Fink, the hitherto unknown Parthenius, and recently, Antoine and Robert de Fevin.<sup>4</sup>

While my colleague Martin Horyna placed the Brno manuscripts into the wider context of Central European musical culture in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, my paper aims to give insight into the local context of the place where both manuscripts presumably originated, and where they were almost certainly used to embellish the liturgy on a very high musical level. My paper will summarise the present state of knowledge about performance practice at St. James' church, mainly based on archival records.

In spite of the fact that Brno / Brünn was, around 1550, with its roughly 4400 inhabitants, the second biggest town in the Moravian Margravate after Olomouc (7700 in.), we know little about its cultural history. Since the middle ages, the town had been divided into two parishes, that of St. Peter's collegiate church (comprising mostly Czech speaking inhabitants) and that of St. James' church with its dominant position within the town's society (there was a comparable situation in other Moravian towns of that period, e.g. Olomouc). St. James' became the town's main church when the Bohemian King and the Margrave of Moravia Ferdinand I, from the house of Habsburg, transferred the patronage rights over the Cistercians in Oslavany to the Brno city council in 1532. Seven years later, Ferdinand confirmed this privilege under the condition that the city council only employ Catholic priests *sub una specie*, thus excluding Utraquists and other non-Catholic priests.<sup>5</sup> This amendment suggests a change in the confessional situation in Brno.

1 PETR, Stanislav. *Soupis rukopisů knihovny při farním kostele svatého Jakuba v Brně*. Praha 2007.

2 HORYNA, Martin – MAŇAS, Vladimír. Two Manuscripts of Polyphonic Music in Brno from the Mid-Sixteenth Century. *Early Music* 40, 2012, Nr. 4, p. 553–575.

3 DUMITRESCU, Theodor. Who Was "Prioris"? A Royal Composer Recovered. *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, 2012, Nr. 1, p. 5–65.

4 POLÁČEK, Radek. *Brněnský rukopis Liber Missarum z roku 1550 a v něm obsažené mše Wolfganga Gräfingerera*. Bachelor thesis, Institute of Musicology, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno 2009. Idem. *Mše Heinricha Fincka a Thomase Stoltzera z brněnského rukopisu*. Master thesis, Institute of Musicology, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno 2011. MILJKOVIĆ, Đorđe. *Missa Mathei Parthenii a její paleografická a transkripční problematika*. Bachelor thesis, Institute of Musicology, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno 2011. STUDENIČOVÁ, Hana. *Antoine a Robert de Fevin, jejich mše v brněnském rukopise BAM1*. Master thesis, Institute of Musicology, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno 2015. For editions of Clemens Goldberg see <http://www.goldbergstiftung.org/file/brumel6gesamtalt.pdf>

5 BRETHOLZ, Berthold. *Die Pfarrkirche zu st. Jakob in Brünn*. Brünn 1901, p. 80, 89.

The Moravian royal towns, where German-speaking inhabitants predominated and had faithfully remained Catholic during the Hussite period, were falling under the influence of Lutheranism. This process had many local variants, from the example of Jihlava and its zealous devotion to the ideas of Luther starting in the early 1520s (with the key figure being the theologian Paulus Speratus<sup>6</sup>), to the slow and initially hidden inclination to Lutheranism among the German-speaking inhabitants of Brno. The trend was also visible in the city council and the parish of St. James', whereas the collegiate church of St. Peter's remained one of a few firmly catholic institutions in Moravia throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

1550 is the central point of our story, since that is the presumed date on the front label of the bigger manuscript (BAM1), but the very first visual depiction of Brno, including St. James' church, did not appear until 40 years later. The church appears in a 1593 woodcut by Johann Willenberg which was published as a part of the *Mirror of the Famous Margravate of Moravia* by Bartoloměj Paprocký.<sup>8</sup> As unbelievable as it seems, no depiction of the church's interior has survived from before its purification into the neo-gothic style by the famous Viennese architect Heinrich von Ferstel (the architect of the Votivkirche in Vienna and the Christuskirche in Brno) in the 1870s.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in our attempt to reach a more profound understanding of the historical context, we have to plunge deeper into history.

Around 1473, a new gothic presbytery and sacristy were built for St. James'. According to the latest research, the presbytery was finished around that time (Jan Petr Cerroni gives 1475).<sup>10</sup> There is no doubt about the existence of a choir loft on the first floor above the sacristy or somewhere nearby at the northern side of the presbytery. But a similar choir loft on the opposite side of the church, probably used by musicians continuously up to the nineteenth century, has until now not been reflected in the historiography of St. James' church in spite of the existence of relevant evidence from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (see below).

As far as physical evidence is concerned, an ancient staircase has survived on the southern side of presbytery.<sup>11</sup> At a height of approximately five metres from the ground of the church, this staircase originally led to a small entrance (ca 150 cm high and 60 cm

6 JIRKOVÁ, Pavla. Od Sperata ke Strobachovi. Jihlava v převratech konfesionalizace v 16. až 17. století. *Documenta Pragensia XXXIII. Město v převratech konfesionalizace v 15. až 18. století*. Praha 2014, p. 159–175.

7 BURIAN, Vladimír. *Vývoj náboženských poměrů v Brně 1570–1618*. Brno 1948.

8 *Zrcadlo Slawneho Margkrabstwij Morawského: W kteremz geden každý Staw, dawnost, wzactnost y powinnost swau vhlada: ... sebrane ... Skrze Bartholomege Paprockeho z Glogol a Paprocke Woly*. Olomutii: Haeredes Milichtalleri 1593, p. CC-CLXXXVI. Accessible via [http://digital.onb.ac.at/OnbViewer/viewer.faces?doc=ABO\\_%2BZ169048003](http://digital.onb.ac.at/OnbViewer/viewer.faces?doc=ABO_%2BZ169048003).

9 Already stated by BRETHOLZ, *op. cit.* I undertook large research on that account during last five years, going through various collections in the Brno City Archive, Library of the St. James' Parish, Archive of the Brno Diocese, collection of graphics in the Moravian library (Moravská zemská knihovna v Brně), without success.

10 KROUPA, Jiří (ed.). *Dějiny Brna 7. Uměleckohistorické památky. Historické jádro*. Brno 2016, p. 264.

11 "Treppenthurm" by BRETHOLZ, *op. cit.*, p. 82, 84; c.f. KROUPA, Petr. Dobový vzhled gotických kostelů. In: *Od gotiky k renesanci*. Ed. Kaliopi Chamonikola. Brno 1999, p. 93. C.f. a rare example of a detailed study on one late medieval church in Trhové Sviny, small city in Southern Bohemia: LAVIČKA, Roman – ŠIMŮNEK, Robert. *Městský farní kostel ve středověkých Čechách. Trhové Sviny 1280–1520*. České Budějovice 2012.

wide) which was probably walled up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the loft itself disappeared.<sup>12</sup> The question of its style and size can now be answered only by further archival research or by comparison to similar situations in other buildings.

We can thus assume that at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century there were two opposing choir lofts in the presbytery, most probably suspended from the church walls, perhaps in the manner of the *cantoria* used in Florence since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Preserved sources in the former St. James' parish library and archive do not tell us what we would like to know about performance practice at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, especially regarding polyphony.<sup>13</sup> Only manuscripts with chant repertoire survive from this period (see Lumír Škvařil's paper in this volume). In addition to liturgical books, the oldest church inventory from 1487–1489 also mentions an unidentified “cantonale de montibus”, which may or may not have contained polyphonic repertoire.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the history of the new organ after the construction of the new presbytery presumably goes back to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> There was a donation of 10 guilders “zu der orgl bey sand Jacub” in 1486,<sup>16</sup> and the payment of an organist started, perhaps, as early as 1478.<sup>17</sup> In 1490 a certain monk Gregorius from the order of fratrum minorum (OFM) apologizes before the city council that he was not able to fulfil his promise to transfer (!) and tune the organ.<sup>18</sup> In spite of this lack of sources, we can still say that the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries was a very active time at St. James'. Besides the continuing construction (in 1502 “ist angefangen di sayten” by Anton Pilgram) we can trace the growth of various donations, so that the church had 29 altars (1541)<sup>19</sup> with their endowments and often also individual chaplains, and also the further growth of various collections of manuscripts and early prints. The last large donation of a missal and gradual (in three volumes in total) was

12 This staircase in respect to its function (leading to the choir loft) has not been reflected by historians of art until now, not even within the latest research of the church's architectural development. Regarding high number of stone-carvers' marks and gothic stone epitaphs, used as a material for the staircase in the upper (younger?) part, leading to the garret of the church, the staircase seems to be built (at least it's lower part) already with the presbytery at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. I am grateful to Mr. Ondřej Múčka, organist at the St. James' church, for drawing my attention to it.

13 Probably one of the earliest records about a polyphonic performance of a school choir (*musica figurata*) alternating with organ in Moravia goes back to 1494. A letter in a form of a complaint, reflecting some quarrels between the clergy, schoolmaster and organist at the parish church of St. Niclas in Znojmo (Znaim) contains rare details proving the use of alternatim praxis, combining chant, organ play and mensural music (in the case of Kyrie). Moravský zemský archiv (MZA), fond G 2 Nová sbírka, Nr. 662/76.

14 Archiv města Brna (AMB), Fond A I/I Collection of documents and letters, Nr. 765.

15 SEHNAL, Jiří. Dějiny varhan kostela sv. Jakuba v Brně. *Časopis Moravského zemského muzea* LXVII, 1982, p. 99–122.

16 BOROVSKEJ, Tomáš. Zu der ere gots und meiner sele zu selikeit. Odkazy brněnských měšťanů církevním institucím v letech 1410–1530. *Sborník prací Filosofické fakulty brněnské university C, řada historická*, Brno: Filosofická fakulta brněnské university, 2001, 46, 1999, p. 79–96, here p. 95.

17 Probably in 1478 was founded a rent for organist, associated with the altar of St. Philipp and Jacob (c.f. “Zins altaris Philippi et Jacobi eynem organisten gehorig”), AMB, Collection of Manuscripts (A1/3), Nr. 182, fol. 71r. According to a document from 1441, a priest associated with this altar (*altarista*) was also an organist. AMB, Fond A I/I, Collection of documents a

18 SEHNAL, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

19 AMB, Collection of Manuscripts (A1/3), Nr. 184.

received in the 1490s; these books were made in the workshop of the so-called Illuminator of the Breviary of the Emperor Friedrich III. These notated manuscripts, which were in use probably up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, were not initially part of the church archive (library). They were added to the archive after they went out of use.

A comparison to the situation at St. Stephan's church in Vienna gives us a valuable and useful insight.<sup>20</sup> The oldest record of the organ there goes back to 1344, and since 1404 there had been two instruments. The most interesting situation at Vienna was at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, when a new representative organ was built on a "chanzzel", i.e. a suspended loft (!) on the southern side of the church's nave, close to the sacristy entrance. In 1513 Anton Pilgram, active also in Brno, finished "Füchselbal-dachin" St. Stephan's so-called "Orgelfuss" in the northern part of the church; this was presumably equipped with a smaller and older organ too.<sup>21</sup>

It seems that there was initially a preference for choir lofts near to the presbytery in churches with a large presbytery and long naves (both because of acoustics and for another practical reason: the time lag between the construction of presbytery and nave).<sup>22</sup> The western choir lofts, opposing the presbytery, were typically built later, usually during the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> This squares with the later tendency to involve town musicians in the festive liturgy. And the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century saw the beginning of the tendency to build larger, more sumptuous organs (earlier organs had been smaller and thus more suitable for accompanying polyphony).<sup>24</sup>

In 1515 the reconstruction of St. James' church in late gothic style was practically completed, but a fire in that year consumed the inner furnishings (including all the altars) and the bells in the tower, so that – according to later chronicles – only the walls were preserved.

20 For similarities between the churches of St. James' in Brno and St. Stephan in Vienna see KROUPA, P., *op. cit.*, p. 94–95.

21 SALIGER, Arthur. *Aspekte zur historischen Frage der Standorte von Orgeln im Wiener Stephansdom*. [online]. [cit. 2016-06-01], [http://www.dommusik-wien.at/Dommusik/media/Orgelstandorte\\_im\\_Stephansdom.pdf](http://www.dommusik-wien.at/Dommusik/media/Orgelstandorte_im_Stephansdom.pdf). C.f. SCHLOSSER, Ignaz. Die Kanzel und der Orgelfuß zu St. Stefan in Wien, Wien 1925, p. 14. Very interesting reconstruction of historical performance combining organ and choir brings MAHRT, William P. The Choralis Constantinus and the Organ. In: *Heinrich Isaac and Polyphony for the Proper of the Mass in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Ed. David Burn – Stefan Gasch, Turnhout 2011, p. 141–156. However, the Brno choir books (BAM1 and BAM2) do not contain irrefutable evidence for alternatim practice, combining sung polyphony and organ, as Mahrt states in the case of the Imperial chapel or the Constance Cathedral at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

22 If the nave was too long, the wester loft could be entirely omitted, c.f. church of the cistercian convent in Ždár n. Sázavou (Saar). For Moravia there is no known Liber ordinarius or similar source, which would prescribe the office in the particular church.

23 C.f. Petr Kroupa states, that western choir lofts in Moravia originated mostly at the end of the 15th century, but alone regarding later given list of late gothic churches in the region, this does not occur so often. KROUPA, P., *op. cit.*, p. 86.

24 C.f. MORAWSKA, Katarzyna. *Historia muzyki polskiej tom II, Renesans 1500–1600*, p. 87. Regarding the use of organ in the church during the 16<sup>th</sup> century see BROWN, Howard Meyer – SADIE, Stanley (ed.). *Performance practice. Music before 1600*. New York 1990, p. 170–171. Situation in Moravia is briefly reflected by SEHNAL, Jiří. *Barokní varhanářství na Moravě. Díl 2. Varhany*. Brno 2004, p. 7.

Brunae exorto noctu incendio passa est parochialis ecclesia s. Jacobi apost. memorabilem calamitatem, quae praeter muros tectum ecclesiae et omnia altaria destruxit, turribus campanas 8 liquefecit. ... (Bretholz p. 202)

The fire did not have such a devastating impact on the church as whole, since we know that the library was preserved (perhaps it was already being kept in the depository / archive just next to the choir loft above sacristy) and it seems that the fire hit mostly the older part of the church with its three naves and two towers.<sup>25</sup>

The reconstruction of the church continued up to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the new high tower with its copper covering was completed. The western choir loft is dated 1581 and was probably soon equipped with a big organ. According to Rudolf Quioka, Georg Koch from Zwickau built a rather big organ with one manual there in 1590. But Quioka links this instrument with the description of a smaller organ at St. James, published anonymously in Breslau 1757; according to Jiří Sehnal, this connection seems rather improbable.<sup>26</sup>

At this point I would like to mention a Sunday sermon by the Jesuit Georg Scherer (1540–1605), published in 1603 at the Premonstratensian monastery Bruck / Klosterbruck (Louka) near Znojmo.<sup>27</sup> Scherer concludes his narrative about music with an important remark reflecting the situation in the Lutheran church around 1600: it seems that organs were being reintroduced in Lutheran churches at that time.<sup>28</sup>

We have important testimony about the furnishings of the church in the protocols of the so-called *visitatio generalis*. The oldest one, from 1629, has not been preserved, but Gregor Wolny quotes from it in his work. In 1629, the church was equipped with 17 altars and two organs. Although the record is very brief, one remark is difficult to understand given what we already know: there was no archive or library in the church (“archivum et bibliothecam non habent”).<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this meant that the library was kept in the depository? Or that a large portion of the manuscripts as well as prints were liturgical books for the use of the choir? In spite of this riddle, this record testifies to the existence of two organs – on the small choir loft above the sacristy and in the western loft, a situation which was not substantially changed before the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

More interesting is the hitherto unknown and much more detailed description of the church for the *visitatio generalis* around 1679, when the parish priest and dean Ignác Wolhaupter, probably a good musician himself, declared that the church had three choir

25 KROUPA, J., *op. cit.* p. 265.

26 SEHNAL 1982, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

27 VOIT, Petr. *Encyklopedie knihy. Starší knižnické a příbuzné obory mezi polovinou 15. a počátkem 19. století*. Praha 2006, p. 907–908.

28 *Postill Georgii Scherers/ uber die Sontäglichen Evangelia durch das gantze Jahr...* Bruck an der Teya 1603; (with more later editions published mostly in Munich) p. 638: *Diese abschaffung der Pfeiffer haben etliche Schwermer dieser zeit zu einem Argument vnd behelff genommen, alle Orglen vnd Instrumenten, j adie gantz Musicam aus allen Kirchen abzuschaffen und auszuschliessen, wie närrisch sie aber daran gethan, haben sie darnach selber erkannt, in dem sie die abgebrochenen vnd eingerissnen Orglen, widerumb an jhr orth setzen vnd mit grossem vnkosten von newem auffrichten lassen, haben also die Pfeiffer vnd Organisten anfangs abgeschafft, darnach widerumb zu ruck geruffen.*

29 WOLNY, Gregor. *Kirchliche Topographie von Mähren meist nach Handschriften und Urkunden*. Brünn 1856, p. 80.

lofts built of brick, and that they (all?) were equipped with an organ (“ex muro extracti et in quovis organum bene dispositum”). So besides the two already known to us, there was another “a regione” of the presbytery, which must have been already in position at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> The western choir loft got a new organ at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, built by Jakub Ryšák and finished after his death by Andreas Beck. Sometime before 1757, most probably during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the choir loft above the sacristy was equipped with the new instrument mentioned above.<sup>31</sup> Probably the latest record testifying to the existence of the two mirroring choir lofts in the presbytery is from around 1784/1785, when the sculptor Andreas Schweigl (who worked in St. James’ church in the 1750s and 1760s) wrote his Comments on Art History in Moravia (Bildende Künste in Mähren). His description of the clear and bright interior of the church, full of admiration, concludes with a wish for the elimination of the altars and choir lofts in the presbytery, which are useful, but detract from the clarity of the gothic interior.<sup>32</sup> According to Schweigl’s description, it seems that even as late as the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, both choir lofts in the presbytery were suspended, thus somehow protruding into the interior of the presbytery.

By 1817 at the latest, the situation had changed. According to a detailed description in the Hausprotocoll from that year, there were only two choir lofts in the church (the western one above the main entrance with the big organ and a smaller one above the sacristy between the sixth and seventh pillars). A staircase in the wall led to this loft, and another staircase led to an oratory which had been opened on the opposite side. An almost identical description was given by Gregor Wolny in 1856. Although this Benedictine monk from the Rajhrad Monastery surely worked with the aforementioned Hausprotocoll, his description of the interior reflects his own experience.<sup>33</sup> These two records testify to an undated reconstruction of (probably) both choir lofts which removed their protruding parts sometime before 1818. Whereas the choir loft on the southern side had been turned into an oratory (meaning that the entrance from the staircase was left open for some time before being walled up, presumably at the time of the neo-gothic reconstruction), the loft above sacristy was still in use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

30 Zemský archiv Opava, pobočka Olomouc (ZAO-OI), fond Arcibiskupská konzistoř (ACO), sign. B 12, k. 671, fol. 440rv.

31 SEHNAL 1982, s. 103–105.

32 „Ich wünschte nur, dass die sonst schöne Altäre samt beiden Coren in Presbyterio, die zwar zu Notwendigkeit dienen, nicht allda stunden, wodurch diese gottliche Bauart ihr herrlich lichtet Ansehen in etwas verliert...” SCHWEIGL, Andreas. Bildende Künste in Mähren. Ed Cecílie Hálová-Jahodová, Umění 20, 1972, p. 168–187, here p. 180.

33 WOLNY, *op. cit.*, p. 66: Musikchöre, das eine im Presbyterium an der Evangeliumsseite mit einer Orgel, dem gegenüber an der Epistelseite ein offenes Oratorium angebracht ist... An der Evangeliumsseite im Presbyterium befindet sich eine Doppelsakristei..., wortaus man mittelst einer schönen, in einem eigenen Thürmchen angebrachten Wendeltreppe in das Kirchenarchiv gelangt, wo nebst alten Kirchenschriften, Matriken und auch eine merkwürdige Büchersammlung aufbewahrt wird, die nebst 113 zum Theil werthvollen und sehr schönen Handschriften mit prächtigen Miniaturen, auch 220 Druckwerke theologischen und klassischen Inhalts. C.f. HausProtokoll des Stadtpfarrers bey St. Jacob in Brünn, zusammengetragen von Maxmilian Reisenhofer, Stadtpfarrer im Jahre 1817. Kept in the parish house of St. James’.



Regenschori (Master of Music at St. James') Leopold Streit, who entered his office in 1815, mentions two places for performing music, often complaining about their insufficient capacity, especially concerning the smaller choir loft above the sacristy. According to him only 30 musicians could perform there, whereas it would be possible to place 200 persons on the western choir loft if the organ could be shifted slightly backwards. Roughly ten years later (1826/1827), after moving the organ, Streit states that around 160 musicians can be placed on the western choir loft.<sup>34</sup>

Whereas we can still admire there the beauty of Anton Riga's baroque organ case from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and even listen to music from the western choir loft built in 1581, the two earlier sites for music performance, probably built at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, are lost. The choir loft on southern side of the presbytery disappeared almost without a trace. The arch of the choir loft above the sacristy was substantially walled up during the neo-gothic reconstruction of the church in the second half of the nineteenth century, and although there is still a small room with organ, it does not have anything to do with the original choir loft there.

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34 SEHNAL 1982, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

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