

## **The six pipe organs of the Royal Basilica of Mafra**

The unique character of the six pipe organs of the Basilica of Mafra National Palace derives not only from their numbers and dimension - exceptional in itself - but also and above all from the fact that they have been built simultaneously and of having been designed as whole unit from the very outset. The majority of several pipe organ sets in existence in European churches has resulted from the successive additions of several instruments over a long period of time rather than from a priority overall design.

In Mafra's case, the display of the High Chapel tribunes and transepts appears to herald an original intention to place six instruments in the Basilica. However, when the church was consecrated in 1730, no organ had yet been built as there are reports of the import of three transferable organs from Italy for the opening ceremony. It is only after 1750 that the first reference to the presence of six organs at the Basilica emerges.

### **The instruments**

The six pipe organs we can presently see and admire at Basilica of Mafra date from Portuguese King John VI's regency time and they result primarily from the work developed by organ makers Joaquim António Peres Fontanes and António Xavier Machado e Cerveira since 1792, when the latter was appointed as «Administrator of the Royal Pipe Organs of Mafra». The work went on along a full decade and the six pipe organs were successively completed (or inaugurated) between 1806 and 1807. On that very year, the first French Napoleonic invasion and the subsequent exile of the Portuguese Royal Family in Brazil drastically brought to a halt the music activities in the Basilica and the normal use of the six pipe organs.

From the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the definitive victory over Napoleon's armies and the imminent return of the Royal Family, there was increasing activity around the pipe organs of Mafra. Machado e Cerveira who

had kept his position as Administrator launches a campaign for renewing the six instruments. All the pipe organs were disassembled and subject to interventions aimed at their widening as well as at their adapting to an ideal and more clearly post-baroque sound (the widening process is particularly evident on the High Chapel pipe organs, originally much smaller than the rest of them). This intervention by Machado e Cerveira never came to an end due to his death in 1828 and to the political turmoil following the death of King John VI in 1826 that led to civil war between absolutist and liberal monarchists. As a consequence of the works having come to a halt, the São Pedro de Alcântara pipe organ (at the northern transept's eastern wall) that had been disassembled would never be rebuilt. Then, the extinction of convents and the expropriation of religious buildings, following the final victory by the liberal faction in 1834, would lead, in Mafra's case, to the end of musical activities and to progressive degradation of the Basilica's pipe organs.

### **The Restoration**

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but, above all, along the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pipe organs of the Mafra Basilica were subject to several interventions aiming at allowing for some of them to be heard again. These works varied between the simple applying of electric ventilators (installed by the João Sampaio e Filhos company in the 1950's) and more elaborate works (such as the one directed by organ master António Simões on the Epístola (Epistle) organ in 1989). However, regardless of their different degrees of depth (and quality), all those works have been thought out in terms of a single one or another pipe organ and never looking at the set as a whole broader unit.

Only in the 1990's decade, has the possibility of integral restoration of the whole six pipe organs been considered. The exchange of ideas at the Pipe Organ International Meeting in Mafra on December 1994 much contributed towards this as well as the analysis of materials from the disassembled São Pedro de Alcântara pipe organ found in the lower grounds of the Palace and

identified by organ maker Dinarte Machado in the previous year. Work has begun when a fortunate partnership between the Portuguese State and a private sponsor (Barclays) managed to achieve the feasibility of the project. The work was then trusted into the hands of pipe organ maker Dinarte Machado, given his wide experience on Portuguese pipe organs, particularly on the ones from the school of António Xavier Machado e Cerveira and of Joaquim António Peres Fontanes.

Although each one of the pipe organs has been subject to separate works, the intervention bore in mind the notion of a full set since the outset. A scientific support group was established and this together with the organ master and the permanent consultant, have defined the master guidelines for the restoration action and have taken the most crucial decisions along the process. The approach to the restoration has been fundamentally based on two points: the acceptance of the result from the second intervention by Machado e Cerveira as to the maturity condition of the instruments and, above all, the vision of the six pipe organs as an undivided unit. In this way, the work developed along the last decade has aimed at the balanced harmonization of the broader set besides the integral restoration and the repairing of faults resulting namely from some earlier interventions. For the São Pedro de Alcântara pipe organ, whose surviving materials date back to their construction in 1807 by Joaquim António Peres Fontanes, the option was taken for its rebuilding according to the invoice by Fontanes towards the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (feasible only given the mentioned experience of the organ master over instruments produced by that organ maker) attaching, however, particular attention to the stage of harmonization so as to guaranteeing its insertion into the full set.

Research went on as well as the restoration itself, providing light to the path ahead but also often forcing occasional road map changes that have been duly evaluated by scientific support group meetings. This process has shown itself as decisive for defining the harmonization to be applied to the six pipe organs: Only through the whole information provided by the analysis

of the instruments historic material and with the aid of documental research, it has been possible to have reached a clearer idea about the original sound features of the full set.

### **The repertoire**

The outlook for the conclusion of the six pipe organs in 1807 led to great composing activity, given the obvious absence of a repertoire for such unheard of instrumental assembling. Conserved until today, there is a remarkable number of music works (mainly at the Library of the Mafra Palace and at the Library of the Paço Ducal de Vila Viçosa) composed for the six pipe organs, their vast majority dating from 1807. The six pipe organs of the Mafra Basilica are now available to the public, more than 200 years after their construction, as a broad set whose quality and cohesion have been recovered and whose musical versatility reflects the genius of major names of Portuguese organ mastery such as António Xavier Machado e Cerveira and Joaquim António Peres Fontanes.

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