

Vasco Spinelli, a benefactor for the organists

A memory of Umberto Pineschi

On March 10, 2012, in Larciano, province of Pistoia, Vasco Spinelli died. He was almost 100 years old, born in the same town on 17 October 1912. Mr. Spinelli had been a successful businessman. In 1953 he founded a company and called it SPIVAL, combining his name with that of his town, that is SPInelli VASco Larciano —the first three characters of his last name, the first two of his first name and the first of his town—. The Spival S.p.A. produces brushes and accessories for domestic and industrial cleaning and provides all the biggest names in the home appliances market.

Vasco Spinelli was the protagonist in an unusual event concerning the organ world. I first met him in 2000, when he came to me with an unusual request that left me stunned. “I want you to do a special project for me”, he straightforwardly said. A striking feature of Vasco Spinelli was that he assumed that his plans were not to be discussed but simply accepted, which probably was the key to his success. Larciano –he bluntly explained– is a town inhabited by people who are good for money, but not as good for culture, because here, culturally speaking, there's nothing. Therefore I would like to leave an organ to the parish church, San Rocco. Not, mind you, an every day organ, but an exceptional instrument both in size and in quality. It's up to you to design it. The cost won't be a problem”. I believe that such a proposal is the dream of every organist and, therefore I immediately accepted it. The only drawback was the available space. In the counter façade of the church there was an “eye” window that had to be respected, since it was a gift from a influential local family, and the back gallery should not go beyond the first two pilasters of the church. Both elements were rather severe limitations.

Four organ companies were interviewed to get an estimate. Of the three that answered, one was immediately discarded both for the excessive price and time required for the construction. “Considering my age —pointed out Mr. Spinelli—, I have an evidently close deadline. Before getting there, I would like to see and hear the organ completed”. Before selecting one of the two builders left in the running, Mr. Spinelli asked to see and hear, together with his son Piero, at least one instrument of each of the two competitors. He finally decided on the builder whom he thought had the most convincing sound, that is Glauco Ghilardi from Lucca.

Next step was the selection of the type of organ. Mr. Spinelli left the choice to the organ builder, that is Mr. Ghilardi, and to the consultant organist, that is me. Given that the organ would be of considerable size, we thought that the best solution would be an instrument inspired by the northern German style for a decorous performance of the great German Baroque literature. While discussing this we had in mind an interesting remark of a former student of mine, Riccardo Berutto from Lucca, who unfortunately passed away prematurely a few years ago. Whenever we were trying to create, painfully and punctually, with disappointing results, sonorities suitable for German pieces on the great Tamburini organ of the Bossi Hall of the Conservatory of Bologna, Riccardo said: “But wouldn't it be better to build an organ completely in German style, instead of striving to try to imitate it on an organ obviously unsuitable for this kind of literature, despite its 70 stops? It's like persisting in reading a translated novel, when you could read it in the language in which it was written.”

The final decision was an instrument with three manuals, one of which operating a Rückpositiv, and pedalboard, not only fully tracker action for both keyboards and stops, but even with bellows not only fed by electric blower, but also by levers to be operated by feet, which makes it possible to appreciate the different quality of the wind and to play the organ even during an

electric black out. This was the most difficult detail for Mr. Spinelli to accept. "If it were a machine for the construction of my products, —he said— I would not accept a system in my opinion obsolete, given the technical possibilities of today, but since it is you who is the expert, I think that your opinion should prevail".

Mr. Spinelli then meticulously followed all the stages of the construction of the organ. Almost every Saturday he would visit the Ghilardi shop and forced me to accompany him. He also persecuted the poor organ builder, and me too, with numerous phone calls when he thought that the work went too slowly. He was interested and wanted to know all the technical details, even the smallest, occasionally appearing with advice often proved useful. The first picture shows him, smiling, sitting at the console of "his" organ. Behind him, Mr. Glauco Ghilardi the organ builder. In the implementation phase, because of a Mr. Ghilardi's mistake in cutting the wind chest of the Brustwerk (obviously a "felix culpa" for Mr. Spinelli and, especially, for the organists who would use the instrument), the 40 stops originally planned increased by a half stop in the treble.

This is the final specification of the instrument.

Parish church of St. Rocco, Larciano. Organ by Glauco Ghilardi, 2005

3 Manuals of 58 keys (C-a'''); Pedalboard of 30 keys (C-f')

Stops:

I. Rückpositiv

Gedackt 8'
Quintadena 8'
Prestant 4'
Rohrflöte 4'
Octave 2'
Sesquialtera II
Quinte 1' 1/3
Scharf II
Dulzian 16'
Krumhorn 8'

II. Hauptwerk

Quintadena 16'
Principal 8'
Hohlflöte 8'
Viola di gamba 8'
Quinte 3'
Nassat 3'
Octave 4'
Spitzflöte 4'
Superoctave 2'
Waldflöte 2'
Tertia 1' 3/5
Mixtur IV-V
Trompete 8'
Trompete 4'

III. Brustwerk

Holzgedackt 8'
Blockflöte 4'
Hohlquinte 3'
Tertia 1' 3/5
Terzflöte 1' 3/5' (from c')
Quinte 1' 1/3
Vox Humana 8'

Pedal

Subbass 16'
Principal 8 (HW)
Hohlflöte 8' (HW)
Octave 4'
Mixture III
Posaune 16'
Trompete 8' (HW)
Trompete 4' (HW)
Cornet 2'

Couplers: I-II, II-Ped

Accessory: Tremulant

In 2005, Vasco Spinelli had, finally, the joy of attending the opening concert of his organ. As long as his health allowed, he always attended the concerts that followed. On April 17, 2009, he also attended the final round of the international competition "Willem Hermans", organized by the "Giuseppe Gherardeschi" Organ Academy, won by Polish organist Krzysztof Urbaniak, with Michael Radulescu (Austria), Ludger Lohmann (Germany), Guy Bovet (Switzerland) and Theo Jellema (Nederland), besides me as the president of the Academy, sitting in the jury. In the second picture, he is at the center, with the jury, the winners of the competition (on his right, on the left in the photo, the first prize and on his left, right in the picture, the third prize, since the second prize was not awarded), the mayor of Larciano (the lady behind him) and the pastor of the church (first row, last person on the left).

It is imperative to remember this man with reverence and gratitude, who with his enlightened generosity has enriched not only Larciano, but all of Tuscany with an instrument that will continue to be valuable especially for a serious training of young organists.