

The Cathedral of Mariana houses a precious musical treasure – an organ built in the first decade of the 18th century in Hamburg, Germany by Arp Schnitger (1648-1719), one of the main organ builders of all times. Initially sent to a Franciscan church in Portugal, the organ arrived in Brazil in 1753 as a present of the Portuguese crown to the first bishop of Mariana.

It is an instrument of great importance, both because of its antiquity and established authorship and because it was subjected to a comprehensive restoration. Among the extant Schnitger organs, this is one of the best preserved and the only one outside Europe. The instrument is being considered for inclusion in UNESCO's World Heritage list of Arp Schnitger organs.

History

Built in Germany in the first decade of the 18th century, this organ was in Portugal for a while and was sold in 1747. The Portuguese king João V bought it from João da Cunha, the Court's organ builder, to send it to Mariana, but died before he could do that. His son, D. José I, presented it to the newly created Diocese of Mariana, the seat of a bishopric that had an organ player, Father Manuel da Costa Dantas, and a chapel master, Father Gregório dos Reis Melo, as early as 1748.

The organ traveled by ship and mule, and its conditions of arrival were precisely described: "... a large organ with its case and the carvings belonging to it that arrived in 18 large numbered crates with specific instructions for assembling it, and 10 large and small numbered parcels"

Since its installation in 1753, the Schnitger organ was the center of an intense musical activity in the See of Mariana, whose written memory is the collection of scores belonging to the Museum of Music, which holds works of composers from the colonial period. The composers come from various cities in the state and the country. After many years working uninterruptedly, in which it was modified to follow the taste of the times, around the 1930s the organ stopped working. In the 1970s, after research was done to establish its origin, and its importance was recognized in Brazil and abroad, efforts were orchestrated to restore the instrument.

Location

The Schnitger organ is in the Basilica Cathedral or the Our Lady of Assumption Church, in Mariana, State of Minas Gerais, where the concerts are held. The town hosts the Brazilian Association of Organ Players.

Restoration

In the 1970s, the archbishop D. Oscar de Oliveira and the CEO of CEMIG, Francisco Afonso Noronha, invited the German organist Karl Richter to come to Mariana in order to evaluate the instrument, which had a large number of original pieces. Richter considered the organ an important instrument probably manufactured by Arp Schnitger. After his visit and thanks to a

considerable effort, the musical elements of the organ were sent to Hamburg, where the Beckerath Company restored them.

Meanwhile, a Brazilian team from the Federal University of Minas Gerais, directed by Beatriz Coelho, restored the internal and external structures of the case and the instrument's decoration. The major result of this first stage was to bring the instrument back to life using modern technology without destroying the signs of the previous phases, highly valuable for a later restoration with a historical focus.

In 1984, the Schnitger organ was again the center around which the musical life of Mariana spun, following masses and liturgical celebrations, besides being presented in national and international concerts that brought world-renowned organists. Although the organ was playing and functioning well, some important characteristics that couldn't be restored were left to a second stage. An initiative of the Archdiocese of Mariana's Cultural and Educational Foundation, further restoration began in 1997 with the visit of Bernhard Edskes to Mariana and ended in February 2002.

The tuning was changed to a system more in step with the times when the instrument was built and some registers were rebuilt. Together with the restoration, research was done to gather more data about its building and its arrival in Minas Gerais, as well as its various functions along its history. This restoration was done by the Edskes Orgelbau Company, of Wohlen, Switzerland and was sponsored by Petrobras, with support by Varig, Tam, and Vitae.