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Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann – Pioneer of the Organ as a Concert Instrument

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Abstract

The most important organist in Czechoslovakia between the wars was Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann (1883–1951). He was a teacher and composer, but above all a great performer. After arriving in Prague in 1911, he began playing in regular recitals at the Emmaus monastery. Then from 1920–1932 he played at the Sunday matinee concerts at the Prague Municipal House. In these performances, he made the case for the organ as a concert instrument and chose the compositions he played with that in mind. He also performed at the Hussite church in Dejvice and Vinohrady, and later at the church of St James in the Prague Old Town. As the only Czech organist of the era to perform outside his own country, he travelled to England, the United States, Germany, Sweden and Belgium. Wiedermann was of fundamental importance for the development of organ music and organ performance in the Czech Lands.

Key words

Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann, organ, organ music, organ concerts, unit organ, Czech music of the 1st half of the 20th century, church of St James in Prague, Prague Municipal House

Wiedermann in brief

Without a doubt, the most important organist in interwar Czechoslovakia was Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann (1883–1951). He was born in Ivanovice in Haná and graduated from the classical lyceum in Prague, where his teacher for singing was the organist Josef Klička. He worked briefly as a finance clerk in Kroměříž before deciding to study theology at Olomouc. During his studies in Olomouc he was the organist and choirmaster at the Cathedral of St Wenceslas. After seven semesters, shortly before he would have graduated, he abandoned his theological studies. From 1908 to 1910 he studied at the Prague Conservatory. His organ teacher there was Josef Klička, whom he already knew from his secondary school years, and his composition teacher was Vítězslav Novák. From 1910 to 1919 he worked as a church organist, first in Brno, then in Prague at the church of Emmaus, and at the church of Sts Cyril and Methodius in Karlín. At the same time, he played viola in the Czech Philharmonic for three years. Then he was appointed to the teaching staff of the Prague Conservatory, where he taught from 1917 to 1944 and again briefly after the war. When the Academy of Performing Arts was founded in Prague in 1946, he began teaching there. He died in 1951, aged 68.¹

Wiedermann's church concerts

Wiedermann first performed as an organist in 1905. He was the organist at the cathedral in Brno for 10 months, but we have no mention of any concert performances from this time. He left for Prague in 1911 and became the organist of the Benedictine monastery of Emmaus, where he remained active until 1917. Here he regularly played at church concerts lasting roughly an hour. These were all devoted to particular themes, e.g. Christmas music, organ music by Czech, German, or French composers, and sacred music.²

From 1917 to 1919 Wiedermann worked as organist at the church of Sts Cyril and Methodius in Karlín, but held no concerts there.

At Wiedermann's suggestion, in 1941 the essentially Baroque organ at the church of St James the Great (sv. Jakub Větší) in the Prague Old Town was rebuilt and expanded to 75 registers by the Tuček firm of organ builders, based in Kutná Hora. Thereafter, throughout the 1940s, Wiedermann often performed at recitals at St James. These took place on Wednesday evenings, and were organised by themes. Wiedermann's sacred compositions for voices and instruments were also performed in this church.

1 ŠTĚDRŮŇ, Bohumír. Wiedermann, Bedřich Antonín. In *Československý hudební slovník osob a institucí*: 2. svazek M – Ž. Praha: Státní hudební vydavatelství, 1965, pp. 950–951.

POLÁČEK, Radek. Wiedermann, Bedřich Antonín. In *Český hudební slovník osob a institucí* [online]. [cit. 2019-03-28]. URL: http://www.ceskyhudebnislovník.cz/slovník/index.php?option=com_mdictionary&task=record.record_detail&id=2250.

2 Concert programmes from the private collection of Marek Čihař, Prague.

Wiedermann performed not only in Catholic churches, but also in Protestant ones: in Prague, principally at the Czechoslovak Hussite churches in Dejvice and Vinohrady, and this was not well received by the priests at the church of St James. With his typical humour, Wiedermann joked, “*I have to play concerts wherever they build organs. If they build one in a bordello, I’ll play there too.*”³ It is also notable that it was Wiedermann’s concerts at the Hussite church in Dejvice which were broadcast on the radio.

Wiedermann was an advocate of the unit pipe organ, which he had met and become enthusiastic about in the course of his concerts in the United States. The first church organ of this type in Czechoslovakia was built in 1934 by the firm of Rieger, following Wiedermann’s design suggestions, at the above-mentioned Hussite church in Vinohrady. Wiedermann began to perform there soon afterwards.⁴

Two years later he worked out another specification for a unit organ, this time in consultation with two of his colleagues at the conservatory, Karel Douša and Antonín Elšlégr. One of this design was built by Rieger in 1936 at the Prague Conservatory, with financial support from the Ministry of Education, where it was used for teaching and for school performances.⁵

Wiedermann continued to maintain a steady schedule of concerts in Prague churches even after the Second World War, especially at the church of St James, where he was often joined in performances by the Czech Radio Choir, the choir of St James, and vocal soloists from the opera of the National Theatre.

Concerts at the Prague Municipal House

Wiedermann believed that the organ was the Cinderella of instruments, very little or even badly publicised. In churches, organs were mostly used exclusively for voluntaries at religious services and for accompanying singing during such services.⁶ Wiedermann therefore insisted on frequently playing concerts not only in churches, but also in secular venues. His teacher Josef Klička had been the first Czech virtuoso organist to organise this kind of concert, performing at the Prague Rudolfinum on the Sauer organ built in 1885.⁷ Wiedermann may have attended such concerts during his short stay in Brno, where the outstanding German organist Otto Burkert played roughly twice a month at the Deutsches Haus, Brno’s German cultural centre, on a three-manual, 48-stop Rieger

3 JANÁČEK, Bedřich. Vzpomínky na B. A. Wiedermann. *Varhaník: časopis pro varhanickou praxi*. Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitské nakladatelství, 2005, (3), p. 5–8.

4 LYKO, Petr. *Varhanářská firma Rieger*. Ostrava, 2018. Doctoral dissertation. Pedagogická fakulta Ostravské univerzity, pp. 47–54.

5 WIEDERMANN, Bedřich Antonín. Nové varhany státní konservatoře hudby v Praze. BLAŽEK, Vlastimil, ed. *Sborník na paměť 125 let konservatoře hudby v Praze*. Praha: Nakladatelství Vyšehrad, 1936, pp. 138–139.

6 O Popelce naší hudební kultury: Bude pochována varhanní tradice? *Ostravský večerník: List Národního souručenství*. Moravská Ostrava: Moravskoslezská vydavatelská společnost, 1939, VII (16. 12. 1939), p. 3.

7 HOFFMEISTER, Karel. *Josef Klička*. Praha: Česká akademie věd a umění, 1944, pp. 22–23.

organ.⁸ Less than a year after Wiedermann arrived in Prague, a new organ was built at the Municipal House (Obecní dům). It was a three-manual, 70-register instrument built in 1912 by the firm of Heinrich Voit from Durlach bei Karlsruhe, aided by Jan Tuček from Kutná Hora. The young French virtuoso Joseph Bonnet played concerts on the instrument that very same year.⁹

These performances and venues may have been Wiedermann's inspiration to hold regular concerts outside of churches after the creation of Czechoslovakia. In 1920 he began to give Sunday matinee concerts, billed as "popular organ concerts", in the Smetana Hall at the Prague Municipal House. These morning concerts took place once a month for twelve years, i.e. until 1932, and in total, Wiedermann appeared in 102 of them. Some were complete recitals given by him; some were mixtures of solo pieces for organ with pieces for vocal and instrumental soloists; some even included choirs and orchestras. For these concerts Wiedermann recruited a group of fellow artists, with whom he performed quite regularly. Among the singers and instrumentalists with whom he regularly gave concerts were the soprano Jarmila Novotná (later famous in the USA), the mezzosoprano Gabriela Horvátová, the baritone Emil Burian, the violinists Bohuslav Šich and Jaroslav Pekelský, the cellist František Berka, and the harpist Bedřich Dobrodínský. Original compositions for the organ were premiered, as well as transcriptions for the instrument, sometimes including instruments or voices. Some of these pieces were sacred, while others, such as opera arias, were secular.¹⁰

An extensive report on one of Wiedermann's Sunday matinee concerts at the Prague Municipal House was written by the Slovene Srečko Koporc (a composer, conductor, and musical theorist, and the son of an organist). He attended the concert on 1 April 1928 and reviewed it in the Slovenian periodical *Cerkveni glasbenik* ('Church Musician'): "*The greatest contemporary Czech organ virtuoso, Bedřich Wiedermann, prepares so-called 'popular' organ concerts for the Smetana Hall of the Municipal House. The goal of these concerts is to acquaint the listeners with modern organ music, which is a lofty aim in itself. Unfortunately, the concerts are poorly attended. (If the weather is wet, the hall is full, but in fair weather people prefer to be out in the countryside.)*

One such concert took place on 1 April. Because I had heard so many flattering reports and favourable opinions from various people at the conservatory, my curiosity began to be piqued, not only about these concerts, but about Prof. Wiedermann himself. They said that he was a phenomenon on the organ, a master of inexhaustible combinations of registers, a virtuoso, a perfect sovereign of the pedals etc. I was able to meet the master personally, thanks to his student Alexander Moyzes, a short prelude of whose was played at the concert.

I arrived with a friend shortly before the concert began. One had the impression that if Wiedermann had not been an artist, he would have been a banker or something of the sort. Strict,

8 KÖNIG, Stefan. *Otto Burkert. Konzert-Organist und Reger-Interpret*. In *Mitteilungen der Internationalen Max-Reger-Gesellschaft*, 28 (2015), pp. 21–22.

9 Besides brief articles, the contemporary press also contains a longer article about the performances of Joseph Bonnet: JARKA, Václav Hanno. *Varhanní koncerty v Praze. (Umění, koncerty.) Časopis pokrokového studentstva*. Praha: Antonín Klouda, 1912, 1, pp. 62–63.

10 Concert programmes from the private collection of Marek Čihař, Prague.

well-marked facial features, flashing eyes, light gestures that got lost in the air, an ingratiating smile that could quickly be transformed into strictness – all in all, Wiedermann appears to be an uncomplicated and friendly person.

'You're from Yugoslavia, do you understand Czech? Do you speak German, or French? Have you heard this organ?' Thus he addressed me. We spoke of current questions, and he also told me of some radical new reforms concerning the use of church organs as solo and also accompanying instruments. During the conversation, he gesticulated constantly, sometimes glancing impatiently through the window to gauge the size of the audience.

The bell rang in the atrium, so I made my way to the parterre. Wiedermann appeared on stage, there on the podium appearing a little simple, even clumsy. With a small movement he bowed and sat at the Voit & Sons organ with its 76 stops. He made himself ready, he chose the stops, his head moved slightly, his eyes scanned the manuals, the stops, the music, the hall – and he began with an exquisite pianissimo.

After the prelude by Moyzes we heard two songs by Rheinberger, 'Herr, du mein Gott' and 'Osterhymnus', for soprano with organ accompaniment. The singer, Jaroslava Vašková, has a beautiful, well-trained soprano voice. She interpreted them with great finesse. Next, Wiedermann performed C. M. Widor's organ symphony No. 2 (Prelude, Andante, Scherzo, Adagio–Finale), of which the most beautiful movements are the Scherzo and Finale. Wiedermann played with great mastery; the instrument was no longer an organ, but rather an orchestra. Widor's symphony is not very noteworthy, though its Scherzo and Finale are masterpieces: as for its harmony, the whole composition is rather uniform, without novelty, but the sonorous effect is very good. Afterwards he played a paraphrase of the Czech St Wenceslas chorale by Antonín Mikoláš. Mikoláš is of the older generation of Czech composers, and this piece, except for the fugue, does not seem to be the work of a composer with consummate technique. The counterpoint in the fugue is well worked-out, but harmonically old-fashioned, the whole composition merely alternating between tonic and dominant. Any composer wishing to write a paraphrase, especially on the St Wenceslas Chorale, should first study Suk's 'Meditation' on this chorale. I would have omitted the whole of this piece except for the fugue; even if old-fashioned, it is effective. But for Wiedermann and the magnificent organ, even the fugue would clearly have been a failure. There was yet time to hear 'Two Prayers', songs by J. B. Foerster (professor of composition at the conservatory). These are beautiful compositions, not written in a contemporary idiom, but nonetheless valuable. They were sung movingly by the baritone Kunstadt. They are orchestral songs, which had been transcribed by Wiedermann. Guilmant's 'Pastorale' and 'Finale' closed the evening, which had afforded the opportunity to hear all the best qualities, technical and expressive, of the organ and of Wiedermann himself.

As if Doomsday had struck, the 32' Open stop thundered terrifyingly, followed by the appalling crack and roar of the Trombone. Thoroughly impressed, I went backstage to congratulate him. The most effective piece of all was Guilmant's 'Finale', which will remain indelibly in my mind!"¹¹ It is clear from the remainder of the report by Koporc that Wiedermann had inspired him to no small degree.

11 KOPORC, Srečko. Bedřich Wiedermann: *Cerkveni glasbenik*. Glasilo Cecilijinega društva v Ljubljani, 1928, 51 (May–June 1928), pp. 75–77.

In spite of worthwhile programmes, interesting guests and the approval of professionals, these Sunday matinee concerts suffered from poor attendance, and, owing to this insufficient interest, the last ones were held in 1932.¹² The magazine *Cyril* also published a retrospective account of these concerts: “On 7 February this year [1932], Prof. Wiedermann has celebrated the hundredth of his popular organ matinee concerts, through which he has been enriching and beautifying the musical and cultural life of Prague for many years. This has occurred not only by means of a striking overview of worldwide and Czech organ music, but also thanks to the uniquely excellent level of the performances. Wiedermann’s universal outlook has manifested itself in the systematic, expert choice of programmes, including representative organ music from all eras and styles, from the predecessors of Johann Sebastian Bach to our own times. A wide and honoured place has been given to Czech organ masters and their compositions for the king of instruments. The jubilee concert featured a chronological journey through Czech organ music, and Wiedermann gave the audience an opportunity to follow its development over the last three centuries, in music ranging from Černohorský, Zach and Seger, through Skuherský, Musil, Klička, and Mikoláš, to Wiedermann himself, since he is not only an outstanding interpreter of his predecessors, but can honourably set himself beside them as a composer of the same rank. He is, at the current time, almost the only one continuing and upholding (and very well) the great tradition of Czech organ music... With these popular organ concerts, Maestro Wiedermann, Professor at the Prague Conservatory, has shown himself to be an educator in the best sense of the word, not only of youth but also of the wider musical public. He always keeps the educational value of the concerts in mind, and to this end even subjugates his ambitions as a true organ virtuoso par excellence”.¹³

Performances abroad

Alongside his intense concert activity in Czechoslovakia, Wiedermann was the only Czech organist to perform in other countries between the wars. In autumn 1924, he appeared in England, but principally in the USA, as Frederick Wiedermann. He gave recitals in the Wanamaker Auditorium and the Town Hall in New York. Richard Aldrich, the well-known critic of the *New York Times*, reviewed his concerts, and other reviews were published in the *Sun* and in the *Musical Courier*. In 1925 he performed in Germany, and a year later in Sweden, where his performance at Stockholm’s Konserthuset was even attended by the King of Sweden and the royal family. Reviews of his concerts, and other information about them, appeared in *Dagens Nyheter*, the *Social-Demokraten*, and the *Svenska Dagbladet*. In 1935 he performed in Belgium. Critics praised his exceptionally even

12 KOPORC, Srečko. Bedřich Wiedermann: *Cerkveni glasbenik*. Glasilo Cecilijinega društva v Ljubljani, 1928, 51 (May–June 1928), s. 75. Also here: O Popelce naší hudební kultury: Bude pochována varhanní tradice? *Ostravský večerník: List Národního souručenství*. Moravská Ostrava: Moravskoslezská vydavatelská společnost, 1939, VII (16. 12. 1939), p. 3.

13 R. Š. Prof. Wiedermann. *Cyril: časopis pro katolickou hudbu posvátnou v československém státě. Zároveň orgán a majetek Obecné Jednoty Cyrilské*. Praha: Obecná Jednota Cyrilská, 1932, 58 (3), p. 28.

and brilliant technique, his registration, his strongly contrasting dynamic effects, and his exploitation of the tone colours of the instrument. His concert was labelled a magical experience. Wiedermann was counted among the greatest masters of the organ.¹⁴

Wiedermann's repertoire

During his life Wiedermann studied and performed an enormous quantity of compositions of many kinds. At the forefront of his interests lay the great organ repertoire, from which he nonetheless made his own selections. He played Bach's toccatas, preludes, fugues, and effective and expressive chorale preludes. Among his favourite pieces were many from the Romantic era: the Frenchmen César Franck, Guilmant, Widor,¹⁵ Saint-Saëns and Vierne, the Italian Marco Enrico Bossi, and the Germans Rheinberger, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Brahms, and even Max Reger to a limited extent. He also liked to play the music of Liszt, both the original organ works and some of the piano works that he had transcribed himself. He also played organ transcriptions of piano pieces and orchestral works by Chopin, Berlioz, Wagner, Rachmaninov and others. He devised thematic programmes centring on particular composers (Bossi, Liszt, Reger, Bach, Handel, Dvořák, Brahms, Mendelssohn) or particular countries (Germany, Austria, Italy, England, Poland, Russia, America). He devoted special attention to Czech music from the Baroque to his own times. He performed compositions by his own teacher Josef Klička (*Legend in D major, Fantasy on the St Wenceslas Chorale, Fantasy on Motifs from Smetana's Vyšehrad*), Vítězslav Novák (including the 1942 premiere at the Prague Municipal House of the *St Wenceslas Triptych*, which he also included in later programmes), J. B. Foerster, Eduard Trégler or Miroslav Krejčí. Wiedermann was also a pioneer, perhaps even the discoverer, of the older repertoire. Not only did he occasionally play music by Bach's German predecessors, such as Buxtehude and Bruhns, and music by Bach's contemporaries, but he also performed older music from other countries, including Georg Muffat, the French organists of the 17th and 18th centuries, Frescobaldi, and Polish composers from the Renaissance (Marcin Leopolita and Mikołaj of Kraków). From among the older Czech composers, he played pieces by Zach, F. X. Brixi, Jan Křtitel Kuchař, and Bohuslav Matěj Černožský.

Unlike most Czech organists, Wiedermann was also very active as a composer. He wrote about 400 pieces, of which 94 were for organ.¹⁶ At his concerts, he often

14 Flyer with selected foreign reviews in English, published in the NY Times, the Sun, the New York AMERICAN Musical Courier, Thüringer Volkswacht, Dagens Nyheter, Social-Demokraten and Svenska Dagbladet. Private collection of Miluše Wiedermannová, Prague.

15 Wiedermann's pupil Bedřich Janáček recalled that when he was learning Dupré's Prelude and Fugue in B minor, Wiedermann was rather restrained in his enthusiasm: "*Widor will always be performed, but Dupré hardly ever*". JANÁČEK, Bedřich. Vzpomínky na B. A. Wiedermann. *Varhaník*. Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitské nakladatelství, 2005 (3), p. 6.

16 MICHÁLKOVÁ SLIMÁČKOVÁ, Jana. The Organ Compositions of Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann: Introduction to the topic. *Muzikološki zbornik / Musicological annual*. 2020, 56 (1), pp. 64–68.

performed compositions of his own, such as his *Toccata and Fugue in F minor*, his *Impetuoso*, his chorale preludes, and his *Finale*.

Interpretation

Wiedermann was considered a musician of exceptional ability. He was an organ virtuoso of the Romantic type, but had a very personal approach to performance. He concentrated on the basic musical material of each work.¹⁷ Today we might consider his performances of early music anachronistic, and we might not even agree with his performances of early 20th-century works. In any case, his approach was rooted in the Romantic tradition. He had a phenomenal technique, especially in his finger dexterity, and was strikingly skilful in choosing stops and providing colour in performance.

Wiedermann's pupil Josef Kubáň characterised his teacher's interpretation thus: "*He did not bow down to any particular style of performance. He was guided by an infallible musical instinct in his choice of registration, which enabled him to give any composition, within the range of possibilities of the instrument, unexpected expressiveness and charm*".¹⁸

Only three recordings of Wiedermann's playing have survived his *Toccata and Fugue in F minor*, and two organ transcriptions of orchestral pieces: the *Largo* from Dvořák's 9th symphony and Fibich's idyll *At Twilight*.¹⁹ This sampling is too small to enable us to evaluate Wiedermann's style of interpretation reliably, so we must depend on the testimony of critics and other witnesses from his time.

In order to have as comprehensive a picture of Wiedermann as possible, it should be mentioned that he was also a sought-after accompanist. He performed together with a series of singers, instrumentalists, and orchestras, as was mentioned above. Nor should we forget that he was an excellent improviser. His organ improvisations were well-thought out and comprehensive, giving the impression that they were written-out compositions.²⁰

Wiedermann's importance

Already in 1958, seven years after Wiedermann's death, Jiří Reinberger wrote that: "*If today we wish to assess the Czech organ school, either here or abroad, it is a simple fact that it*

17 BÄRTL, Petr. *Životní dílo Bedřicha Antonína Wiedermannna*. Master's thesis, Charles University in Prague, 1980. P. 94.

18 KUBÁŇ, Josef. *Malá varhanní kronika*. HOLZKNECHT, Václav, ed. *150 let pražské konzervatoře: Sborník k výročí ústavu*. Praha: Státní hudební vydavatelství, 1961, p. 66.

19 WIEDERMANN, Bedřich Antonín. *Hraje Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann (historický snímek)*. [online]. VT 8541-2. Supraphon, 2011 [cit. 2019-08-18]. URL: <https://www.supraphonline.cz/album/1299-hraje-bedrich-antonin-wiedermann-historicky-snimek>.

20 BÄRTL, Petr. *Životní dílo Bedřicha Antonína Wiedermannna*. Master's thesis, Charles University in Prague, 1980. P. 91.

was founded by Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann, a great artist, a phenomenal teacher, and an exceptionally kind man."²¹

In conclusion, we can say that Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann was the first modern Czech organ virtuoso. He acquainted his audiences with compositions from the Czech lands and the rest of the world, from the Baroque to his own times, in concert halls and in churches. He performed frequently both in Czechoslovakia and abroad (and indeed, he was alone at that time in exporting Czech organ music). He was, clearly, a pioneer. He recognised the neglect that the organ was suffering at that time in the musical and cultural life of Czechoslovakia, and he strove to raise the organ to the level of prestige it had enjoyed during the Baroque. He therefore sought to spread knowledge of the organ, and performed in many different places all over the country, but especially in Prague. Thanks to him, the public had access to a wide organ repertoire, from the Baroque or even earlier, to contemporary compositions, all performed at the highest level. His importance is confirmed by the wide appreciation of his international performances, and it would not be amiss to rank him alongside other organ virtuosos of the time, such as Karl Straube or Marcel Dupré.²²

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