

## CHAPTER II ITALIAN ORGANS

More than a century ago, poor Italian immigrants crossed the Atlantic to build railroads and theaters and to turn Argentina into one of the world's richest nations.<sup>18</sup>

Between the years 1880-1940, Argentina experienced a period of unprecedented modernization. Although primarily fueled by investments from Great Britain, Germany, and the United States, that modernization was largely possible because of an influx of immigrants from Italy. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Italian population in Argentina was estimated at four million.

The Italian immigrants shaped Argentina in many ways. Even today, their influence can be heard in the language spoken in Argentina, Castellano, which differs greatly from that of its neighboring countries. During the period of modernization, their influence was both economic and cultural. The economy was positively affected by the many successful small businesses which were founded by Italian families and friends. More important, the culture of the country was shaped by this influx of Italian immigrants. Among the immigrants were a great number of musicians who brought with them musical scores, instruments, and the great musical tradition of the old world. One still can read Italian surnames on local orchestras' rosters. Among the maestros were organists and organ builders who soon would change the local organ culture and, subsequently, the religious culture by importing Italian organs for their communities. In fact, in Argentina there are, at present, thirty-eight pipe organs of Italian origin.

---

<sup>18</sup> Kevin G. Hall, *Italians in Argentina*. <http://www.latinoamericanstudies/argentina/argentina-italians.htm>. February 20, 2006.

### **A FAMILY OF ORGAN BUILDERS**

In the year 1867, an organ builder by the name of Santiago Poggi (1830-1874) arrived in Buenos Aires. Poggi was born in Genoa, Italy, where he had helped in the construction of an organ for the cathedral. Invited by the Pastor of a Church in downtown Buenos Aires, *Nuestra Señora de Monserrat*, Santiago went to Argentina to install the new organ built by Fratelli Serassi. After the dedication of the instrument during January of 1868, Poggi and his family decided to stay in Argentina where they established a great tradition of organ building.

Santiago Poggi died unexpectedly in the year 1874, leaving his nineteen year old son, Alberto Mateo, with the responsibility of finishing jobs and sustaining the family financially. Alberto followed in the footsteps of his father, eventually assembling numerous organs in Argentina and Chile by using many parts imported from Europe. His talent as an organ constructor extended beyond Italian organs. His reputation reached its peak in the year 1887 when he performed extensive work on the Walcker organ of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Buenos Aires (see Chapter III).

Alberto Poggi was not only a successful organ builder but also an accomplished businessman. With his brother, he managed a successful business that not only installed and maintained organs, but also took care of other instruments such as pianos and music boxes. Eventually they opened a music store in downtown Buenos Aires that was one of the most important in the city. (Figure 12 shows an advertisement for their enterprise.) Later, Alberto's son, Eduardo Santiago, founded the first Argentinean organ factory. Even though his work deserves appreciation and merit, it was not of the caliber and

artisan quality of his predecessors. Eduardo Santiago followed the world trend of the first half of the twentieth century: building instruments using industrial mass production methods.



Figure 12: Advertisement of the Poggi brothers' music business.  
Courtesy: Miguel Juárez

## ITALIAN ORGANS IN ARGENTINA

A great number of Italian organs arrived in Argentina beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of these instruments have not survived to modern times, having been replaced by electro-pneumatic ones of far inferior quality. Despite such a misfortune, some of these Italian treasures, miraculously, still exist. Builders Carlo Vegezzi Bossi, Giacomo Locatelli, Fratelli Serassi, Natale Balbiani, Agati Tronci, Giovanni Tonoli, Giuseppe Bernasconi, Francisco Mascia, Pedrini, Marcelo Borelli, Antero Cadei and Vincenzo Mascioni are represented in Argentina by at least one instrument.

Even though many of these organs are worthy of study, the Serassi organ at the *Church of Nuestra Señora de Monserrat* is the best example in Argentina of the Italian tradition of organ building. Adding to its significance is the fact that it has been preserved in its original state.

## THE SERASSI DYNASTY

The Serassi family was a dynasty of organ builders that for six generations, between the years 1720 and 1895, was admired and respected all over the world for their art and craftsmanship. The origins of the Serassi family can be found in Cardano, in the province of Como, region of Lombardia (in northern Italy) where Giuseppe Serassi was born in the year 1694. Thirty years later he moved to Bergamo where he dedicated his life to building organs. There he founded a dynasty that followed in his footsteps for almost two centuries.

Throughout its history the Serassis constructed eight hundred and thirty-three organs of the highest quality, introducing many innovations while always remaining faithful to the Italian style. Musicologist Guy Oldham gives a clear picture of the style of organ building performed at the Serassi factory:

The organs of the Serassi family retained many features of the classical Italian organ: often one manual with strong bases of chorus stops, many being divided into treble and bass; the higher ranks grouped together into mixtures; and solo half-stops added, such as reeds, 8' flutes and narrow-scaled string stop, the latter mainly in the bass at various pitches for accompanimental purposes.<sup>19</sup>

Among some of the most recognized instruments from the Serassi's workshop are those at the *Santuario de Caravaggio*, Bergamo; *San Crocifisso dell'Annunziata*, Como; *San Tomaso*, Milan; *San Lorenzo*, Florence; and *San Maria Maggiori*, Trent.

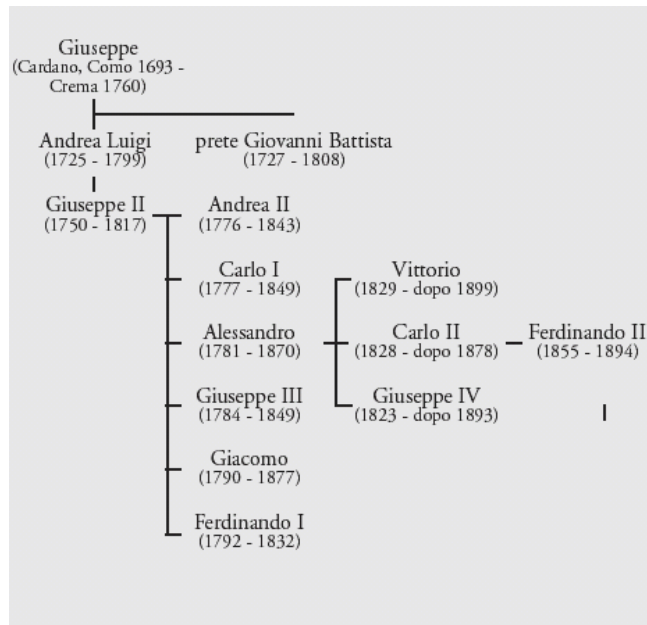


Figure 13: **The Serassi family tree of organ builders.**

Found at <http://www.provincia.bergamo.it/OrganiStorici/out/it/serassi.htm>.  
March 9, 2006

<sup>19</sup> Guy Oldham, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. (New York: Grove's Dictionary of Music Inc., 1980).

After the death of Giuseppe Serassi II in 1817, his sons formed a company (*fraterna*) under the name of Fratelli Serassi. During this era of the Serassi history, several organs were built for churches in Buenos Aires. Five organs were sent to Argentina between 1867 and 1868. Only two instruments have survived: Opus 699 in the *Iglesia de Monserrat* and Opus 700 in the *Iglesia de la Inmaculada Concepción*. Serassi's successor was Giacomo Locatelli, a company that built a large number of organs for South America in the first years of the twentieth century. Several Locatelli organs of very high quality can still be played today in Argentina.

#### **SERASSI'S OPUS 699**

In 1865, almost one hundred years after a fire destroyed the original church from the time of the colony, the *Iglesia de Monserrat* was dedicated. With a neoclassic facade, similar to the one at the Metropolitan Cathedral, the new church was inspired by the Jesuitical architectural style. Even though the *Iglesia*, like the original church, venerates the black Spanish Virgin from the region of *Catalunia*, its construction reflects the influence of Italian culture and especially of the immigrants from Italy who were now present in the *barrio de Monserrat*. Among the many Italian elements found at the church is the outstanding organ built by Fratelli Serassi (Opus 699) and installed by Santiago Poggi as his Opus 1 in Argentina.

Serassi's Opus 699 follows not only the classic Italian tradition of organ building, especially that of the region of Lombardia, but it also reflects the musical trends of the second half of the nineteenth century by including many elements important for

performing secular music. This combination of classical and contemporary influences makes this instrument an extraordinary example of that period of organ building in the Lombardia region. Among the classical Italian characteristics in this Serassi, we find the typical one manual, divided between b and c'; the *Ripieno* formed by the addition of the upper ranks; the pedal with its short extension (C to e') permanently coupled to the first octave of the manual; and a group of solo stops. The organist can use this section of the organ to play the traditional Italian repertory including Frescobaldi, Pasquini, Diruta, and so many other great composers. The sound of the Principale is especially exquisite and one can easily hear the influence that organs from South Germany had on Serassi's instruments. On the other side of the spectrum, as mentioned previously, are many stops and effects that are taken from the secular music of its time, particularly opera. Some of the orchestral sounds like Corno Inglese, Viola, and Flutes, combined with the percussion effects of *Campanelli* and *Timballo*, were essential for the interpretation of transcriptions and newly composed music which was often performed in churches. It is a unique experience to hear transcription of the music of Rossini, as well as compositions like those of Padre Davide da Bergamo (1791-1863) performed on this superb instrument. When the practice of playing secular music in the Roman Catholic Churches was prohibited by the Vatican at the beginning of the twentieth century, construction of church organs of this style stopped.

The organ at the church of Monserrat also contains many mechanical features that are of tremendous use for the rapid change of sonorities during a performance. The Tirapieno is a pull down Pedal found at the right side of the pedal board that pulls all the

stops belonging to the traditional Italian Ripieno. The *Combinazione Libera* (free combination) is a Composition Pedal found next to the Tirapieno that the organist can press to call one or several desired stops from the Solo family (reeds, strings and flutes); the desired stops must be pre-prepared by pulling the stop knobs to a second position that will only engage if the *Combinazione Libera* is pressed. Another very useful mechanism is that of the *Terza Mano* (third hand) which is the equivalent to the modern super octave. There are also nine pull down pedals to call individual stops as well as for the striking of the drum. A special effect of a Timpani is achieved by a mechanism that plays together C, C# and D of the Contrabassi 16 when the f' in the pedal is pressed.

The console of this organ is situated in one of the lateral sides of the case (see figure 14), instead of the front as is found in all the other organs built by Serassi. It is possible that the limited depth in the loft of the church confronted the builder with a challenge that was solved by placing the console on the side. Above the console, there are expression shades, but the effect is not very noticeable due to the fact that the front of the instrument is open (unenclosed).

In the year 1989 a restoration of this historical instrument by organ builders Carlos Alberto Lalli and Enrique Rimoldi was made possible thanks to the generous sponsorship of the *Accademia di Musica Italiana per organo de Pistoia*. In January of 2004, Opus 699 was again in danger of being lost forever when extensive insect damage was discovered in many parts of the organ. Fortunately, superb restoration of many parts, as well as specific treatments to prevent future insect infestations, were successfully performed by Licenciada Celia Torea and Licenciada Susana González. The instrument is



now in very good condition and, without a doubt, is the most important Italian organ in Argentina.

### Specifications

**Fratelli Serassi Opus 699**  
**Iglesia Nuestra Señora de Monserrat, Buenos Aires**  
**Year of construction: 1868**

Manual	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Ripieno</b></p> <p>           Principale Bassi 8' (b)            Principale Soprani 8' (s)            Principale Secondo 8' (desde Do2)            Ottava Bassi 4' (b)            Ottava Soprani 4' (s)            Decimaquinta Bassi 2' (b)            Decimaquinta Soprani 2' (s)            Decimanona            Vigesima seconda 1-<math>\frac{1}{3}</math>' and 1'            Vigesima sesta            Vigesima nona <math>\frac{2}{3}</math>' and <math>\frac{1}{2}</math>' </p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Registri da concerto</b></p> <p>           Fluta Soprani 8' (s)            Tromba Soprani 8' (s)            Fagotto Bassi 8' (b)            Corno Inglese Soprani 16' (s)            Viola Bassi 4' (b)            Flauto in ottava Bassi 4' (b)            Flauto in ottava Soprani 4' (s)            Ottavino Soprani 2' (s)            Flagioletto Bassi 1' (b)            Voce Umana Soprani 8' (s)            Terza Mano </p>
Pedal	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Ripieno</b></p> <p>           Contrabassi 16'+ 8'            Corni 4' </p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Registri da concerto</b></p> <p>Trombone 8'</p>

Manual compass: C–c''' Divided into Bassi (b) and Soprani (s) between b' and c''  
 Pedal compass: C–e'

### Mechanics on pedals:

Ottavino Soprani 2'  
 Tromba Soprani 8'  
 Fagotto Bassi 8'  
 Corno Inglese Soprani 16'

Rollante in C D G A  
 Terza Mano  
 Campanelli (s)  
 Trémolo

Ripieno  
 Tiratutto preparabile  
 Expressione  
 Timpano



Figure 14: **Serassi's Opus 699**  
Corner view  
Photo: Rafael Ferreyra, May 18, 1989

In figure 14, the reader can observe the front and side of the organ. The front is almost touching the railing of the choir loft. The console, situated on the side, has the stop knobs on two rows located at the right side of the keyboard.



**Figure 15: Console of Serassi's Opus 699**

Console view

Photo: Rafael Ferreyra, May 18, 1989

The picture in figure 15 shows the console with all its special features. To the right are the two rows of stop knobs. The row in the far right contains the stops for the Ripieno, while the remaining row manages the Registri da Concerti. The reader can also observe the pedal board; it is important to notice the inclination of the pedals which suggests that the technique used for pedal playing was based on early Italian music. As previously mentioned, rapid changes of registration and color during a piece were very

important and the heart of the Italian music; therefore, all the mechanics shown in figures 15 and 16 were essential for the interpretation of this music.



Figure 16: **Pedal board of Serassi's Opus 699**

Pedal board view

Photo: Ezequiel Menéndez, March 20, 2006

Figure 16 is a detailed picture of the mechanics previously mentioned. Starting on the left and moving to the right, the order of the pull down pedals' functions is as follows:

Tremolo  
 Campanelli Soprano  
 Tromba Soprano  
 Corno Inglese Soprano  
 Ottavino 2' Soprano  
 Fagotti Bassi 8'  
 XXVI-XXIX  
 Espressione  
 Timpano  
 Banda Militare

Tiratutto Preparabile  
Ripieno

The organ at the Church of Monserrat is one of the best examples of Italian organs in Argentina, and, in addition, has been preserved in its original state. The reader should refer to Appendix I for a list of other historical organs in Argentina.

Our journey continues now to the examination of a very different type of instrument, those that came from Germany; this country that has always had close business ties to South America, especially regarding musical instruments.