

Gilding the Organ

From the actions of the church treasurer and church court proceedings

Organs first appeared in small village churches about 1700. The Konrad Church also acquired one around this time. It would certainly have been only a small organ with a couple registers, which in a few decades no longer could satisfy current aspirations. Thus in 1767 the town ordered a new organ from the Faurndauer organ firm Johann G. Spaeth. With this organ builder, the town chose well. The organ's *disposition*, that is its tonal quality corresponded to the taste of the times, but above all he gave the organ works a beautiful public face that we can still admire today. According the contract, he claimed: *so much intricate sculpting of the [ornamental] leaf work is required for decorating the works, requiring much expert skill.*

Now, as is often the case with such plans, they become more expensive than estimated. The organ needed a new setting; the choir loft and much else had to be expanded. The planned construction costs of 850 fl climbed to over 1000 fl, so the town came into some financial straits. The year 1769 at the same time was cold and wet, the wine proceeds barely were sufficient to pay the taxes. The Rems River overflowed its banks into fields and pastures. What now? The only hope left was to plead to the Duke for a princely relief donation, *a mildfürstlichen Beytrag*.

Pastor Sigelen, Official Mezger, and Mayor Joh. S. Lederer* composed the following in Jan 1770, a typical letter of the Baroque era. First the great charitable qualities of the Duke were praised, using large words, and then one got down to brass tacks:

*Most Serene Duke
Gracious Duke and Lord!*

One of the most praiseworthy philanthropic institutions and most uncommonly good deeds they are, that your serenity has come to help with a princely relief each and every person, church and school building project, villages in distress and Piiis Corporibus, and for this reason, we the humble undersigned are in fervent and submissive hope for your high grace to be bestowed on the building plans we have taken on, so that we likewise may stand in your good stead.

First, because we embarked on a renovation project in 1789, and it became substantially more difficult and expensive, and second because it pleased the Lord God to afflict our village in addition to others in our region this spring with a total crop failure, partly through hail, partly through frost and cold, the main source of income was lost, so the townspeople are unable to pay their taxes, or even know how to start their work in the fields again to raise their food, after this harsh spring. So we find ourselves in the dire need...in these circumstances, and humbly approach your Ducal charitable relief patronage and nobility...to seek your help for princely relief and to give us a helping hand.

Your humble ands true subjects, Official, Mayor, Town Council of the town of Geradstetten, Schorndorf district.

Now [the language] “the humble *undersigned are in fervent and submissive hope for your high grace [Subsignierten sind der zuversichtlich dovotesten Hofnung auf die Gnade],*” indicates the need for financial help of the Duke. After the description of the poor grape harvest, the entire town thanked the Duke in advance in anticipation of his help. The hint of a similar precedent in the town of Heppach was not missed, as the official named above was also responsible for this town.

The letter went next to the district office in Schorndorf. The Dean [church official] there confirmed the facts but could not deny himself the opportunity to remark that the town had allowed to get itself in pretty deep through its organ construction and renovation project.

Unfortunately, we do not know if the Duke found himself ready to give the town a helping hand. However, it was as if a miracle had indeed come about, because only a couple months later the town was able to reach an accord with the art painter J. Schnaible for church decoration. The organ was to be painted and gilded, and along with that, five pictures were ordered for shields to be inlaid in the organ casing. The whole job for a cost of 60 fl. No words about poverty and a pressing hunger emergency! Pastor Sigelin remarked in the proceedings:

Actin d. 11 Maii 1770

As art painter Schnaible presented to the assembled church court, he was of the mind to paint the organ casing standing in the church so that it would please everyman’s taste.

When an accord was reached here, he would vouch as an honorable man that on 16 May [Maii] a. c., God willing, he would begin his painting. At the same time the said H. Schnaiblin promised; he wanted to estimate the task of the organ case and the shield inlays, as the accord indicated, for his painting and gilding, at 60 fl.

Hereupon after deliberation it was decided that yet another accord for an increase should be paid for this painting work. At the same time the entire matter was tabled pending ratification by the highly honored District Office in Schorndorf.

The art painter kept his word. A few weeks later the church court could see with its own eyes the painted and gilded organ works. Five wooden plates with pictures of Jesus and His disciples ornamented the organ box casing. Art painter Schnaible did not over promise, for all were satisfied. At the next sitting of the church court he indeed asked for additional pay, as otherwise he said he would lose money on the job.

The reader can still admire Schnaible’s work today. The organ casing face is now under National Historic Monument protection, and it can never be changed. The painted wooded plates were taken down during the church renovation of 1959 and now decorate

the north and south walls of the church. Count Adelman, the responsible official of the Monument Office, was indeed deeply shaken when Pastor Schaller reported to him that the pictures, painted on thick wooden plates, were thinned out on the planning machine of the cabinetmaker Dierolf. Luckily however they were not harmed!

Actim d. 8 June 1770

Just as last month on 11 May a contact was made with Johann Bernhard Schaible, art painter, concerning painting the organ, that he would paint to everyman's taste and put the matter to order. This was done, and the entire painting was finished on 7 June. To all eyes of those here concerned, the job has been done to everyman's taste.

Mr. Schnaible however brings to the court and the assembled town council the request that he wished to add to the contracted 60 fl an additional charge; otherwise he would suffer injury to his art business.

Here it was put to a vote, what the additional payment should be. After discussion it was decided by eight votes that Mr. Schnaible should receive another 20 fl. On that account it was concluded that the said addition should be paid partly from the church funds and partly from the town's. It was resolved that the painting was finished with high tint costs, and exceptional diligence was applied in the painting, much more than anyone had foreseen in making the original contract.

Which transaction was recorded T. Pastor M. Sigelin Mayor, Joh. Simon Lederer, Town Council, Town advisor, church treasurer, and town deputy.*

P. S. According to an article in the *Schorndorfer Zeitung*, the art painter Johann Bernhard Schnaible from Leonberg had decorated the town council room in the Schorndorf Town Hall also in these times with pictures from the Old Testament. By order of the county leader of the NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) the paintings were removed in 1939. "Nice pictures, above all that of the Führer [*Schöne Bilder, vor allem dass des Führers*]," should instead adorn the council room. A Schorndorf town councilman preserved the heavily damaged pictures on the attic floor for the Town Hall, before they could be destroyed, and gave them to the State Museum after the war. They were restored and now again can be viewed in Bälde.