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PHOTOGRAPHY / GERMANY

Pipe dreams

Robert Götzfried's photography project pays tribute to the haunting and beautiful grandeur of Bavaria's 'queen of instruments'.

WRITER Florian Siebeck
PHOTOGRAPHER Robert Götzfried

Church pipe organs are powerful instruments. In fact, the great French novelist Honoré de Balzac once compared them to "a complete orchestra" (when operated by a skilful hand). Their designs are incredibly intricate too: the pipe organ is said to be the most complex mechanical instrument developed before the Industrial Revolution. In Bavaria their forms are particularly ornate and, as Munich-based Robert Götzfried has discovered, highly photogenic.

He has been shooting Bavarian pipe organs for nearly a decade, capturing the graphic nature of their pipes in emphatic fashion. His ongoing *Pipes* project makes up an important part of a portfolio dedicated to serial photography of typically busy locations when they are empty (including train stations, petrol stations and bowling alleys). With *Pipes* he is not just championing the church as a place of worship but as a temple of design ingenuity. And these pipe-organ designs, dating from the 1700s to the modern day, deserve our attention. As Germany continues to secularise, church organs' elaborate designs remain attractions in their own right. We asked the German photographer to tell us about his passion for pipes.

Q. Why did you start photographing these pipe organs?

A. Ten years ago I happened to take a picture of a pipe organ in Herz-Jesu-Kirche in Munich, which eventually landed me a contract with a gallery. I wanted to make it a series but only started about two years ago. I find organ pipes to be extremely impressive: their graphic structures, their lines, their symmetry. These organs are so unique compared to other instruments and it is hard to grasp how their creators manage to not only make them beautiful but also sound so good.

Q. You focus on pipe organs in southern Germany. Why?

A. I live and work in Munich as project leader at McKinsey so it is a bit out of necessity. It is not hard to find them here. Bavaria is heavily Catholic and Catholics like to show off so you find a wide range of beautifully designed organs in a small area – much more than in northern Germany. There are even databases compiled by specialists so, time permitting, I take my Vespa and explore.

Q. Sometimes pipe organs are built bigger than is actually needed. Do they also serve as status symbols?

A. They are called the "queen of instruments" for a reason. Catholic churches in general are good at making you feel very small: entrance doors are big and heavy and you can tell there is an effort to highlight the idea that there is something bigger at work here than yourself. The pipe organs are designed to emit that feeling too. Many pipes that you see are so-called "jewellery" pipes, which are purely there for aesthetic reasons. Sometimes, when I am lucky, I enter an empty church while the organist is playing. It makes me feel very small.

Q. You show the pipes in a centralistic perspective. How do you do this?

A. The pipe organ is often fitted above the front door, facing the altar. After entering the church, I proceed to the altar and only then turn around. These are precious instruments and the moment you turn around feels like a second door is opening up into another world. I work with tilt-shift lenses to get the perspective right and usually I have to sneak behind the altar to be as far away from the instrument as possible. Sometimes, of course, the view is disappointing. But I enjoy doing it no matter what. I work every day in a busy and noisy open-plan office. When I'm in the church, my mind is at ease.

