

Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel (1677-1723)

by Caroline Cannon-Brookes

Bohemia and Moravia are immensely rich in architecture of all periods and especially in the first third of the eighteenth century when the Habsburg Lands experienced a great building boom following the aftermath of the Thirty Years War and the collapse of the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683. Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel, born in Prague in 1677, and of the third generation of a leading family of Italian stonemasons, became one of the most artistically innovative architects responsible for an astonishing number and variety of buildings in the Czech Lands. Recorded as “not strong and with a physical impairment”, he trained as a painter and is mentioned as a builder. He emerges about 1700, clearly up to date with the latest architectural developments and showing an affinity with the achievements of Borromini in Rome who had broken with the Classical tradition of building based on modules for a system based on geometry and angular relations favoured by Gothic architects, as seen in his church of S. Ivo della Sapienza there. The ground plan is based on equilateral triangles which form a six-pointed star, the symbol of wisdom as fitting for the institution. These ideas were taken up by the Theatine architect, Guarino Guarini, who planned his churches on a geometrical basis with particular emphasis on the interpenetration of spatial units as can be seen in the engravings of plans for the Theatine Church in Prague but which were never carried out. One can only conclude that Santini was well connected, in touch with the local architectural milieu and technically competent to satisfy the requirements of the aristocracy who, ever more powerful, supported the Roman Catholic Church which was continuing its programme of re-catholisation in the Czech Lands using all artistic means to get its message across.

The older religious orders set about great programmes of renewal not least the Cistercians who were to be among Santini's major patrons. Abbot Wolfgang Lochner employed him in the rebuilding of the Abbey of Zbraslav and he was soon recommended to the ‘go ahead’ Abbot Jindřich Snopek who had started to renovate the oldest Cistercian Abbey in the Czech Lands at Sedlec close to Kutná Hora. Founded in 1280 and dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady, it had been all but destroyed in the Hussite Wars. Recently restored, the result is inspiring and one is captivated by the way he has treated the vault with a delicate pattern of stucco interlinking ribs which hark back to medieval examples but are yet completely different. Santini is deeply rooted in the Bohemian gothic of Peter Parler's net vaults above the choir of Prague Cathedral and the late flowering of the gothic in Benedict Ried's vault of the Vladislav Hall or, closer still, the nave of St Barbara at Kutná Hora at the beginning of the sixteenth century. At Sedlec he doubled the side aisles and each bay is no longer given a ribbed quadripartite vault but a shallow saucer dome which rests on pointed arches, the wall surfaces are left plain and the whole painted in a very pale primrose yellow giving a light airy effect no doubt far removed from the original darker medieval building. On either side of the crossing he introduced one of his imaginative hallmark features in the encasement of spiral stairs in white stucco. At the west end light pours in from a great clear window, below which on the exterior a porch is attached to the entrance, which supports a Galilee that once housed the figures of St John and the Virgin Mary. Santini provided plans for the rest of the abbey buildings and the Ossuary nearby.

Sedlec provides a good example of his Baroque Gothic style which he further developed in his rebuilding of the destroyed Benedictine monastery at Kladruba in Western Bohemia for Abbot Maurus Finzguth who in 1711 had held a competition between Santini and Christoph Dientzenhofer. He chose Santini's model *al modo gotico* which confirmed the desire of the Abbot to evoke the great days before the Hussite Wars to revitalise the present. As one approaches this seemingly regular Gothic building one's eye rests on an extraordinary dome-like structure which one critic likened to a regal artichoke, topped with a crown in honour of its founder Vladislav I who is buried within. The interior of this great building takes one's breath away. The vault is decorated with a riot of stucco ribs in a maze of floral motifs, crosses and stars, bearing an inscription celebrating the Abbot above the chancel. Below are richly imaginative altars, while figures above the choir stalls lead one's eye to the High Altar, a gothic structure filled with Baroque sculpture around a crucified Christ above the Virgin Mary below. On either side are St Wolfgang and St Benedict to whom the Abbey is dedicated. Light floods in from eight windows beneath the great dome over the crossing before the choir, emphasising the Baroque qualities of this otherwise seemingly gothic structure.

Also in Western Bohemia, Santini had become involved in the ambitious project of rebuilding the Cistercian Abbey at Plasy in the romantic valley of the River Střela near Plzeň founded by Vladislav II in 1144. Burnt down by the Hussites, reconstruction had begun in the 1660s. However Santini provided plans for the extensive monastery buildings with a great church attached, the latter never carried out. He was also responsible for the pilgrimage church at Mariánská Týnice and a number of farms on the monastery estates such as Hubenov, work on all of which continued to be carried on long after his death in 1723. Abbot Eugene Tyttl had first commissioned from him a small chapel at Mladotice dedicated to the Name of Our Lady. This is a small hexagonal building with strongly emphasised corners and concave walls lit by rectangular windows. Inside, the vault rises from the six convex walls in the shape of a star which is repeated in the lantern, while above the altar is a painting of the Virgin within a star. Bernard of Clairvaux placed love at the heart of his mystical theology, sublimated into devotion to the Virgin leading to all Cistercian abbeys being placed under the protection of Our Lady, and as with Borromini symbolism plays a major role in all Santini's work. Built on marshy land, it was perhaps intended to be a test of his technical skills since the great monastery at Plasy, also on marshy land, had to be built on oak piles.

Santini worked on a variety of buildings in Prague, the earliest attributed to him being the Deanery House opposite the north-east end of the cathedral which shows distinctive features associated with his architectural vocabulary such as the pedimental features above the windows, the roof line that rises as a steep gable over the centre hinting at a classical pediment and the flat key stones above the windows on the ground floor. Two of his major palaces are on the Nerudova. The Morzin Palace is built on the site of a number of older buildings which imposed the subtle movement of the façade, and despite the detached features (eye-brows) over the windows all the emphasis is on the entrance where two great figures of Moors by F. M. Brokoff alluding to the name of the owner support the gallery. Even grander is the amazing pictorial entrance to the Thun Kolowrat Palace which includes two eagles, alluding to the arms of the owner perched on rocks conversing across the doorway, while above Jupiter and Juno appear to have a quarrel, all sculpted by M. B. Braun, known as the Bohemian Bernini. Santini also supplied designs for the enlargement of the Kolowrat property at Rychnov nad Kněžnou, while

his best known and most original country house is Karlova Koruna at Chlumec nad Cidlinou. Built for František Ferdinand Kinský, the name dates from the Emperor Charles VI's visit there in 1723. It is a monumental building planned with a central circular hall with three wings set at 120 degrees providing three sets of apartments all with access to the central space and no passages.

In Moravia, Santini provided plans for the complete rebuilding of the Benedictine Order's oldest foundation there, at Rajhrad, south of Brno. These show him working in a very different style. Also built on marshy land, the entrance façade to the church is undistinguished and in no way prepares one for the grandeur of the interior as one approaches the High Altar through a series of ingeniously illuminated spaces. The central area is an irregular octagon lit by two tiers of large unconventionally shaped windows. Furnished with large altars and sculptured saints, the domed area is covered with pale frescoes by J. G. Etgens. Although completed with changes after Santini's death, his concept is Roman in scale and the scenographic effect distinctly theatrical. Grandeur of this scale is also to be found at Křtiny, a place of pilgrimage since the fourteenth century, buried in the country 15 miles north-east of Brno. Here the Premonstratensians, for whom he had worked at Želiv, decided to rehouse the miracle working statue of the Virgin Mary in a grandiose new pilgrimage church. Santini designed a Greek cross plan with balanced pilgrim arcades leading to two chapels dedicated to St Anne and St Joseph (the latter never built). The interior is spacious and vast piers, set diagonally and painted in pale colours, carry the frescoed vault brilliantly lit by large windows, while the statue of the Virgin Mary is placed in an elaborate shrine above the High Altar.

Throughout most of his working life he was supplying Václav Vejmluva, one of the most prestigious Cistercian Abbots, with plans for rebuilding the Abbey at Žďár nad Sázavou founded in 1251. He set about restoring the church with its exceptionally bizarre organ cases and was soon commissioned to design a cemetery intended for victims of plague (which didn't materialise). Planned as an enclosure with, originally, three chapels symbolising the Trinity it was likened to the shape of a skull! As at Plasy, Vejmluva was very active rebuilding parish churches which often have symbolic references, as at Zvole. Dedicated to St Wenceslas the central lantern here is decorated with his instantly recognisable crown, while above the entrance is a metal cross with the Abbot's monogram. At Běstvína one comes across a small roadside chapel distinctively connected with Santini and dedicated to St John of Nepomuk. The well-known story goes that the medieval prelate had refused to divulge the Queen's confession, was tortured and thrown into the River Vltava from the Charles Bridge. At the spot where he drowned a crown of five stars appeared. Although considered a martyr in his own time, during the seventeenth century, and as part of the programme of re-catholisation, he started to be promoted as a Counter-Reformation saint and a new focus. In 1719 a piece of what was thought to be his tongue was found and he was soon on the road to canonisation. Václav Vejmluva decided to honour the new saint with a pilgrimage church on a hill near the monastery at Žďár for which Santini produced one of his most memorable and best known designs. It is called Zelená Hora (Green Hill) after the place from which the monks originally came to Žďár and close to the town of Nepomuk, the birthplace of the Saint.

The small church, built on a five-pointed star plan, is surrounded by a winding pilgrims arcade based on a ten-pointed star with ten concave-convex walls divided by five entrances and five chapel-like spaces. The exterior of the church defies description and is bizarre although one can

distinguish five wings and low dormer Gothic windows, the whole crowned with a dome-like structure supporting a spire. Inside, the body of the church is a circular space at the centre of a five-pointed star. The star provides five chapel-like spaces accommodating the Four Evangelists and the High Altar, with small oval chapels inserted between them, which are subtly carried up through the building. The visitor looks up to two levels of galleries. The first emphasises the circular space and the upper one surrounded by a balustrade, carried on pendentive forms and decorated with a pattern of delicate stucco ribs, twists around the body of the church in a flattened star shape. Light pours in through three different shaped windows representing the tongue, an abbot's mitre and the Trinity, while high above, brilliantly illuminated in the centre of the vault is St John of Nepomuk's flaming tongue in the centre of a ten-pointed star. The remains of the saint are deposited in the main altar where St John of Nepomuk stands on a globe on which five eight-pointed stars of the Cistercian Order represent the Five Continents to which Christianity had been brought. The globe is supported by three angels in the shape of a V alluding to the patron who undoubtedly supplied the complex iconographical programme in celebration of both the new saint and the patrons of the Monastery of Our Lady and the Holy Trinity. Here at Žďár Santini excels in his combination of Gothic motifs with his concept of a Baroque building in which Christian symbolism and directed light play a dramatic role in his greatest creation. St John of Nepomuk was canonised in 1729, and the high-point came in 1735 with celebrations to mark the 500th anniversary of the foundation when the Abbot was raised to the rank of Imperial Councillor.

After Santini died in 1723 his many designs continued to be carried out, albeit often changed and altered, the legacy of his short working life to the architectural heritage of the Czech Republic. Whether it is a great ecclesiastical complex or the façade of a farmstead, his vision bears witness to the faith of the country during the early decades of the eighteenth century.

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