



## **The distinctiveness of Bohemian baroque: a study in the architecture of Central Europe, c.1680-c.1720**

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Between the late seventeenth century and the first years of the eighteenth the architecture of Bohemia underwent a marked transformation as the Italian influences that had been dominant until around 1690 gave way before Southern German and Austrian influences. In 1680 there were 28 architects of Italian origin working in Prague, compared with seven recorded as coming from northern Europe.<sup>1</sup> The rapidity with which German influence displaced Italian can be gauged from the fact that by the later 1690s the proportions were reversed, largely as a result of the great immigration of architects, particularly from southern Germany, which took place from 1690 to 1700. This influx of talent ensured that, despite long-established Italian architectural dominance, the great flowering of the Austrian baroque which took place in the 1680s had rapid repercussions in Bohemia, where its influence interacted with local influences to produce a style of architecture altogether distinct from that prevalent in Austria itself.

The first phase of the Austrian baroque had itself been dependent on Italian artists, and a large number of architects, sculptors and decorators originating in Italy made vital contributions to the development of the style known as 'Imperial Baroque'. This Austrian imperial architectural style, dynamic in its manipulation of volumes and planes, grandiloquent in detail but massively authoritarian in overall character, had reached its fullest expression around 1700, finding its greatest exponents in two Italian-trained native architects, Johann Fischer von Erlach (1656-1723) and Lucas von Hildebrandt (1688-1745). The work of these two architects was to have an important and enduring influence on the architecture of Bohemia and particularly on the Bohemian capital, Prague. The evolution of the initial Italian influence in the baroque architecture of Bohemia and of Austria, however, provided

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1 Eberhard Hempel, *Baroque Art and Architecture in Central Europe* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 125.



**Fig. 1.** Arched loggia at the Valdštejn Palace, Prague.

an early point of divergence between the two architectural schools. Perhaps because of its absorption into the canon of the imperial style, Italian influence in Austria became more staid, producing a baroque which tended to be unwilling to break away from the accepted standard Italian architectural usage: an example of a somewhat rigid, formalised architecture which could result is the interior of Fischer's Karlskirche in Vienna (1716-29). In Bohemia, as in Bavaria, the blend of Austrian and Italian baroque was interpreted with rather more freedom.

It has been said that Austrian influence on Bohemian art and architecture was 'indirect rather than direct ... [Vienna] was one of the stations through which the new iconographic styles passed and from which technical innovations spread'.<sup>2</sup> This line of stylistic and technical influence through Vienna and Prague had its departure point in Italy; by the time it reached Bohemia it had acquired a strong Austrian and south German strain, and went on to blend with other influences from France, Poland and Russia to become a clearly Bohemian style, although closely related to the Austrian and international baroque.

The long period of Italian dominance in Bohemia left several notable buildings in Prague: the Valdštejn Palace (fig. 1), begun in 1621 by Andrea Spezza, blends renaissance elements such as the arched loggia with a baroque façade and a courtyard in the classic Roman baroque pattern, with the three orders superimposed on the three stories. This building marks the early stages of Italian influence, and has parallels in parts of Austria and southern Germany; but characteristically Bohemian

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2 Václav Vilém Štech, *Baroque Sculpture* (London: Spring Books, 1959), p. 35.

features are making their appearance in the large dormer windows with their pointed finials, standing out sharply against the steeply pitched roof.

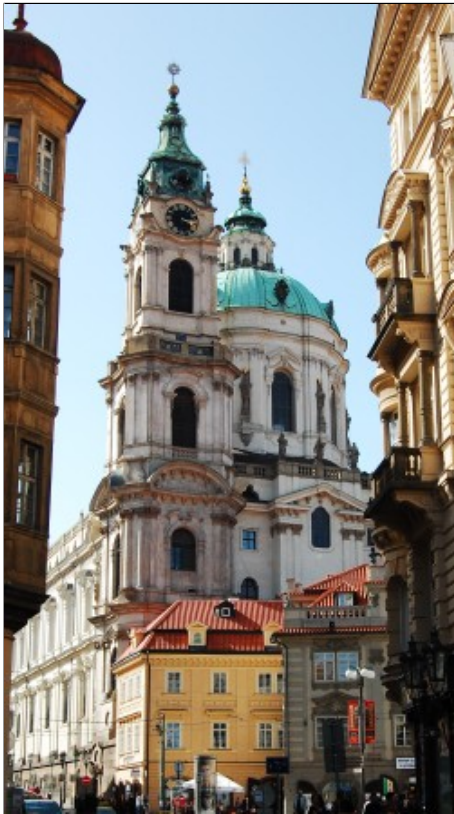
Both the general stimulus of the Italian baroque and the inspiration provided by specific buildings remained strong in Bohemia throughout the seventeenth century, and the Italian vocabulary of form and detail became thoroughly absorbed, but local tradition and character rapidly modified this legacy in a way that did not happen in Austria. Thus the Italian manner of placing a dome on top of a drum, with clear horizontal demarcation between the different components of the structure, remained firmly engrained in Austria, but was rarely employed in Bohemia. The late seventeenth-century Church of St John in Kroměříž, a classic example of later Italian influence, has a dome pierced in the lower part by windows and developing directly from the nave below, without any intervening drum; its oval plan, without aisles or transepts, again links it to southern German styles.

The design of churches provides ample evidence of the way in which the international baroque style was shaped and modified by distinctly Bohemian characteristics. At the centre of church architecture as practised in Bohemia from the end of the seventeenth century to the middle of the eighteenth are Christoph Dientzenhofer (1655-1722) and his son Kilian Ignatz (1689-1751), members of an Upper Bavarian family which provided several of the most important architects of the Central European baroque. Christoph came to Prague in 1678 and over the next half century he and his son created some of the most imaginative, colourful and inventive baroque architecture in the old world, justifying the claim that all the inherent tendencies of the baroque were carried in Bohemia 'to their logical conclusions'.<sup>3</sup>

The church of St Nicholas on the Kleinseite (1703-11) is generally regarded as Christoph Dientzenhofer's finest building, and is the greatest baroque church in Prague (fig. 2). The exterior, with its undulating façade and lantern-capped dome atop a great drum, broadly conforms to the accepted canons of Austro-Italian baroque, and gains great dignity from its restrained ornamentation; but there is a certain plasticity in its monumentality, in the curves of the façade, the delicacy with which the windows are treated, and the lightness of the lantern, indicating the presence of a brightness and energy which is rare in contemporary Austrian churches. If the exterior hints at restlessness, the interior has a sense of perpetual movement which transcends its basically Italian structure, with its curved entablature, the almost organic freedom of the balconies at gallery level, the angled wall pillars

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<sup>3</sup> Štech, *Baroque Sculpture*, p. 19.



**Fig. 2 (above).** Church of St Nicholas on the Kleinseite, Prague. **Fig. 3 (below).** St Margaret's Basilica at Břevnov.



with their tops dissolving into sculpture, the play of convex and concave surfaces, and the expressive yet untheatrical carving of the statuary and public decoration. The whole shows clearly the influence of the Italian baroque architect Guarino Guarini, filtered through a blend of Polish, Bavarian and Bohemian styles.

Christoph's other great church, St Margaret at Břevnov (1707-21), has an exterior which, it has been said, 'defies all rules and transcends all boundaries'.<sup>4</sup> There is nothing quite like it in Austria, or even in Bavaria (fig. 3). The walls are plain, articulated with ionic pilasters and pillars; at the west end, the façade curves back around the corners, without the curves being marked by any particular decoration – the simplicity of this arrangement only adding to its drama. The building's dynamic quality is further emphasised by the lateral projections of the nave, two bays in width, and the recessed endmost bays on either side. The entablature and roof have a distinctly Slavic air, with the sharp corners of the masonry contrasted with curved pediments. The whole building has left the formulae of the Austrian and Italian baroque behind, and has more in common with the styles of Poland than with those of Austria. St Margaret's Church confirms the claim that Bohemian architecture derives its unique quality from a 'joining of Slavic and Germanic elements'.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Hempel, *Baroque Art and Architecture*, p. 129.

5 Christian Norberg-Schultz, *Late Baroque and Rococo Architecture* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 181.

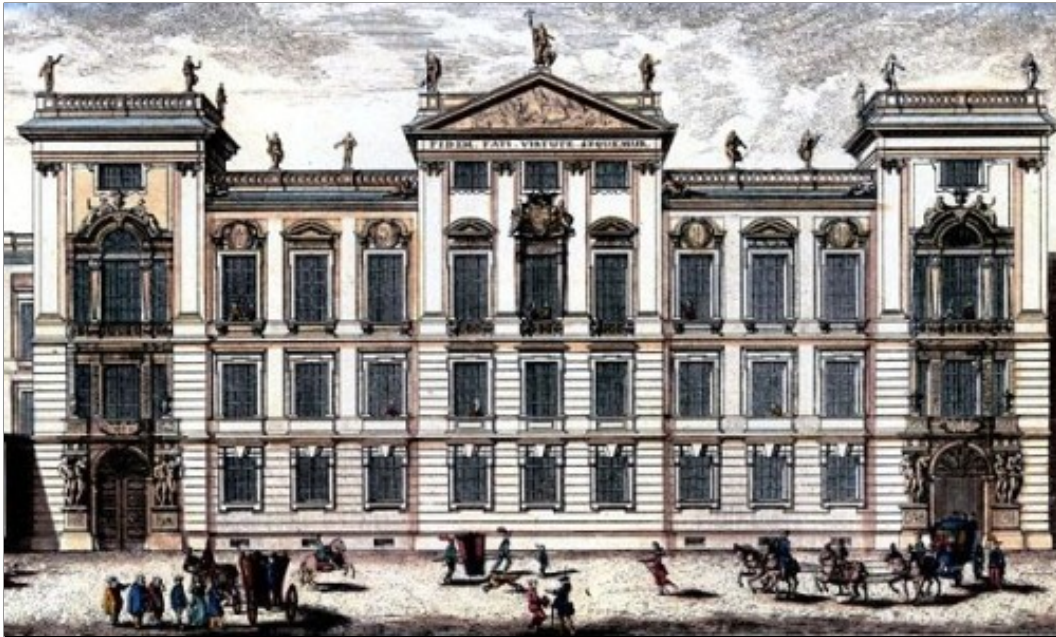


Fig. 4. Clam-Gallas Palace, Prague.

Secular buildings tended not to offer baroque architects the same degree of opportunity for inventiveness and originality as churches, but the palaces, university buildings and country houses of Bohemia can nonetheless by *circa* 1680 be said to have left behind their Italo-Austrian origins and developed a distinctively Bohemian character. The beginnings of Bohemian influence on Italian-derived palace architecture in the case of the Valdstejn Palace, with its steep roof and visually striking dormer windows, have been mentioned above; and a picturesque, broken roof line is one of the defining characteristics of Bohemian architecture during this period. Fischer's Clam-Gallas Palace (fig. 4) of 1713, also in Prague, shares many features with comparable Austrian structures, but with its varied roofline and lively decoration has a picturesque quality which is simply un-Austrian. The skyline of the Clam-Gallas, the expressive detailing of door and window surrounds, and the vigour of sculpture around the entrance portals (by Matthias Braun) combine to create an overall impression of energy and balance which is characteristically Fischer but equally characteristically Bohemian.

The Clam-Gallas Palace can be compared with Fischer's earlier work on the saloon at the Castle of Vranov, which dates from the rebuilding of the castle in 1678-95. This is a far more purely Austrian conception in its somewhat pedantic harmony; the sculpture, by Tobias Kracker, is more refined than Braun's but at the same time much less expressive. The Vranov saloon has more in common with the space and

careful elegance of the Hofburg in Vienna than with the vigorous baroque of Bohemia. The elements of fluidity, inventiveness and playfulness to be found in the baroque architecture of Bohemia are absent from this more ponderous and ‘Germanic’ exercise in the grand architectural manner.

Braun’s sculpture is employed in Prague in ways which can be paralleled in Vienna, notably in its visual integration into architectural compositions around doorways and staircases; but the difference between his Prague work and that to be found in Vienna and other Austrian towns and cities effectively crystallises the distinctiveness of the Bohemian baroque. The colossal eagles which flank one of the doorways of the Thun-Hohenstein Palace in Prague (c.1720) are roughly contemporary with the carving in the Prinz Eugen Stadtpalais in Vienna, and possess the same central European baroque massiveness and boldness, but are more distorted, more textured, more vigorous, more savagely powerful than anything to be found in Vienna. Braun’s sculpture is treated as unified with the architecture in the classic Austrian manner, but never seems to be at ease with its situation – and therein lies its power.

Perhaps the most completely original architecture produced in Bohemia during the early eighteenth century is the ‘Baroque Gothic’ of Johann Saintin-Aichel (1667-1723), a native of Prague who trained in Italy and studied in both England and Holland. His main interests were in lively angular contours and largely unornamented services, which are traditional characteristics of native Bohemian architecture. His most distinctive work, carried out at abbeys and pilgrimage churches, was the product of a conscious attempt to return to native Bohemian traditions. A combination of an assertive, reinvigorated Catholicism and a desire to resurrect what was seen as the greatness of mediaeval Bohemia – rediscovered in the early eighteenth century through the writings of historians, notably the Czech Jesuit, Bohuslaus Balbin (1621-1688) – resulted in the abbeys of Bohemia taking a leading role in the transmission of consciously native Bohemian traditions through their architecture. The outcome was expressed through a reversion to Gothic forms: at the abbeys of Sedlec, Kladruby and Zeliv, Aichel employed Gothic-inspired vaults which were purely for visual effect, being devoid of structural purpose, and which were combined with plain walls, baroque entablatures and classical orders within settings characterized by remarkable light effects to create an architecture quite unlike any other, and unique to Bohemia. When working on purely secular structures, however, Aichel showed himself a master of more conventional Fischer-style Austrian baroque, such as he employed in the Thun-Hohenstein Palace.



Fig. 5. Villa Amerika, Prague.

It is generally accepted that the baroque remained a vigorous and dynamic presence in Bohemian architecture throughout the eighteenth century, long after other parts of Europe had begun to accommodate the quieter and more harmonious influences of the rococo and the neoclassical. Discussing Bohemia's general rejection of the rococo and neoclassical styles later in the eighteenth century, one writer has referred to a 'counter-attack against classicism'<sup>6</sup> on the part of Bohemian architecture, characterized by buildings such as the Villa Amerika of 1720 (fig. 5). This exquisite structure, by K. I. Dientzenhofer, combines the simplicity and elegance of Veneto villa architecture with a confident, rhythmically baroque style of wall articulation and a typically Prague broken roof line of sculpture, moulded dormer windows and strongly grouped chimneys. A similar adherence to the baroque spirit is demonstrated by the Sylva Tarouca Palace of 1749, which despite its careful proportions and symmetry, declines to be a building at rest; instead it shows its baroque vitality in its entablature and pediments, and in the massing of its bold pavilion-like central block and flanking wings. That both the austerity of neoclassicism and the profuse ornament of the rococo were rejected in Bohemia reflected the extent to which baroque had been absorbed into and adapted by the native tradition, acquiring distinctly Bohemian qualities of vigour, energy and originality and expressing a willingness to test the accepted rules of architectural composition to their limits.



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6 Hempel, *Baroque Art and Architecture*, p. 132.