

## AHS London Lecture Thursday 16 September 2021

### Johannes Graf, *Synchronizing Time in Austria.*

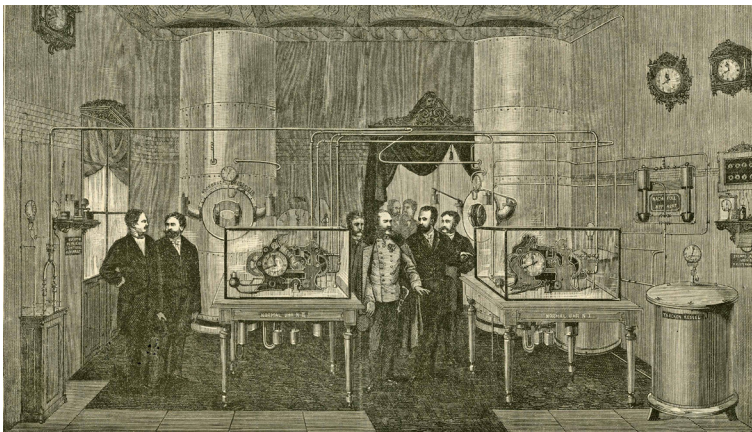
### The Pneumatic Clocks of Carl Albert Mayrhofer

Pneumatic clocks? Who doesn't think of Jules Verne and his extraordinary voyages with steam-powered submarines or manned capsules whizzing through a pipe system? Some characters of Verne's novels really did exist in the second half of the nineteenth century: courageous adventurers or inventors who, like the Austrian Carl Albert Mayrhofer, were completely dedicated to a strange idea. During the 1870s and 1880s, Mayrhofer had devoted himself to pneumatic clocks because those in charge were sceptical that the construction of a central clock system for Vienna would succeed by using the widely unproven technology of electricity. But this choice caused the inventor more problems than the use of electricity could have done.

Mayrhofer desperately campaigned for acceptance of his pneumatic clock system,

which was accompanied by bankruptcies and breakdowns. Like the eccentric inventor Gyro Gearloose in Disney comics, he was bubbling over with ideas, but he had no idea about business. A shady bankrupt by the name of Viktor Popp snatched the patents from Mayrhofer and sold them at an enormous profit to a Parisian public limited company.

With his pneumatic clocks, Mayrhofer had reached a dead end. Today, the Vienna clock system and his inventor are largely forgotten. Only a handful of relics survive. Nevertheless, it is worth looking at that tragic story, some of the anecdotes of which can be quite amusing. For the history of this technological innovation provides an insight into the process of building the modern world that on the one hand seems completely foreign and exotic to us, but in some details very familiar.



The Austrian Emperor visiting the headquarter of the Vienna pneumatic clock system, 1877 (Wood engraving, *Deutsche Uhrmacher-Zeitung* 1888).

*Johannes Graf studied German History and Literature at Berlin. After his Ph.D. he prepared several exhibitions and worked for museums at Braunschweig and Wolfsburg. In 2000 he started as a curator for the Deutsches Uhrenmuseum at Furtwangen, Germany. Since then he published some dozen essays and books on a wide range of historical topics, such as world time and daylight saving time, sports timing, cuckoo and other Black Forest clocks, quartz clocks, German clock industry and horological books.*

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