

Jackson Harmeyer

Recollections from the BachFest Leipzig, Part I

In June 2013, Jackson accompanied the Bach Society Houston on their annual trip to the BachFest Leipzig. This was an incredible chance to hear the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and his contemporaries while exploring Bach's own city and its surroundings. The following is the first part of two in an illustrated account of this amazing journey as later recounted by Jackson in December 2015.

Introduction – From Home to Leipzig. In June 2013, I accompanied the Bach Society Houston on their annual trip to the BachFest Leipzig. About half of our group were parishioners from Christ the King Lutheran Church where the Bach Society is based; others like myself had found the trip on our own. Two months earlier, I had completed my undergraduate thesis on Johann Sebastian Bach and his impact on later generations – a work called “Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers.” It was timely then that I would take this trip to Bach's own city to a festival where his music would be venerated, and the Bach Society Houston was thrilled to have me along.

It was June 13 when we arrived in Leipzig. Night had passed while we were over the Atlantic on our nine-hour flight from Houston to Frankfurt. From Frankfurt, we boarded another, smaller plane for a quick flight over the beautiful German countryside to the airport outside Leipzig. We went by bus from there to Leipzig itself, passing many sights that would soon become quite familiar until we arrived at the city's historic center. Finally, there in front of us stood St. Thomas (*Thomaskirche*) – the church where Bach himself had once worked. The hotel where we would be staying was the Arcona Living Bach 14 across the street from St. Thomas, and my room overlooked the famous statue of Bach that stands in the courtyard. As part of the Houston-Leipzig sister city relationship, we soon attended a welcoming party where we met many dignitaries, including Mayor Burkhard Jung. As part of the welcoming reception, a guitarist gave a recital which included music by Leo Brouwer, an improvisation on “Texas Blues,” and a Bach prelude. Music was certainly a thrilling way to be welcomed into the city!

Right: The hotel where we stayed, Arcona Living Bach 14.

Far right: Jackson pictured with the famous Bach statue outside of Thomaskirche in Leipzig.

Photo credits: Jackson Harmeyer.





Day 1 – Friday, June 14. The next morning, we were given a tour of Leipzig, starting at St. Thomas itself. At St. Thomas, we were shown the Romantic-era organ at the back of the church as well as the “Bach organ” which had been installed only a few years ago according to Bach’s specifications since none of the Leipzig organs Bach would have known had survived to the present day. At the front of the church was Bach’s own gravesite. We were also told about how the steep grade of the roof had spared the church during World War II – the bombs dropped from above by plane had simply rolled-off. We were also pointed towards the stained glass windows which pictured Bach, Felix Mendelssohn, Martin Luther, and another honoring the Houston-Leipzig relationship. We saw the modern pulpit and were also pointed towards the spot where Luther had once spoken from a pulpit which was no longer there. We also saw the baptismal font where Richard Wagner had been baptized – I had not known until then that “*Richard ist Leipziger!*” as the posters for the recent Leipzig Wagner Festival still read.

Leaving St. Thomas, our tour guide took us to the front courtyard where the Bach statue that Mendelssohn had dedicated still stood. A statue of Mendelssohn matching the other Bach statue had also been placed across from the older Bach statue. Having now seen Mendelssohn honored with both this statue and the stained glass at St. Thomas, I began to realize that this was as much Mendelssohn’s city as it was Bach’s; in fact, Leipzig’s devotion to Bach had been fostered by Mendelssohn.

From the front courtyard, we walked to the Arabian Coffee Tree (*Zum Arabischen Coffe Baum*) – the second oldest coffee house in Europe behind one in Paris; Bach had spent many occasions with the Collegium Musicum at the Arabian Coffee Tree, and it was this spot which had inspired his *Coffee Cantata*. From there, we continued wandering around the historic city center until we eventually arrived at the other main church associated with Bach – St. Nicholas (*Nikolaikirche*) where the architecture was much more Roman Catholic than the Gothic, Lutheran architecture of St.

St. Thomas sights (clockwise from upper left): Bach statue dedicated by Mendelssohn; Mendelssohn statue; bell tower; Bach’s gravesite; Romantic-era organ; Bach organ; Mendelssohn stained glass; Bach stained glass. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.

Thomas. St. Thomas and St. Nicholas would be the main two venues for concerts while we were in Leipzig.

We also visited the *Augustus-platz* surrounded on three sides by the *Gewandhaus*, the Leipzig Opera House, and the University of Leipzig with the MDR Tower and the still-under-construction St. Paul’s Church (*Paulinerkirche*) where Bach’s favorite organ had survived until the East German government demolished the original church. We passed *Auerbachs Keller* – Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s favorite restaurant in Leipzig which he wrote about in his *Faust* – as well as the Old City Hall (*Alte Rathaus*) which dated back 500 years to the Renaissance unlike the New City Hall (*Neues Rathaus*) which was only 200 years old!

We returned to St. Thomas and the hotel to rest from there, but I took my own tour of the surrounding areas. In just the first few days, I had already learned the geography of the historic city center and, when we had free time, I would go for walks to explore other sites I knew we would not make as a group. The opening concert of the festival was that night at St. Thomas and featured the St. Thomas Boy Choir (*Thomanerchor*), the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and the Cantor of St. Thomas (*Thomaskantor*) Georg Christoph Biller for a program including George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* Part I (in an infrequently-heard arrangement made by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart) and Bach's cantata *Wachet auf* (BWV 140). The theme of the 2013 festival was *Vita Christi* (Life of Christ) – an attempt, in the larger concerts, to string-together the life of Jesus Christ as retold through Bach's oratorios and cantatas as well as other works by his contemporaries. After the concert, the entire congregation was invited to the New City Hall for a grand party hosted by the mayor.

Day 2 – Saturday, June 15. Our second full day in Leipzig, we took a driving tour of some of the Leipzig sights that we had not seen the previous morning while walking. We then headed to a neighboring village called Zschortau where we visited the little town church. Upon arriving, we were greeted by its pastor and given a full tour. One member of our group was even persuaded to play the organ – a smaller country organ that Bach had helped to design. With another member of the group, I explored the creepy bell tower – creepy because of how uneven and dark the staircase was.

Returning to Leipzig, we visited a monument built in 1912 to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of a critical battle fought outside of Leipzig towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The monument was built with the hope that this battle would be the last time Leipzig

would lose so many to war; they had no idea that World War I was only a few years away and that things would continue to rot through the post-World War I German depression, World War II, and Soviet Bloc years until the 1990s.

At St. Nicholas for that evening's concert, we heard orchestral music performed by the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra. Included was a sinfonia and two concerti by Bach, a Handel concerto grosso, and a concerto by Georg Philipp Telemann. This, I remember, was one of my favorite concerts all festival.

Day 3 – Sunday, June 16. That morning, we went to a worship service at St. Thomas in the order of Bach's time. Observing the service from a historical angle, I enjoyed hearing a Bach cantata performed within its original context, interspersed throughout the service. Lunch with our group followed at *Auerbachs Keller* where I had a delicious lamb/pear/green beans dish. *Auerbachs Keller* had the perfect atmosphere for a restaurant as they had installed a system that would only allow emergency calls to come through on cellphones; and, there were no televisions like so many "nice" restaurants in our own country. That evening's concert was at the Great Hall of the *Gewandhaus* and featured Sir Trevor Pinnock conducting Bach's Christmas Oratorio; this was by far the most comfortable venue as neither of the churches were air-conditioned and their seats were tight, stiff, and wooden.

Leipzig historical district sites (clockwise from upper left): *Gewandhaus*; its Mendelssohn statue; its grand organ; *Auerbachs Keller*; St. Paul's and MDR Tower; Leipzig Opera. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.





Wittenberg sites (clockwise from upper left): Castle-Church tower; Recreation of the door where the 95 Theses were nailed; Luther statue; St. Mary's; its organ; cobblestone street; Luther's meeting table. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.

Day 4 – Monday, June 17. We journeyed by bus to Wittenberg that day, and there we visited the homes of Martin Luther and his assistant Philip Melanchthon (who “was almost completely brains”). Luther’s home was the monastery where he had worked while still a Catholic friar which was later given to him as his private residence by the city’s noble after Catholicism had been chased-out of Wittenberg. Even after the monastery became Luther’s private residence, it remained a meeting place for Luther and his associates, and there is a nice photo of the table that was original to Luther’s day. Melanchthon’s home was more modest. One of the world’s leading Luther scholars gave a guided tour in English of the Luther and Melanchthon homes. There are nice photos from inside these homes as well as the long cobblestone street that ran from one side of town to the other. Although beautiful, the cobblestone of Wittenberg was also the most difficult walking surface anywhere in the trip. It was clear that Wittenberg had changed little since Luther’s time!

Lunch was at a Wittenberg restaurant where all the waitresses were dressed in traditional *lederhosen*. Then we visited St. Mary’s Church (*Marienkirche*) where we saw one of the several Cranach altars of our trip. Much of this church – like much of Germany – was under construction; in this case, St. Mary’s was under construction in preparation for the 500th Anniversary of the nailing of the 95 Theses in 1517. We also passed the door of the All Saints’ Church where the 95 Theses had been nailed; also known as the Castle-Church, there was a nice tower which read “*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott.*”

Back in Leipzig that afternoon, I heard one of the best examples of the great street musicians we heard throughout our trip. This afternoon the musicians were four children playing flutes which I first heard from my hotel window and, enjoying their music so much, I rushed downstairs to hear more of their impromptu concert. Leipzig’s street musicians clearly knew their audience as we heard Bach across town – once, a street musician even played a fugue of his on marimba! In other locales, they still played quality music – I heard Mozart, Bizet, Verdi, and others on different occasions. While there were few beggars, there were plenty of talented street musicians.

That evening’s concert was at St. Thomas and included three of the best solo vocalists I have ever heard. With the Monteverdi Choir Hamburg and Central Germany Chamber Orchestra, they performed Bach’s cantata *Jesu, der du meine Seele* (BWV 78), Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Christus am Olberge*, and the *Stabat mater* (D. 383) by Franz Schubert.





Dresden sites (clockwise from upper left): *Frauenkirche*, notice black bricks; organ of *Kathedrale*; exterior of *Kathedrale*; River Elbe; *Zwinger*; Weber statue; Dresden's *Semperoper*, opera house; organ of *Frauenkirche*. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.

Day 5 – Tuesday, June 18. In the morning, we made our visit to Dresden, again by way of bus. These days, Dresden is best-remembered – at least by Americans – as one of the worst-bombed cities of World War II. Especially at the large church at the center of town called the *Frauenkirche*, you could see evidence of the bombing as many of the exact bricks from before the war had been replaced as they had been for hundreds of years – these were a dark black compared to the newer bricks made in their image which were tan. Apparently, Dresden was rebuilt exactly as it had been with only these hints – and there were many black bricks throughout the city – to show the damage. Dresden itself was a work of art and, while the diverse architecture of Leipzig was beautiful, Dresden seemed to be made of nothing but marble and stone as statues adorned every roof. The other big church we visited – this was actually the town's *Kathedrale* – was nothing but white on the inside, it contained so much marble.

While in Dresden, I began realizing that I had become the *de facto* music scholar for our group. The music scholar who was supposed to have journeyed with us became ill a few weeks before the trip, and so was regrettably unable to travel with us. Soon after arriving in Dresden, I found a Heinrich Schütz monument in a park and then a Carl Maria von Weber statue outside of the Dresden opera house; while I stopped to take photos, most of the group simply kept walking, not realizing the significance of these two composers or their tributes. Later that

afternoon, I went by myself to find the Schütz House which was not much more than a hotel and restaurant with a plaque stating that Schütz had once lived there. It was clear, however, that a Schütz Society would on occasion meet there to discuss his music. From then on, if the group had a question about music, more often than not they asked me.

Our first stop in Dresden had actually been the Gallery of the Old Masters (*Gemäldegalerie alte Meister*) – a fascinating and extensive art museum that was housed in the former royal palace of Dresden called the *Zwinger*. There, we were given a personal tour in English. There the most-renowned piece we saw was Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* which contains those famous baby angels we so often see by themselves. We then visited the *Frauenkirche* where we heard their organ played. Afterwards, we walked along the river atop what used to be Dresden's walled boundaries. Finally, our group visited the *Kathedrale* after which I found the Schütz House.

The evening's concert was at St. Nicholas and featured Schubert's oratorio *Lazarus* and Bach's cantata *Christ lag in Todes Banden*, BWV 4. Although I did not find that listening to the unfamiliar Schubert work was particularly enjoyable, it was still interesting historically as a precursor to the *leitmotiv* idea refined by Wagner. I had heard Bach's exciting cantata once before, but for some reason it sounded very different that evening than how I had remembered it.

About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. He is a graduate of the Louisiana Scholars' College – Louisiana's designated honors college located on the campus of Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana. While there, Jackson completed an undergraduate thesis entitled "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." He has followed classical music around the world, attending the BachFest Leipzig in Germany, Colorado's Aspen Music Festival, and many concerts across Louisiana and Texas. Resident in Alexandria, Louisiana, Jackson works with the Arts Council of Central Louisiana as Series Director of the Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series. He also writes the program notes for the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, blogs at MusicCentral, and continues to study other aspects of music in his spare time. His four-movement Suite for Solo Guitar, Op. 21 received its world premiere on November 5, 2015 at Abendmusik Alexandria.

Read more about Jackson's musical travels at
www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.



Festival Faces (clockwise from upper right): conductor Hermann Max with Christoph Wolff, Bach scholar and director of the *Bach-Archiv*, in the second row of the audience; *Amarcord* at the barren Evangelical-reformed Church; Sir John Eliot Gardiner, the Monteverdi Choir, and English Baroque Soloists at St. Nicholas. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.

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in **Part II** of this narrative.