

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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~ Postcards from Germany ~

Living the Dream

by John Chilgren — Bass



On the morning of June 17, 2018, nearly 60 singers and friends began to converge at the designated meeting place in the Frankfurt airport. Our Germany tour had begun. In the days ahead our voices would ring out in the most extraordinary places, our minds would be indelibly etched with the sights and sounds of ancient pipe organs and German music, our eyes and ears would feast on historic places where the greats of Martin Luther, J. S. Bach, Handel, Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, Friedrich Schiller, von Goethe, among many others, wrote, studied, directed, walked, performed and lived. Our deep affection for J. S. Bach and those he influenced became real and personal, often emotional. This excursion, both a retrospective dive into the past as well as into the changes brought about by time, was truly transformational.

From Frankfurt we traveled east to the beautifully preserved 1,300-year-old town of Erfurt, the capital of the state of Thuringia. Here Martin Luther attended the University of Erfurt and lived in the Augustinian Monastery. It was the birthplace of J.S. Bach's father; Bach's parents were married in the *Kaufmannskirche*, just a few blocks from our hotel. Several of J. S. Bach's relatives lived and worked in Erfurt, and the young Bach visited with relatives here. Erfurt is a feast for the eyes, with its towering St. Mary's Cathedral and neighboring St. Severus church, the unique Merchants' Bridge over the Gera River, and one of the oldest synagogue buildings in Europe. How fitting it was to perform our first concert to an appreciative audience in *Andreaskirche* in scenic Erfurt.



Our second day began with a short ride to Bach's birthplace, Eisenach, where J. S. Bach's father was town musician. During a visit to a quiet St. George's Church we gathered around the font where an infant Johann Sebastian was baptized in 1685 and we sang the chorale from his Christmas Oratorio *Ich steh an deiner Krippe hier (I stand by your cradle here)*.

Climbing the steps to the UNESCO-designated Wartburg Castle some 1,350 ft above the town, we experienced an incredible view of the plain below and toured the vast innards of this remarkable castle. The 1,000-year-old edifice is where Martin Luther, an outcast with a price on his head, hid out for 10 months and translated the New Testament from the original Greek into German vernacular; this translation added fuel to the Reformation as well as forever altering for the better the German language.



Traveling north from Erfurt to Mühlhausen, we visited the soaring Divi Blasii Church where young Bach was organist from 1707 to 1708. The current organist, Oliver Stetchbart, treated us to a Bach Partita on an organ designed by J. S. Bach himself. Ralph Nelson and Grant Edwards also performed on this



instrument, and the choir was glad to sing *Ein Feste Burg* which seemed appropriate here in Luther country. We also sang the chorale from Cantata 4, one of Bach's earliest cantatas, which was composed here in Mühlhausen:

**Christus will die Koste sein
Und speisen die Seel allein,
Der Glaub will keins andern leben. Halleluja!**

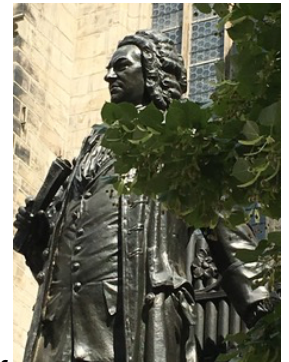
On another day we traveled a short distance to Weimar where Bach was court organist for the Duke (1708-1717). Here six of Bach's children were born. Two of them, Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Phillip Emanuel, became well-known composers. Weimar is one of the great cultural centers of Europe, being the home of Goethe, Schiller, and Herder. Our tour included the Church of St. Peter and Paul with the prominent Cranach Altarpiece and in which Bach was a frequent organist. Martin Luther preached here in the early 1500s; the church was badly damaged during WWII but Luther's pulpit survived.



We also visited the oldest extant burial ground, located at St. Jacob's Church (*Jacobskirche*); this was the site of our Weimar concert as well as the church where Goethe was married and on whose grounds lies the tomb of the renowned Renaissance painter, Lucas Cranach the Elder. Weimar, we learned, was one of the cities in which the Bauhaus movement (the idea of putting fine arts on an equal footing with craftsmanship) developed and influenced subsequent generations.

Perhaps the most significant days of our tour occurred in the 1,000 year-old city of Leipzig that merges its stately pre-war buildings with a dash of modernity. Most importantly to us, Leipzig is the crown jewel where J. S. Bach spent the last 27 years of his life, working, teaching, composing and performing in four different churches, two of which remain. We walked the *Leipziger Notenspur* (Music Trail) that took us past:

- the Opera House
- the *Gewandhaus* (home to the oldest symphony in the world)
- the University of Leipzig with its spectacular *Paulinum* (the University Church)
- *Nicolaikirche* (in which Bach premiered the St. John Passion and part of the Christmas Oratorio)
- the *Coffe Baum* (the oldest coffee house in Germany and a meeting place for artists and scholars including Robert Schumann)
- the Wagner memorial (Wagner was born here in 1813)
- the Bach Museum, and
- the magnificent *Thomaskirche*, the other major Bach church and home of the *Thomanerchor*, the oldest cultural establishment in Leipzig, now over 800 years old.



Here in St. Thomas Church Bach performed hundreds of compositions, including the premiere of his St. Matthew Passion.



Another emotional high for us was singing *Ich steh an deiner Krippen hier* (the same chorale we had sung a few days earlier at his baptismal font) as we gathered around Bach's final resting place in the sanctuary of the *Thomaskirche*. There are always people visiting this church so we had a ready-made audience.

Two of these churches require more discussion. First, the *Paulinum* replaced one of Bach's other churches, *Neue Kirche* or New Church, that was inaugurated in 1545 by Martin Luther and was donated to the nearby University of Leipzig and often went by the name University Church. Although largely unscathed after the war, it was dynamited by the communist regime in 1968. The *Paulinum* was its replacement and services were first performed there in 2009.

Second, the *Nicolaikirche* rose to international fame during "Monday Demonstrations" against the GDR (German Democratic Republic) in the fall of 1989 when peaceful protests by German Lutherans began in the church, eventually spilling onto Karl Marx Square (now *Augustusplatz*) on October 9. Actually, peace prayers (*Friedensgebete*) had begun as early as 1981 in the *Nicolaikirche* organized by Christian Führer, the church pastor; even the *Stasi* (secret police) were unable to stop these peace protests that drew extremely large numbers.



Eventually, the Socialist leader resigned and the Berlin wall came down in November 1989.



We would later perform an evening concert in the *Nikolaikirche*, another moving experience for us. To think that we were able to perform in the two most important Baroque churches in Bach's time was as much ethereal as it was uplifting.

Not far from the *Gewandhaus* is the Mendelssohn House where the composer lived during his final years and is his only residence that can be visited. Carefully restored, this house talked to us as its squeaky boards reminded us that we were treading the very floors where both he and his talented sister Fanny lived and composed. It was Mendelssohn who rescued Bach from a century of oblivion by performing the St. Matthew Passion in Berlin in 1829, so Bach aficionados owe much to this composer.

On a subsequent rainy day, one of only two during our tour, we visited Halle (Saale), the birthplace of a Bach contemporary, G. F. Handel, whose statue is strategically placed in the middle of Market Square surrounded by the four-steepled Market Church and the immense medieval Red Tower. We walked the streets near the square to the Handel Museum that featured countless displays depicting Handel's life in England where he became a citizen and produced his most brilliant works. In addition, hundreds of historical musical instruments, some available for playing, are tastefully displayed. One could have spent days here!



In the final days of the tour we bussed to Dresden, a 13th-century city and capital of Saxony. It was one of the most beautiful and culturally rich cities of Europe in pre-war eras but its elaborate center was destroyed in 1945. Now, resurrected from the rubble, the magnificent buildings have been restored to their original beauty. The marvels of the opera house were explained during a tour that also led us to the Baroque Zwinger Palace and its Semper Gallery, with invaluable works of early Italian Renaissance as well as Dutch, Flemish, German, French and Spanish painters.

Nearby is the imposing *Frauenkirche* that too was destroyed in 1945 but has now been fully rebuilt to its original Baroque form with one of the largest domes in Europe. Once again we were allowed a few minutes to sing to an audience of hundreds who were visiting.



The final concert in Dresden's *Annenkirche* united the *Vocalis Ensemble Dresden*, the Dresden Sinfonietta, and the Bach Cantata Choir. The concert was followed by a party at a local establishment that we filled to overflowing. We could never have conceived of this day!

We cannot underestimate the impact of this tour. We were thoroughly enriched by these eleven days of music, sightseeing, dining, walking and bussing which will feed our memories for years. Indeed, it will empower us with the spirits of Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn and others throughout the remainder of our music lives.



John Chilgren sings bass with the Bach Cantata Choir; he formerly sang with the Portland Symphonic Choir and Choral Arts Ensemble. For 20 years he was pianist and choral director of three SW United Methodist Churches and has been a book and film reviewer for over 45 years.

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Recommended Reading

A regular member of our audience has published a book that is very relevant to the choir's travels. George Fox Professor Emeritus of Religion Roger J. Newell's *Keine Gewalt! No Violence!* discusses the important role of Leipzig's Nicholaikirche (St. Nicholas Church) in Germany's reunification.

"A study tour to Leipzig in the former East Germany (GDR) raised new questions for Roger Newell about the long struggle of the Protestant church with the German state in the twentieth century. How was it possible that a church, unable to stop the Nazis, helped bring a totalitarian government to its knees fifty years later?" — Amazon

<https://www.amazon.com/Keine-Gewalt-Non-violent-Reunification-Germany/dp/1532612842>

The Bach Cantata Choir sang in the Nicholaikirche on June 21, 2018.

The Bach Cantata Choir's mission is to sing the entire set of cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach over a period of 30 years.

The Bach Cantata Choir is a legally organized non-profit corporation under Oregon law, and is a registered 501(c)(3) corporation with the IRS. Donations to the choir are tax-deductible to the extent provided by law and regulation.

The *BachBeat* newsletter is published cyclically by the Bach Cantata Choir.

Emily Rampton, Editor

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