

Jackson Harmeyer

Recollections from the BachFest Leipzig, Part II

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 second part of two in an illustrated account of this amazing journey as later recounted by Jackson in December 2015. [Click Here to read Part I.](#)

Introduction to Part II. The 2013 BachFest Leipzig began Friday, June 14. That evening we were at St. Thomas (*Thomaskirche*) – the church where Bach himself had once worked – for a performance of George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* Part I in an arrangement made by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as well as Bach's famous cantata *Wachet auf*. The theme of that year's festival was *Vita Christi* (Life of Christ), so this was just the first part in an attempt to retell the life of Jesus Christ through Bach's choral works and those of his contemporaries.

Being in Bach's own city, hearing his music in the venues he would have known, was quite exciting. I had two months earlier completed my undergraduate thesis on Bach and his impact on later generations – a work called "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers" – and for many years I had been a devotee of Bach's music.

In our first few days, we toured other Leipzig sights, including St. Nicholas (*Nikolaikirche*), another church where Bach once worked; the Arabian Coffee Tree where Bach would gather with the Collegium Musicum; the *Gewandhaus* where the symphony orchestra plays; and also *Auerbachs Keller*, the restaurant Johann Wolfgang Goethe had written about in his *Faust*. We also began venturing out from Leipzig, visiting neighboring cities like Wittenberg and Dresden. Wednesday we would visit Eisenach...

Right: Jackson pictured with the famous Bach statue outside of *Thomaskirche* in Leipzig. **Photo credit:** Jackson Harmeyer.

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.





Far left: Bach House and Museum. **Left:** Bach statue outside of house. **Above:** Demonstration on a period harpsichord. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.

Day 6 – Wednesday, June 19. We made our furthest excursion of the trip on Wednesday. That morning, about half our group made the bus trip to Eisenach, halfway back to Frankfurt in the next state over from Saxony – the pastoral and hilly Thuringia (and every hill seemed to have a castle atop). The town of Eisenach was the birthplace of Bach, but it is also the home of the Wartburg castle. Atop a mountain overlooking Eisenach, the Wartburg was not only a hiding place for Luther, but the setting of Franz Liszt's oratorio *St. Elisabeth* and Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*; the medieval *Minnesinger* Walther von der Vogelweide also had connections to the Wartburg and he is likewise one of the characters in *Tannhäuser*.

Our first stop in Eisenach was the Bach House and Museum. Although it is believed Bach was born in this house, he would have spent very little time there before his parents died and he went to live with his eldest brother. Nonetheless, it was cool being there, and both the original house and the adjacent museum building with its very modern architecture had great displays.

Upon first entering the Bach House, we were treated to a demonstration of the different keyboard instruments housed there – I do not believe any were originally owned by Bach but all were from his era. There were also several non-keyboard instruments owned by Bach on display, including the fabled instrument known as the serpent which we had learned about in school.

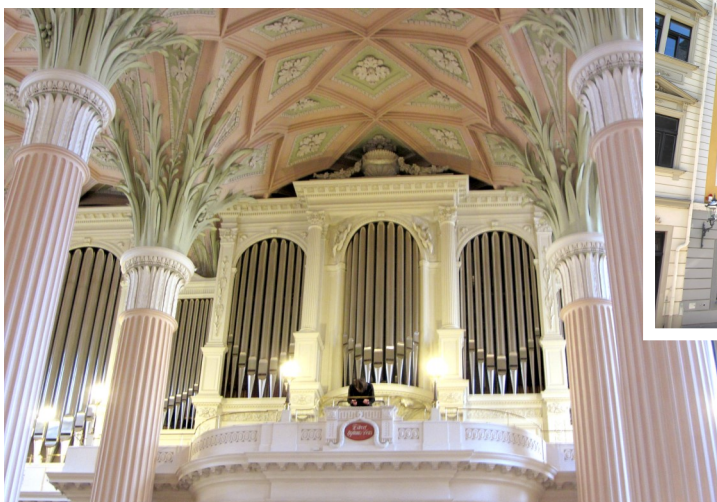
Leaving the Bach House, we walked around Eisenach some – our walk including a visit to the *Georgenkirche* where Bach was baptized – before taking the bus up the hill to the Wartburg. The tour inside the Wartburg was quite impressive, satisfying my need to see a real castle while in Germany. In the grand concert hall of the Wartburg, they had not only rigged-up a stereo system to play the famous march from *Tannhäuser* as visitors entered, but would regularly stage performances of the full opera.

We had planned to stop in Weimar on the way back from Eisenach, but were only able to see a little that evening; a few of us would decide to return to Weimar by train Friday to see more.

Wednesday evening, we were back in Leipzig for a chamber orchestra concert in the Mendelssohn Hall of the *Gewandhaus* (this is the auditorium's smaller hall). Led by conductor Reinhard Goebel, the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra played music by J. S. Bach, a relative Johann Bernhard Bach, Johann Friedrich Fasch, and Pietro Locatelli. The concert, however, got off to a rough start with the Fasch piece which included four horns which were not only too loud, but unable to keep up with Goebel's quick pace; the hornists looked generally disgusted with Goebel afterwards. The rest of the concert was better, but the pace still felt pretty rushed.

Below: Grand concert hall of Wartburg. **Right:** Mural showing Liszt and Wagner, shown with lutes. **Far right:** Exterior of castle. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.





Leipzig sites (clockwise from upper left): interior of St. Nicholas; exterior of St. Nicholas; Wagner memorial; *Thüringer hof* where Martin Luther apparently ate when in Leipzig; *Bach-Archiv*; organ of St. Nicholas. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.

Day 7 – Thursday, June 20. After several days of travel, we stayed in Leipzig on Thursday. That morning, we took another walking tour passing the American Embassy, visiting the library, and walking through the Clara Zetkin Park where I desperately searched for a lime tree (*Lindenbaum*) – these trees feature prominently in Romantic-era German literature, and they are where couples go to make love and then return to commit suicide when things go wrong (i.e. Goethe’s *Werther* but also Schubert’s *Winterreise*). Although I could identify no linden trees at the park, I soon discovered that the two trees right outside of my hotel window next to the Bach statue were in fact linden trees.

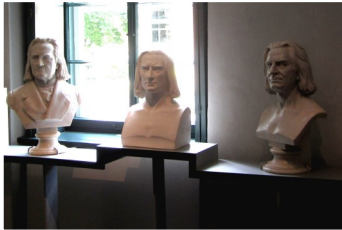
Our walk eventually took us to the *Forum Thomanum* where the St. Thomas Boy Choir (*Thomanerchor*) live and learn. After a tour of the school – including less pleasant things like dorm rooms, gyms, and bathrooms – we ate lunch alongside the boy choir in their cafeteria.

Afterwards, I took advantage of my free time to visit the University of Leipzig campus and the *Bach-Archiv*; the university was at the *Augustus-platz* while the *Bach-Archiv* was next door to our hotel in the house once owned by Bach’s friend Georg

Heinrich Bose. Many of the exhibits in the Bose House were fascinating, but photos were not permitted inside. The exhibits would remind you of the Eisenach Bach House.

In the evening, I attended an organ recital at the *Nikolaikirche* which was really my only chance to hear the magnificent organ at St. Nicholas. At this recital, organist Gunther Rost played several pieces by Bach plus two pieces by another Leipzig hero – the nineteenth-century organist-composer Max Reger – and the Third Organ Sonata by Felix Mendelssohn.

Later that evening, the performance of the *St. John Passion* at St. Thomas gave me my first of two encounters with Sir John Eliot Gardiner, one of my absolute favorite personalities in early music. He, his Monteverdi Choir, and English Baroque Soloists gave a stunning performance of the *St. John Passion* amid lightning and thunder from the fierce storm outside. Although this was the first time I had heard the *St. John Passion*, I enjoyed it much better than the familiar *St. Matthew Passion*. At the time I found the *St. John* much more dynamic while I felt the *St. Matthew* kept getting stuck on recitatives and other formalities; I have come to terms with the *St. Matthew* since that time though.



Day 8 – Friday, June 21.

Disappointed we had not had more time in Weimar on Wednesday, four of us returned there on Friday. We took the train, setting-out from Leipzig's central train station (*Hauptbahnhof*). The first site I visited in Weimar was the Franz Liszt House. This was where the composer spent his later years – from 1869 to 1886 the plaque says – and it was amazing how simple the house was; of course, he was a Catholic priest by then and intended to live a much more virtuous life than he had in his younger days. I saw his piano and, unlike many of the Bach “artifacts,” this was the actual piano he owned, played on, and composed at. (The Mendelssohn and Schumann Houses I visited the next day also contained true artifacts rather than substitutes or recreations, but little had survived from as far back as Bach's life.) The most intriguing item was the *armoire* in Liszt's bedroom: he apparently kept all his scores there – as close to him as possible – and made other arrangements for his clothes. There was also a “travelling piano” which was small and could detach from its stand so Liszt could bring it on trips to practice and compose. There were also plenty of busts and masks – mostly of himself, but also at least one bust of his daughter Cosima Liszt Wagner.

After the Liszt House, we navigated the maze that was Weimar to arrive at the modern Bauhaus University. Bauhaus had its origins in Weimar, and later I got a brief chance to visit the Bauhaus Museum – located at the town square across from Weimar's opera house – where the Bauhaus school had actually worked between the wars. Before that though, I visited the homes of Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. The Goethe House was full of art and artifacts from the years he spent collecting and he had several different collections reflecting the different interests of this “polymath.” The Schiller House was the opposite and only had the bare minimums Schiller needed to raise his large family.

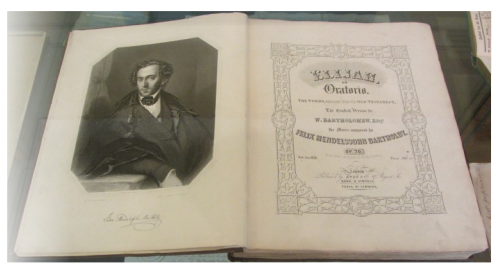
Returning to Leipzig in the late afternoon, we attended two concerts. The first was at the *Nikolaikirche* and featured Hermann Max and the Rheinische Katorei performing the cantata *Halt im Gedachtnis Jesum Christ*, BWV 67 by J. S. Bach



Weimar sites (clockwise from upper left): Liszt's *armoire*; Liszt House; Goethe and Schiller statues in front of Weimar opera house, the *Deutsches Nationaltheater*; Schiller House; Goethe House; Liszt's piano; several busts of Liszt. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.

and *Die Auferstehung und Himmelfahrt Jesu*, Wq. 240 by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. I remember actually liking the C. P. E. Bach piece better and, if I had not realized it already, I then realized that every Bach cantata – no matter how obscure to the rest of the world – was in the standard repertoire in Leipzig.

The evening's second concert followed in the barren Evangelical -reformed Church just outside of the historic city center a few blocks down from the *Hauptbahnhof*. There, from 10:30 PM to about midnight, a group five graduates of the *Thomanerchor* called *Amarcord* sang chant and Renaissance polyphony *a cappella*. Before this concert, I had never really appreciated the beauty of chant, but *Amarcord* was absolutely stunning and the unadorned venue was the perfect setting for this unadorned style of singing.



Leipzig's Mendelssohn and Schumann Houses (clockwise from upper left): Mendelssohn's study with Goethe and Bach busts; exterior of Mendelssohn House; piano at Schumann House; exterior of Schumann House; central corridor of Mendelssohn House; *Elijah* manuscript. **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.



Day 9 – Saturday, June 22. The last two days of our trip were essentially left as free days until the evenings when the concerts began. A few days earlier, I had purchased a book highlighting Leipzig music sights and made it my goal these two days to walk around town seeing as many of these sights as possible. Saturday especially I had a good amount of free time so I hit such sights as the Mendelssohn House, Grassi Museum of Musical Instruments, and Schumann House.

The Mendelssohn House is down the street from the *Gewandhaus*. Located on the third floor of an apartment complex, it is somewhat awkward inside as Mendelssohn and his family occupied several of the rooms shooting-off a long hallway to either side. As exhibits, each room had a different purpose with different artifacts. As soon as you entered, there was a large open area that – today at least – serves as a recital hall. Towards the end of the hallway was Mendelssohn's composing studio with a piano and busts of his heroes – Bach and Goethe. In the hall just outside the composing room stood a nice bust of Mendelssohn himself. Throughout the house there were paintings Mendelssohn had created, and many were quite nice. One room had the manuscript of *Elijah* and, in fact, that was the main composition that Mendelssohn had written in that house: he had saved-up his entire lifetime to purchase such a nice house, and within a few years he had passed away. At the end of the hallway (opposite of Mendelssohn's bust) was where Mendelssohn's deathbed once was (he had moved out of his bedroom by then). Nearby there was also a replica of the first *Gewandhaus* – the one Mendelssohn would have known compared to the modern one which was built during the communist era.

From the Mendelssohn House, I walked back towards the *Augustus-platz* and then towards the *Johannis-platz* where the Grassi is located. The Grassi apparently holds the second largest collection of musical instruments in Europe, and – believe me – the instruments seemed to go on forever. They were grouped by historical era starting in the Middle Ages and moving to the present day: I found the first part of the museum more interesting than the second part which was mainly old Victrolas, nickelodeons, phonographs, and so on alongside obscure, experimental twentieth-century instruments that had never caught on. The first few rooms of the Grassi, however, contained all sorts of exciting instruments for which major composers had written music but which had, in most cases, become outmoded over time.

We were allowed to take photos, so I have pictures of some cool instruments like Bartolomeo Cristofori's original pianofortes and harpsichords, serpents, fan-flutes, violas da gamba, barytons (as in the favorite instrument of Haydn's patron), arpeggiones (as in the Schubert sonata), basset horns, table pianos, and so on. The Grassi also houses the only surviving organ owned by Bach – I believe it is the one with the trapezoidal bench, although its pipes seem to be missing. There were also really weird things like glass flutes and glass trumpets – so few survive today because, duh, they break very easily which was the whole reason they stopped making them after the fad had passed. Upstairs from the main galleries, there was a special exhibit about the instruments of Wagner's orchestra; the main attraction for me here was the Wagner tuba.

From the Grassi, there was a long walk through a modern neighborhood to the Schumann House. Cool as it was to be where Robert and Clara Schumann had once lived, this was really just their first apartment after getting married and the display was pretty small. There were not many artifacts to see, and the building where it was housed was primarily a daycare/elementary school named in the Schumanns' honor. Many of the exhibits were, therefore, very kid friendly. I resolved that the main Schumann House must be in Zwickau where they lived later after they were more established.

That evening, we were back at St. Nicholas for a performance by Sir John Eliot Gardiner, the Monteverdi Choir, and English Baroque Soloists of the *Easter Oratorio*, BWV 249 and *Ascension Oratorio*, BWV 11. Both are much shorter than the *Christmas Oratorio* and they actually resemble cantatas more than full-fledged oratorios.

Day 10 – Sunday, June 23. My last day in Leipzig, I took the morning to walk the trail around the historic city center. Most of the route was greenspace and there were many statues and so

forth to see. There was a particularly impressive Wagner monument which seemed to say that his shadow – his anti-Semitism, influence on the Nazis, and whatever – has been bigger than the man himself. Scenes from his operas were the foundation on which Wagner and his shadow stood. After making the full loop – from *Thomaskirche* north towards the Evangelical-reformed Church, towards the *Hauptbahnhof*, to the Wagner memorial, through the *Augustus-platz*, to the front of the *Neues Rathaus* where the Stasi Museum was, and back to *Thomaskirche* – I returned to my hotel room before walking through town too.

In the evening, we attended the final concert of the festival with a performance of the B Minor Mass by the *Thomanerchor* and Freiburg Baroque Orchestra led by *Thomaskantor* Georg Christoph Biller. I get the impression that it is a tradition to end the festival each year with the B Minor Mass as performed by *Thomanerchor* and *Thomaskantor*. After a great two weeks, leaving Leipzig the next morning felt like leaving home.

JSH 15.12.19



Grassi Museum of Musical Instruments (clockwise from upper left): baryton; arpeggione; front gate of the Grassi; Wagner tuba; serpent and its relative, the ophicleide; only surviving organ which had belonged to Bach; one of three surviving pianofortes built by Bartolomeo Cristofori (only others are in New York and Rome). **Photo credits:** Jackson Harmeyer.