

## Easter in Leipzig

The idea simply came to me: I want to hear the St Matthew Passion in the Thomaskirche (St Thomas's), Leipzig.

I had visited there in 2015 and enjoyed that visit immensely. So, after spending four days in Barcelona, it was plane to Berlin and train to Leipzig.

The planning started much earlier. In March 2017 I contacted the Leipzig Gewandhaus to confirm that tickets would go on sale in June, only to find that I could book now and the order would be confirmed at the end of May. I asked for the most expensive ticket available – €69 (around AUD 100). That being booked, I could make the other arrangements.

I arrived in Leipzig the Wednesday before Easter, having received an email from the Gewandhaus to let me know I could pick my ticket up from the St Thomas's Shop up to 30 minutes before the performance. However, I was keen to have it, so I

went to the Box Office at the Gewandhaus, gave my name and the ticket was handed over. Full marks for their organisation!

There are two large churches in the centre of Leipzig, the other

being the Nikolaikirche (St Nicholas). Bach was also responsible for music there, but the church interior was transformed in the later 1700s into a wonderful Baroque forest. The church boasts the largest church organ in Saxony. It is also renowned for the Prayers for Peace on Mondays which played an important part in the peaceful revolution that ended the rule of the Communist Party in East Germany.

There was a communion service on Maundy Thursday evening which included admission to communion of young people. The service had the familiar structure of the Liturgy of the Word followed by the Communion, but there was no 'Lift up your hearts' dialogue nor 'Holy, holy, holy'. One thing for which I was ready after my previous experience in this city was that the communion wine is table wine rather than fortified; this had been

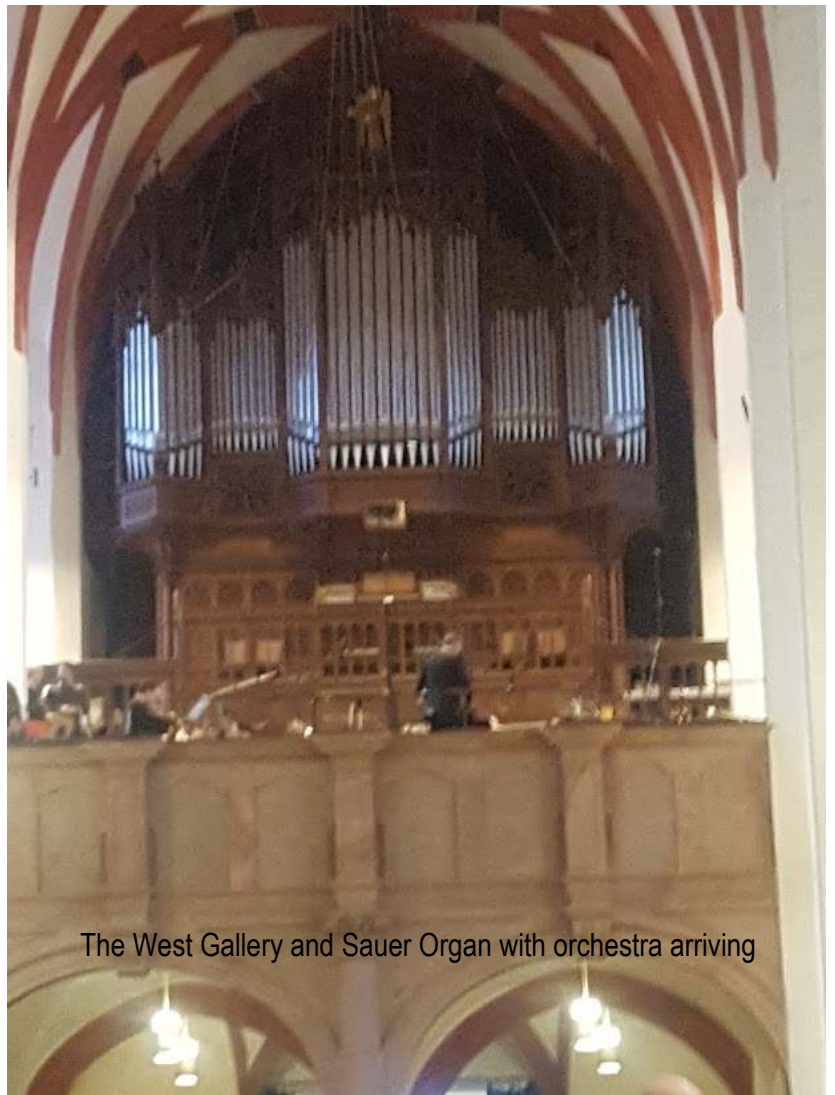


Nikolaikirche Organ Case

something of a shock in 2015.

Something that I had known previously is that Lutherans generally stand to pray and hear the Word of God, and sit to sing hymns. Furthermore, the English idea of the hymn playover is unknown; the organist will either extemporise on the melody or play a written prelude. One of the hymns at this service was to the tune of 'Go, tell it on the mountains', and the organist produced a delightful (even hilarious) extemporisation in 'popular' style, complete with syncopations, added sixth chords, and the use of sounds that reminded me of Tibias on a theatre organ.

The following morning – Good Friday – found me at the Thomaskirche for the 9.30am service. The music from the renowned Thomanerchor – the choir is comprised of school-age students – was wonderful, including 'Christus factus est' by Bruckner and 'Tristis est anima mea' by Poulenc (still sung in German Latin). This also turned out to be a communion service, but much more traditional, including the choice of hymns/chorales. Liturgical greetings and responses were chanted, with the organ supporting the responses, and this time there were 'Lift up your hearts' and 'Heilig, heilig, heilig'. The expectation was that the majority of worshippers would join in the communion. The 1889 Sauer organ in the West Gallery was used. The



The West Gallery and Sauer Organ with orchestra arriving

Matthäus-Passion that evening was included in the announcements, but we were told that 'unfortunately' there were no tickets left.

When I arrived in the evening, I found that my seat was a moulded, wooden Ikea-style chair – rather more comfortable than the pews which are straight boards. I suspect that was an advantage of having booked my seat so early. Also, I was facing across the church, which is also how a small number of pews opposite the pulpit are arranged, rather than sitting with my back to performers in the West Gallery.

The performance began at 7pm. At the end of Part 1, many of the audience

clearly had not read the request to remain in their places at this point, and the Church Pastor needed to go to the microphone to ask people to resume their seats, as Part 2 began after a break of around five minutes. When I turned my phone back on after the end, it was right on 10pm. The orchestra and singers had worked with just that small break for three hours.

The performance, of course, was superb. The Sauer organ was used in the opening movements of both parts; otherwise the continuo was played on a chamber organ and harpsichord in the gallery. Particularly moving was the final appearance of the Passion Chorale immediately following the death of Jesus.

A unique partnership has existed between the Thomaskirche and the Gewandhaus Orchestra for more than two centuries (including the years of East Germany), and musicians from this outstanding European orchestra play at services at least weekly. It is worth noting that other players were at the Opera House that evening as part of a production of Wagner's Parsifal; the Passion requires three pairs of double reeds – Oboes, Cors Anglaises and Oboes d'Amore.

The following evening I could have attended a performance of the St John Passion at the Opera House with the Opera Chorus and a ballet. I chose not to.

Easter Sunday morning found me back at St Thomas's for 9.30, where the music (I certainly was not expecting this) included the Gloria and the 'Crucifixus' and 'Et resurrexit' movements from the Credo of the Mass in B minor (or 'H moll', as it's known in Germany) as well as music by Samuel Scheidt and Michael Praetorius. Once again, bouquets to the Gewandhaus players. This time the Bach Organ, built in the 1990s half-way down the nave, was the main instrument. In this service the communion was optional (strange to an Anglican used to Easter Day communion as a requirement), and after the Postlude those who were



Bach-Orgel in St Thomas's

staying moved to seats in the Altarraum.

The service, which included a sermon delivered with great seriousness about the centrality of joy to Easter, finished at 11.45am after more than two (mostly) wonderful hours. Outside I heard music in the nearby market – players in medieval costume performing music of that time. The temperature was around 2<sup>o</sup>, and at this point I discovered that Glühwein under these conditions is a foretaste of heaven!



On Easter Monday evening I went to a performance of Tannhäuser at the Opera House. The ticket cost €66, and I received a discount of 10% because I had a Leipzig Travel Card the day that I purchased it. Another wonderful performance.

I realise that one factor which made for greater enjoyment of all this is my knowledge of German, which I am able

to understand and speak to a reasonable level. It certainly helped being able to make some sense of the sermons I heard. However, it is worth noting that the printed order of service at St Thomas's included information and instructions in English, and plenty of people are ready to help those who are not familiar with the language.

The epilogue to my Easter in Leipzig is tinged with sadness. On awaking on Easter Monday I saw a Facebook post giving the news of the completely

unexpected death of Gordon Appleton, former Master of Music at St George's Cathedral, Perth, whom I succeeded at Guildford Grammar School, and whom some of us had seen just two weeks earlier in Perth. I already had train travel booked, and as planned made my way to Halle, around 30km from Leipzig and

the birthplace of Handel.

I discovered that Easter Monday is taken seriously as a public holiday, with shops shut. It is also a day of worship in both Catholic and Protestant churches – perhaps a chance for the regular worshipping community to come together – and the Market Church in Halle, where Handel was baptised,

had a 10am service. This proved to be a heaven-sent opportunity to process and reflect on the news about Gordon. The preacher was the Landesbischoff of Anhalt State who, in contrast to the sermon I had heard the previous day, delivered his message with a twinkle in the eye, even eliciting an occasional chuckle from the congregation. The chorales included some which I know well as an organist but are not sung in Anglican churches. The music was provided by the West Gallery organ and a cantor. On this occasion there was no service sheet; the responses were known by the congregation.

To be walking where Bach and Handel once walked was a wonderful experience. Knowing something of and being able to share in the music traditions of the Lutheran Church as a living heritage was also a delight.

*John Beaverstock*



Marktkirche, Halle



West Organ, Marktkirche, Halle