

SPRING MEETING 2009

DRESDEN

On an almost perfect-weather week in April, 28 friends and members of the European AGO met for the 2009 spring meeting in Dresden. We set out to explore organs in the region of Saxony around Dresden, built by Gottfried Silbermann and his pupils Heinrich Gottfried Trost and Zacharias Hildebrandt.

The week began Monday evening with dinner at the Ibis hotel, where most of the tour members stayed, and an introductory after-dinner talk by Matthew Provost – our tour guide, stop puller, organ demonstrator, and bus driver. Tuesday, the first full day, dawned sunny and warm, and we had free time to see the sights of Dresden, a lovely city, and especially so in the sunshine. Some members headed off to the highly recommended Gruene Gewoelbe museum. Others headed up the winding ramps and staircases of the Frauenkirche for a breathtaking view of the city, or later heard the midday prayer service there (with a chance to hear, and critique the new French-style organ, housed in a Silbermann-inspired case.) Some members took boat rides on the Elbe, while others preferred to spend the morning having their car serviced. In the later afternoon, we met at the catholic Hofkirche, also called the Dresdener Kathedral, to hear and play the large three manual Silbermann organ there. Built in 1755, it was the last instrument of a fruitful career, and Silbermann's former apprentice Hildebrandt, came at his request to assist with this final project. First, the organist Herr Lennartz demonstrated some of the possibilities of the instrument for us. Explaining that the combinations of 8' stops could construct an almost romantic sound, he played something French-styled to demonstrate this possibility. With eight manual 8' flue stops and reeds which, he explained, bore obvious connections to French instruments, due to Silbermann's time spent working in France, this was surprisingly effective. Then, with the later afternoon sun streaming through the front windows of the cathedral, we were free to wander around the balconies of the church, and play for ourselves. Matthew showed us lots of representative Silbermann sounds, with a Bach variation set, and then turned us loose on the organ. With Christoph Linde, our resident organ builder, in attendance, some members took the chance to explore inside the case, while others preferred to sit on the side balconies for a better perspective on the sound. We all enjoyed a meal together in the evening, and headed to bed with visions of Silbermanns dancing in our heads.

Wednesday we were joined by a few members who had arrived the night before. Judy and Matthew's voices ringing in our heads, we had all gobbled down our breakfasts, in order to be ready on time for an 8 AM departure for Leipzig. Unfortunately, the car rental folks were not as cooperative, and our ensuing late start was the cause of some high-speed racing down the Autobahn towards Leipzig. With our caravan of two very large vans and a car or two, we managed to make fabulous time (thanks to expert navigation and driving), but still arrived a bit late. Our first appointment was the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, where Bach spent the later years of his life as Cantor. The Thomas organist, Herr Böhme, graciously met us there. He explained to us that in Bach's time, there were two organs in the church, neither of which exist today. One was in the rear balcony, though not as far back as the current organ, and the other on the side of the sanctuary towards the front, in a swallows nest. Herr Böhme took us upstairs, first to see the so-called Bach-organ, built in 2000 in the side balcony by Gerald Woehl, in Silbermann style. He explained that the

specifications were taken from documentation of Bach's organ in Eisenach. Herr Böhme demonstrated the organ, both with an improvisation showing various single stops and combinations, and a rousing rendition of the hymn *Christ ist erstanden*, the way he would play for a full church, ending with an Easter selection from the *Orgelbüchlein*. He also showed us a lever, found inside the case, which switches the pitch of the entire organ from 415 to 466 Hz! A few members had the chance to play, and then we headed to the back balcony. The organ there is from Wilhelm Sauer, built in 1889. This instrument was originally installed with mechanical action, but in 1902 was given Pneumatic action, and expanded slightly in 1908. Herr Böhme ripped through the Introduction from Reger's *Introduction and Passacaglia in d-minor* (from memory!), and showed off some various sound combinations. It was another sunny, warm, and beautiful afternoon and we had ample time to linger for lunch in Leipzig at sidewalk cafes, peruse the shopping district, or for the more industrious among us, investigate the Bach museum. In the afternoon, we headed out to the countryside to Störmthal, a little village not far from Leipzig with a one manual Hildebrandt organ from 1722-23. Matthew explained that, while everyone likes to talk about the Hildebrandt organ in Naumburg as the "Bach organ", Bach only probably played that instrument. Scholars are certain that he played this organ sometime during the inaugural year, and thus we have no doubt that we are touching the same keyboards as the master himself did, when we play in Störmthal! This small organ is entirely original, except for the facade pipes, taken for the war efforts. We also learned from the pastor (for unfortunately, this small church currently has no organist), that the entire village, including church and organ, was slated for destruction, being in an area with extensive "brown coal" strip mining. Thanks to the timely falling of the Wall, these plans were halted. Matthew played for us some lovely demonstrations of various colors and then let us loose on the organ. The very widely spaced pedalboard was a challenge, to both those with experience playing historic instruments, and those without! We enjoyed a few minutes on our return trip, viewing the lake which now occupies the previous strip mine sight. Wednesday night we were all invited to a party at Christoph and Gabriele Linde's house. Murmuring protests of how they just had a small apartment, and had just whipped a little something up to eat, we were all soon somehow seated comfortably and served more than our fill of various delicious quiches, which Gabriele kept pulling out of somewhere. An enjoyable evening ensued, with much wine, laughter, conversation, and ice cream.

Thursday, again sunny and warm, was our Freiberg day. With a leisurely start of 9 am, we arrived in Freiberg in time for a brief stroll around the town, eventually ending up at the Petrikirche. We were first shown the room behind the organ, where the original bellows have recently been reconstructed - quite an impressive sight. They can be inflated electrically or manually. (A plaque on the wall outside the room thanked the



corporate sponsors of this project!) Inside the church, Matthew explained that this organ is an example of a very large two manual instrument, an early Silbermann from 1734-5, and he demonstrated various stops with a delightful musical selection. We were then given plenty of time to play and enjoy the organ, accompanied by the church's webmaster, who was busy snapping photos and taking names. A brief pause for lunch gave us enough time for a trip to Subway, or an ice cream in the sun, and then it was off to the village of Nassau. The two manual Silbermann from 1745-48 was



our goal. On the way, we passed by the village of Frauenstein, Gottfried Silbermann's home town, and the home of the Silbermann museum. The organist in Nassau, Frauenstein, and four other villages in the area, Herr Kleinart, met us and was happy to demonstrate the organ's various possibilities, with a well prepared Bach Prelude and Fugue, as well as a contemporary piece written by a colleague from the Czech Republic, to show us that a Silbermann can play more than "just" Bach. A few people had the chance to play before we piled back into the vans for a return to Freiberg and our appointment at the Dom of St. Marien. The former organist, Herr Wagler, met us there and gave an excellent overview of the church and both Silbermann organs. The large three manual in the rear balcony is Silbermann's Op.2, from 1711-14, and his oldest surviving organ. (Op. 1 was built for his hometown of Frauenstein, and tragically destroyed in a fire during his lifetime.) We learned here that Gottfried Silbermann was only 28 years old

when he received this very important contract in Freiberg. Also housed in this space, on the front side balcony, is a small 14 stop, one manual organ with pedal, built for the Johanniskirche in Freiberg, but given to the Dom before the start of WWII. Herr Wagler played this organ first, and the way this small instrument filled the large cathedral was quite remarkable. We also marvelled at the artwork in the church - especially the two pulpits standing side-by-side in the sanctuary. The so-called Tulip pulpit, made of carved stone, is especially beautiful. This pulpit is preached from on special church feasts, and the other, more conventional pulpit, is used the rest of the time. Herr Wagler treated us to some Muffat on the rear organ, and then we were invited to climb up to the back balcony to view and play the large 44-stop organ there. A lovely evening in Dresden was spent together, eating at a restaurant in the Weiße Gasse neighborhood, and we headed to bed that night with our stomachs full and our ears ringing with laughter and music.

Friday's weather reminded us that we were not, in fact, in Malaga, with the cold and rainy dampness causing us to pull out our until- now- unused sweaters and jackets. In the village of Ponitz, we were met by the organist, Herr Beyrer, who explained some of the history of the 27-stop organ with two manuals from 1734-37. The existence of this church and organ is due to the Renaissance castle located in this village, where two noble families lived, who had the church and organ built. One of the special features of this instrument is the fact that 100% of the original metal pipes have been preserved. We also enjoyed hearing the story that, in 1993 after being lost for many years, the original contract that Silbermann drew up for this organ appeared for sale at a Southeby's auction, and thus the church was able to regain this valuable piece of history. We journeyed on to Altenburg, to hear and play the large two manual organ from 1735-39 by Heinrich Gottfried Trost, in the chapel of the city's castle. This small but opulent room contains an elaborately designed organ, with beautiful casework (my favorite aspect being the faces on either side of the keyboards!) This is the church where Johann Krebs worked for the last 23 years of his life, and Bach is known to have played here as well. The reed stops seemed not to have been notified of our arrival, but otherwise we enjoyed hearing the rich tonal resources of this instrument through Matthew's demonstration and the ensuing musical offerings of the group.

The last village on our tour, Rötha, has two organs by Gottfried Silbermann. The St. Georg's church houses a two manual organ from 1718-21 and the St. Marien a one manual from 1721-22. The organist of both these churches, Frau Höfner, kindly met us and told us the histories of both churches and organs. (Some members were quite excited to have it proven that, all appearances prior to this point to the contrary, there are in fact a few female organists in Germany...) We learned that both organs were ordered by the Baron of Rötha, who met Silbermann at the court in Dresden and decided he wanted to order TWO organs from him. The St. Georg organ was well known to Mendelssohn, who played here often. The incredibly high ceiling of the St. Marien church bore witness that it was originally planned to be many times larger than the present structure. It was originally built as pilgrimage church for the many pilgrims who flocked here to witness the sight of a miraculous event. [The Virgin Mary appeared to a shepherd and had him feed the bark of a birch tree to his sick sheep. This shepherd then made a pact with a nun from the local convent, that a church should be erected on this site.] Matthew demonstrated both organs and playing time for all ensued. That evening, back in Dresden, we met together for our closing banquet and celebration of 30 years of the European AGO. There were presents given – to Judy, for her gracious and capable leadership, thanks expressed - to Christoph and Gabriele, for years of supporting the European AGO, and to Matthew - for his expert services as organ tour guide, and for planning a great trip. There was even an impromptu song written after dinner, and performed by the creator, celebrating the European AGO and its members.

All in all, by far the best European AGO organ tour this member has ever attended, and I believe well-received by everyone else as well.

Rhonda Edgington