

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: HIS LIFE AND WORK



Bach, 35 years old

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Chapter One

EARLY YEARS



EISENACH: 1685-1695

Johann Sebastian Bach was born on March 21st 1685, the son of Johann Ambrosius, court trumpeter for the Duke of Eisenach and director of the musicians of the town of Eisenach in Thuringia. For many years, members of the Bach family throughout Thuringia had held positions such as organists, town instrumentalists, or Cantors, and the family name enjoyed a wide reputation for musical talent.

The family at Eisenach lived in a reasonably spacious home just above the town center, with rooms for apprentice musicians, and a large grain store. (The pleasant and informative "Bach Haus" Museum in Eisenach does not claim to be the original family home). Here young Johann Sebastian

was taught by his father to play the violin and the harpsichord. He was also initiated into the art of organ playing by his famous uncle, Johann Christoph Bach, who was then organist at the Georgenkirche in Eisenach. Sebastian was a very willing pupil and soon became extraordinarily proficient with these instruments.



When he was eight years old he went to the old Latin Grammar School, where Martin Luther had once been a pupil; he was taught reading and writing, Latin grammar, and a great deal of scripture, both in Latin and German. The boys of the school formed the choir of the St. Georgenkirche, which gave Johann Sebastian an opportunity to sing in the regular services, as well as in the nearby villages. He was described as having 'an uncommonly fine treble voice'. The Lutheran spirit would have been strong in Eisenach, for it was in the Wartburg Castle standing high above the town, that Martin Luther, in hiding from his persecutors, translated the New Testament into German.

Roads were still unpaved in the smaller towns, sewage and refuse disposal poorly organized, and the existence of germs not yet scientifically discovered. Mortality rates were high as a result. At an early age Johann Sebastian lost a sister and later a brother. When he was only nine years old his mother died. Barely nine months later his father also died.

Johann Sebastian and one of his brothers, Johann Jakob, were taken into the home of their eldest brother, Johann Christoph (born 1671) who had recently married and settled down at Ohrdruf, a small town thirty miles south-east of Eisenach. Johann Christoph, a former pupil of Pachelbel, was now well established as organist of the St. Michaeliskirche, Ohrdruf.

OHRDRUF: 1695-1700

Johann Christoph was an excellent teacher – all of his five sons were to reach positions of some eminence in music, and he was a keen student of the latest keyboard compositions.

Johann Sebastian at once settled down happily in this household studying the organ and harpsichord with great interest under his brother, and he quickly mastered all the pieces he had been given. When a new organ was installed at the Ohrdruf church, Christoph allowed his young brother to watch its construction. He also encouraged him to study composition and set Sebastian to copying music by German organist composers such as Jakob Froberger, Johann Caspar Kerll and Pachelbel. An anecdote tells how Christoph punished his young brother when he discovered he had copied a forbidden musical manuscript by moonlight over a period of six months, and confiscated the precious copy.

During this period Johann Sebastian attended the Gymnasium (grammar school) of Ohrdruf, once a monastic foundation, which had become one of the most progressive schools in Germany. He made excellent progress in Latin, Greek and theology, and had reached the top form at a very early age. The scholars of the Gymnasium, as at Eisenach, were also employed as choir-boys, and their Cantor, Elias Herda, had a high opinion of Johann Sebastian's voice and musical capabilities.

It was his excellent soprano voice that found Johann Sebastian a position in the choir of the wealthy Michaelis monastery at Lüneburg, which was known to provide a free place for boys who were poor but with musical talent. This was no doubt arranged by Elias Herda who had held a scholarship there himself.

In the Spring of 1700 Johann Sebastian set out with his schoolfriend, Georg Erdmann, who was also joining the choir, on the journey of a hundred and eighty miles north to Lüneburg. It is not known how they traveled; most probably the journey would have been undertaken largely on foot, relieved where possible with a lift on a river barge or farmer's cart. Doubtless the two boys would have been given free food and accommodation in the many monasteries along the route.

LÜNEBURG: 1700-1702

When Johann Sebastian reached this North-German musical center, he was well received because of his uncommonly beautiful soprano voice, and was immediately appointed to the select body of singers who formed the 'Mettenchor' (Mattins Choir). Their obligations to sing were many, and Johann Sebastian thus had a unique chance to participate in choral and orchestral performances on a scale unknown in the poorer Thuringian towns of his homeland. He was also freely permitted to study the fine library of music in the Gymnasium, which included some of the best examples of German church music.

The growing lad soon lost his soprano voice, but was able to make himself useful as a violinist in the orchestra, and as an accompanist at the harpsichord during choir rehearsals.

During this period he was fortunate in meeting Georg Böhm, organist of the Johanniskirche at Lüneburg, who himself had been a pupil of the famous organist Jan Adams Reinken in Hamburg, and was a friend of the Bach family in Ohrdruf. Böhm introduced Johann Sebastian to the great organ traditions of Hamburg, to which city he made several pilgrimages on foot. He also came under the influence of French instrumental music when, through his great proficiency on the violin, he played at the Court of Celle, 50 miles south of Lüneburg. Though distinctly German in its construction and outer appearance, Celle Castle was known as a 'miniature Versailles' for its rich interiors and then-current musical tastes.

When he was nearly eighteen, Johann Sebastian, considerably enriched by these musical experiences, decided he would try to find employment as an organist in his native Thuringia. He was greatly interested in an organ under construction in the new church of Arnstadt, and as members of his family had been professionally active in the district for generations, he felt he had a good chance of getting the post. So in 1702 he left Lüneburg and returned South.

WEIMAR 1703

While awaiting the completion of the organ at Arnstadt, Sebastian was offered, and accepted the post of violinist in the small chamber orchestra of Duke Johann Ernst, the younger brother of the Duke of Weimar. At Lüneburg he had already experienced church choir music, violin, continuo and organ playing, as well as musical composition and performance in the French style. Here at Weimar he now came into contact with Italian instrumental music, and acted as deputy to the aging Court Organist, Effler, an old friend of the Bach family, thus having a chance to keep his organ playing in practice. His stay here was short, but he was to return later.

In July 1703 the Arnstadt Town Council invited young Bach to try out the newly finished organ in the 'New Church', so called as it had been almost totally rebuilt having been seriously damaged by fire. He so impressed the people of Arnstadt with his brilliant playing at the dedication that he was immediately offered the post of organist on very favorable terms.

ARNSTADT: 1703-1707

At the end of 1703, 18-year-old Sebastian took up his post at the small town of Arnstadt, no doubt thrilled at having his own relatively large organ of two manuals and 23 speaking stops, and the responsibility of providing music for his own congregation. Though the present organ is not "Bach's", the original manuals, stops and pedals of Bach's organ are displayed in the Palm Haus Museum of this quiet historic little town, where the house in which Bach lodged can also be seen.

In October 1705, the Church Council granted Bach leave to visit the north-German city of Lübeck to hear the great organist, Dietrich Buxtehude. In Lübeck he took every chance to hear Buxtehude play, and to attend the famous evening concerts in the Marienkirche when Buxtehude's church cantatas were performed. Bach was so fascinated by these concerts, and by his discussions on the arts with the great master, that he remained in Lübeck over Christmas until the following February.

He returned to Arnstadt three months late, having also visited Reincken in Hamburg and Böhm in Lüneburg on the way, full of new ideas and enthusiasm which he immediately put into practice in his playing.

The congregation however was completely surprised and bewildered by his new musical ideas: there was considerable confusion during the singing of the chorales, caused by his 'surprising variations and irrelevant ornaments which obliterate the melody and confuse the congregation'.

The Church Council resolved to reprimand Bach on his 'strange sounds' during the services, and they also asked him to explain the unauthorized extension of his leave in Lübeck. Bach did not attempt to justify himself before what must have seemed to him a group of narrow minded and conservative old gentlemen; yet the Council, knowing how skilled his playing was, decided to treat their young and impetuous organist with leniency.

However, new conflicts soon arose when Bach, citing a clause in his contract, refused to work any longer with the undisciplined boys' choir which he had been required to train for the sake of Council economy. For this the Council further reprimanded him and also added the complaint that he had been 'entertaining a strange damsel' to music in organ loft of the church. The young lady was probably his cousin, Maria Barbara, whom he was later to marry.

Thus, what had been an exciting and promising start at Arnstadt, had now turned into recriminations and disputes; Bach no doubt decided it would be better to look around for somewhere new.

At the end of 1706, he heard that the organist to the town of Mühlhausen had died. Knowing that Mühlhausen had a long musical tradition, he applied for the post, and after yet another very successful audition at the imposing cathedral-like St Blasius Church on Easter Sunday 1707, he was accepted, again on very favorable terms. So in June 1707 he returned the keys of his office to the Arnstadt Council and left quietly with his few belongings for Mühlhausen.

MÜHLHAUSEN: 1707-1708

Bach arrived at Mühlhausen, a small Thuringian town proud of its ancient foundation and independence, to take up the post of organist to the town. Unfortunately, a quarter of the whole town had recently been devastated by fire; it was difficult for him to find suitable dwellings, and he was thus forced to pay a high rent. Nevertheless, shortly after his arrival, he brought his cousin Maria Barbara from Arnstadt, and on October 17th 1707 he married her at the small church in the picturesque little village of Dornheim. Maria Barbara came of a branch of the musical Bach family, her father being organist at Gehren.

By now Bach had high ideals for the church music of Germany, and to start with, he began organizing the rather poor facilities of Mühlhausen; he began by making a large collection of the best German music available, including some of his own, and set about training the choir and a newly created orchestra to play the music.

The first result of these efforts was his cantata 'Gott ist mein König' (BWV 71), given in hitherto unknown splendor in the spacious Marienkirche to celebrate the inauguration of the Town Council in February 1708. This success gave Bach the courage to put in a long and detailed report, proposing a complete renovation and improvement of the organ in the St Blasiuskirche. The Council agreed to carry out the renovation and improvements, and Bach was given the task of supervising the work, for not only was he now a brilliant player, he had also become an expert on the construction of organs.

However, before the organ was completed, a religious controversy arose in Mühlhausen between the orthodox Lutherans, who were lovers of music, and the Pietists, who were strict puritans and distrusted art and music.

Bach was apprehensive of the Pietists' growing influence, in addition to the fact that his immediate superior was a Pietist. Music in Mühlhausen seemed to be in a state of decay, and so once more he looked around for more promising possibilities.

Former contacts made in Weimar were now useful; the Duke of Weimar offered him a post among his Court chamber musicians, and on June 25, 1708, Bach sent in his letter of resignation to the authorities at Mühlhausen, stating very diplomatically that not only was he finding it difficult to keep a wife on the small salary agreed to on his arrival, but that he could see no chance of realizing his final aim, namely the establishment of a proper church music 'to the glory of God'. The Council had little option but to allow his departure. However, the situation was concluded quite amicably and Bach was asked that he should continue to supervise the rebuilding of the St Blasiuskirche organ. This he did, and some time in 1709 he came over to inaugurate its first performance.

Chapter Two

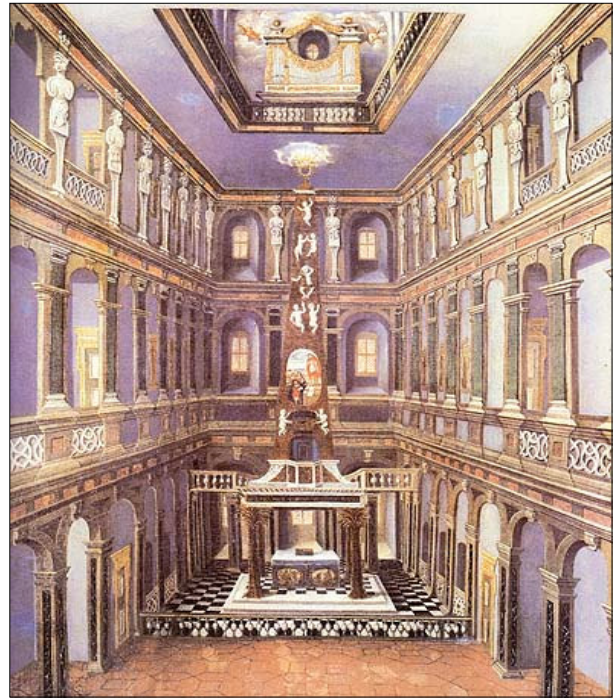
Bach's first major appointment: WEIMAR 1708-1717



Weimar was quite a small town with only 5000 inhabitants; yet Bach was to meet some very cultured people here. Not least was his employer, the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar, one of the most distinguished and cultured nobles of his time.

Bach's two-fold position as member of the chamber orchestra and as Organist to the Court offered him many opportunities for improvement.

The Court Orchestra consisted of about 22 players: a compact string ensemble, a bassoon player, 6 or 7 trumpeters and a timpanist. Bach's function in the orchestra was mainly as a violinist, however he also played the harpsichord and occasionally wrote or arranged some of the music. As was the custom in most 18th century Courts, the musicians also spent some of their time employed in household and domestic duties.



In 1714 Bach became the leader of the orchestra, and was now second only to the old and frail Capellmeister Johann Samuel Drese, whose duties he was gradually taking over.

As Court Organist, Bach had succeeded Johann Effler, a musician of some standing. The organ was new and not quite as large as the one at Arnstadt. After a few years, Bach declared that it was inadequate and should be rebuilt. It was in fact rebuilt at great expense according to his plans: proof of the high regard the Court had for his capabilities as organist and expert on organ construction.

During this period he wrote profusely for the organ, and he was rapidly becoming known throughout the country as one of the greatest German organists. Organ pupils came to him from far and wide, and he was asked to test or dedicate many organs in various towns. His tests were extremely thorough and critical. He used to say for fun “Above all must know whether the organ has a good lung”, and, pulling out all the stops he produced the largest sound possible, often making the organ builders go pale with fright. He would usually complete his trial by improvising a prelude and fugue: the prelude to test the organ's power, the fugue to test its clarity for counterpoint. Many of Bach’s organ works were composed as organ test-pieces, either for himself or for other organists who had been asked to test a local instrument.

Constantin Bellermann describes Bach’s playing (during a visit to Kassel) in these words; “His feet seemed to fly across the pedals as if they were winged, and mighty sounds filled the church”. Mizler's *Nekrolog* states: “His fingers were all of equal strength, all equally able to play with the finest precision. He had invented so comfortable a fingering that he could master the most difficult parts with perfect ease (using 5 fingers instead of the then-normal 3). He was able to accomplish passages on the pedals with his feet which would have given trouble to the fingers of many a clever player on the keyboard”.

On a visit to Halle in 1713, during which he gave a trial cantata (probably BWV 21), he was invited to become organist in succession to Zachau, a composer well-known, and celebrated as Handel's early teacher. However, the conditions and salary were not sufficient for his growing family, so he was obliged to refuse the post.

On a visit to Dresden, Bach was invited to compete in a contest with the visiting French organist, Louis Marchand, considered to be one of the best in Europe. But, on the day appointed for the contest, Marchand decided to withdraw discreetly by taking the fastest coach available back to France. And so Bach gave an impressive solo performance before the assembled audience and referees, establishing himself as the finest organist of the day.

Bach made some very good friends at Weimar, among whom was the eminent philologist and scholar Johann Matthias Gesner, who expressed with great eloquence his admiration for the composer's genius. Bach was also a frequent visitor to the nearby 'Rote Schloss', the home of the former Duke's widow and her two music-loving sons. Here the interest was in the new Italian style of music which was then becoming the rage of Europe, one of the chief exponents being the Venetian composer Vivaldi. Bach and his cousin Johann Georg Walther transcribed some of the Italian instrumental concertos for keyboard instruments.

During 1717 a feud broke out between the Duke of Weimar at the 'Wilhelmsburg' household and his nephew Ernst August at the 'Rote Schloss'. Consequently musicians of the first household were forbidden to fraternize with those of the second. Bach did his best to ignore what was, after all, merely an extension of a private quarrel. But the atmosphere was no longer so pleasant. Added to this, the ancient Capellmeister then died, and Bach was passed over for the post in favor of the late Capellmeister's mediocre son. At this, Bach was bitterly disappointed, for he had lately been doing most of the Capellmeister's work, and had confidently expected to be given the post.

Through the help of Duke Ernst August, Bach was introduced to the Court of Anhalt-Cöthen, and as a result he was offered the post of Capellmeister, which he accepted. This infuriated the Duke of Weimar, so that when Bach put in a polite request for his release, he was arrested and put in the local jail. However, after a month, he was released and given reluctant permission to resign his office. During this enforced rest, Bach typically used his time productively, and prepared a cycle of organ chorale preludes for the whole year, published later as the 'Orgelbüchlein'.

Chapter Three

CÖTHEN: 1717-1723 – Another Court Appointment

Bach arrived at the small Court of Anhalt-Cöthen to hold the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the baroque age. His master was the young prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, barely twenty-five years old, the son of a Calvinist. As the Calvinists were antagonistic to the splendors of the Lutheran liturgy, there was no church music at Cöthen; however, the young Prince's religious beliefs did not bar him from enjoying a cheerful and cultivated style of living complete with secular cantatas and instrumental music featuring the latest styles and fashions. Prince Leopold had already spent three years (1710-13) doing the Grand Tour of Europe, first to Holland and England, through Germany to Italy, returning by way of Vienna. So he would have been thoroughly familiar with the latest European fashions in music.

The young Prince stretched the limited budget of his miniature Court to provide an orchestra of eighteen players, all chosen for their high musical standards from all over the country, some from as far afield as Berlin.

In fact it was during the Prince's Grand Tour in 1713 that news came to him of a golden opportunity: when Wilhelm of Prussia came to power, he dismissed his father's Court Capelle, and Prince Leopold was able to tempt many of the best musicians from Berlin to Cöthen. He had well-developed musical tastes, having traveled widely, particularly to Italy, where he studied Italian secular music with great interest; he returned from Italy determined to raise the standard of German secular music to an equally high level.



Unlike most Princes of his time, he was a player of considerable proficiency on the harpsichord, the violin and the viola da gamba, and contrary to current Court etiquette he played quite freely and informally with his Court musicians, treating them entirely as his equals. He soon became very friendly with his new Capellmeister, having a high regard for him, and would often ask his advice on various matters.

Life at Cöthen was informal and easy-going; in this happy atmosphere Bach's days were completely devoted to music. During this period he wrote much of his chamber music; violin concertos, sonatas, keyboard music, etc.

When the Prince traveled, Bach and some of the Court musicians (together with instruments, including an ingenious folding-harpsichord) would accompany him on his extensive journeys. Twice they visited Carlsbad, the meeting place of the European aristocracy, in 1718 and in the summer of 1720. It was on returning from this second visit that Bach received a serious shock; his wife, Maria Barbara, whom he had left in perfect health three months earlier, had died and been buried in his absence, leaving four motherless children.

Two months later he visited Hamburg and expressed an interest in the newly vacant post of organist in the Jakobskirche. This church contained the famous Arp Schnitger organ with four manuals and sixty stops. However, Bach left Hamburg for Cöthen before the audition, presumably because the conditions there did not suit him.

Bach continued with his work at Cöthen. He was asked to compose and perform cantatas for the Prince's birthday and the New Year; two each time, one sacred and one secular. To perform these works there were singers under contract from nearby Courts, and one of these, Anna Magdalena, daughter of J.C. Wilcke, Court and Field-Trumpeter at Weissenfels, attracted Bach's attention with her fine soprano voice. In December 1721, Anna Magdalena and Bach married, she at the age of 20, and he 36.

Anna Magdalena was very kind to Bach's children, a good housekeeper, and she took a lively interest in his work, often helping him by neatly copying out his manuscripts. In the twenty-eight years of happy marriage that followed, thirteen children were born to the Bach family (though few of them survived through childhood).

A week after Bach's wedding, the Prince also married. But for Bach this was to be an unfortunate event, as the new Princess was not in favor of her husband's musical activities and managed, by exerting constant pressure (as Bach wrote in a letter), to "make the musical inclination of the said Prince somewhat luke-warm". Bach also wrote to his old school-friend, Erdmann, "there I had a gracious Prince as master, who knew music as well as he loved it, and hoped to remain in his service until the end of my life".

But in any case, Bach was now having to consider his growing sons; he wished to give them a good education, and there was no university at Cöthen, nor the cultured atmosphere and facilities of a larger city.

So once more, Bach decided to look around for somewhere new. It may perhaps have been these circumstances which led Bach to revive an old invitation to produce what are now known as the Brandenburg Concertos. We know from the opening of this dedication, dated March 24th 1721, that Bach had already met the Margrave of Brandenburg, at which time Bach had been invited to provide some orchestral music.

“Your Royal Highness; As I had a couple of years ago the pleasure of appearing before Your Royal Highness, by virtue of Your Highness' commands, and as noticed then that Your Highness took some pleasure in the small talents which Heaven has given me for Music, and as in taking leave of Your Royal Highness, Your Highness deigned to honor me with the command to send Your Highness some pieces of my Composition: have then in accordance with Your Highness' most gracious orders taken the liberty of rendering my most humble duty to Your Royal Highness with the present Concertos, which have adapted to several instruments.... For the rest, Sire, beg Your Royal Highness very humbly to have the goodness to continue Your Highness' gracious favor toward me, and to be assured that nothing is so close to my heart as the wish that may be employed on occasions more worthy of Your Royal Highness and of Your Highness' service....”

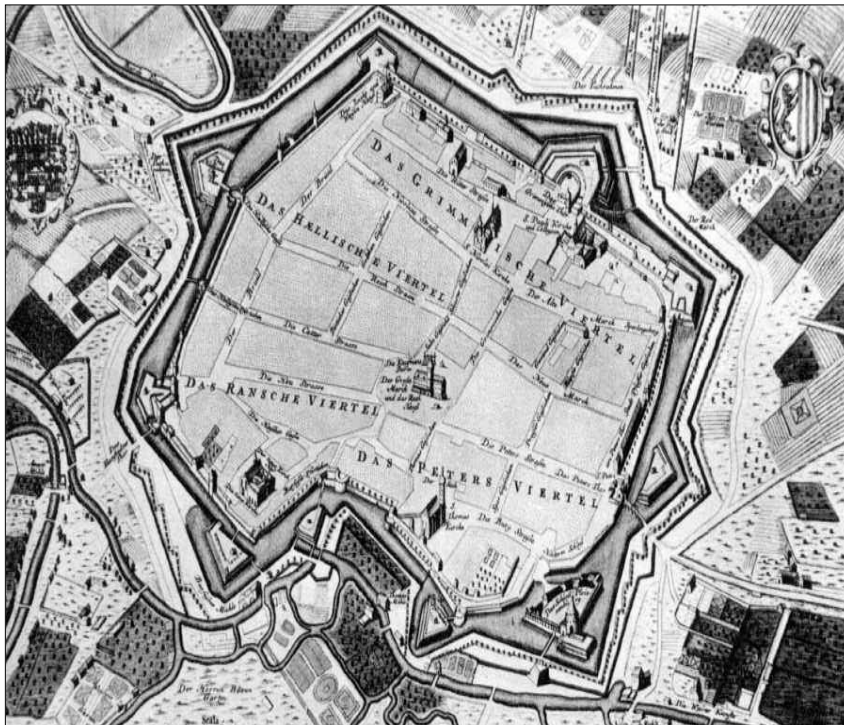
There is some internal evidence in the music itself that Bach was intending to visit Berlin in person for the first performance of these works. There are for example some musicological errors in the scores – hardly something Bach would permit were he seriously dedicating music to a dignitary, particularly with the hope of prospective employment. The most noteworthy indication however is the missing middle movement of the third concerto. Bach, so his contemporaries frequently noted, would not even permit his performers to put in their own trills and elaborations; he would certainly not have left an entire movement to the whim of some distant performer about whose capabilities Bach knew nothing.

History shows no record of Bach's having subsequently visited the Margrave at his Brandenburg Court. There could be many reasons for this. The Margrave was not easily accessible as he was more frequently to be found in residence at his estates at Malchow than in Berlin. Moreover the death of Johann Kuhnau, Cantor of the Thomasschule at Leipzig in June 1722 opened the possibility of an appointment for Bach at Leipzig, perhaps more attractive to him than Berlin. Leipzig was situated in familiar territory where he already had many musical and courtly connections; in addition it had a famous university, and the three-times-yearly Trade Fair gave the city a distinctly cosmopolitan atmosphere.

The merits of various candidates to succeed Kuhnau were considered, and the Council eventually nominated Georg Philipp Telemann. However, the authorities at Hamburg would not release Telemann, and so the candidature was left pending. This position of Cantor at Leipzig had been favorably described to Bach, and as the town offered the necessary educational facilities for his sons, he applied for the post. The Council, after trying unsuccessfully to get a certain Christoph Graupner, old boy of the Thomasschule and Capellmeister at Darmstadt, eventually settled for Bach as a reasonable alternative.

Bach applied for his dismissal at Cöthen, and the Prince, regretting his departure but not wishing to stand in his way, quickly consented. And so Bach left with his family and belongings for Leipzig, where he was to remain for the rest of his life.

Chapter Four – The CITY OF LEIPZIG: A GUIDED TOUR



Leipzig Town Plan, 1720.

Start at the bottom right-hand corner. Here you have the Vestung Pleissen-burg, built as a fortification. Burg means fortress, and the Pleisse is the river on which Leipzig sits.

A little to the left is the Thomaskirche; just on the right of it, the Thomasschule. Bach looked out over the "moat" to the Promenade; he also had ready access through the little Thomas Gate.

Moving upwards from the Thomaskirche we find the

Market Place in the center, with the Town Hall. To the left is the Catherine Strasse with Zimmermann's Coffee House where Bach would later perform with his Collegium Musicum. Carrying on upwards and slightly right from the Market is Grimma Street leading to the Grimma Gate. To the left of it is the Nikolaikirche.

Outside the Grimma gate was a garden in which Bach's Collegium Musicum played in summer.

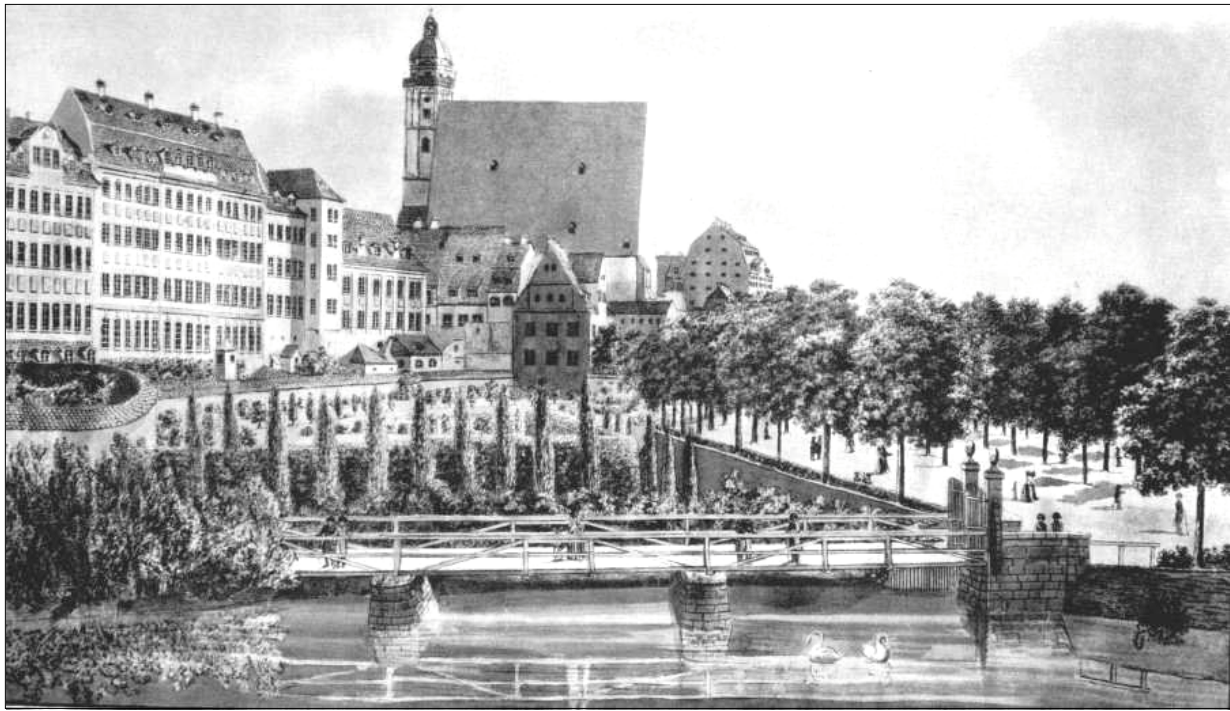


In this coloured engraving of 1735 we see Bach's "home neighbourhood". The building facing us in the centre is the recently rebuilt and re-styled Thomas Schule, with the great Thomas Kirche at right. The well in the square was supplied through a network of pipes with fresh water. The channels in the cobbled road surface were (unfortunately) for refuse water (of all kinds!) but these were removed in 1743.

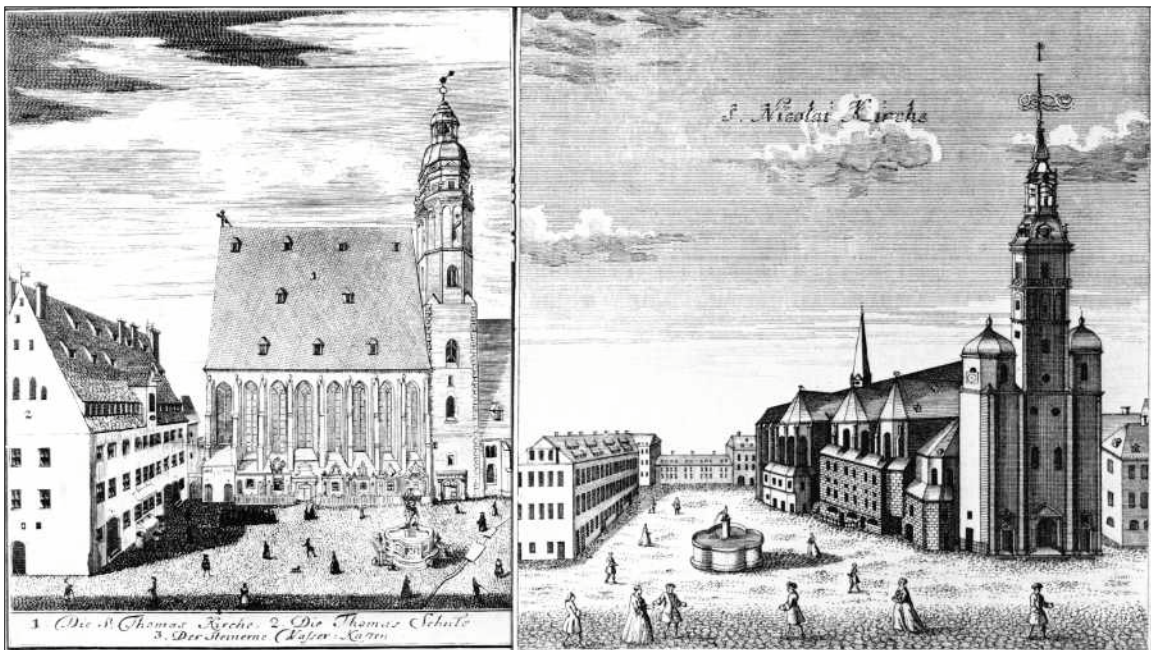
Through Thomas Gate, the little archway which can just be seen bordering the School on the left, Bach would have walked out onto a tree-lined promenade, there mingling with the fashionable and well-to-do merchants and their ladies. From there, as from the window of his *Componierstube*, his Composing Study, there were views over ornamental gardens and the Pleisse River to the distant rolling hills beyond.

The Thomas Gate had its own bridge connecting to the fashionable Promenade surrounding the city. Beyond were a number of extensive formal botanical gardens, the two earliest being laid out by the celebrated horticulturist Georg Bose in 1700, with the later addition of Herr Breiter's Garden which included a substantial glass Winter Garden. Further out were the rolling meadows along the Pleisse River. The Thomas Gate can clearly be seen in the centre of the left picture.

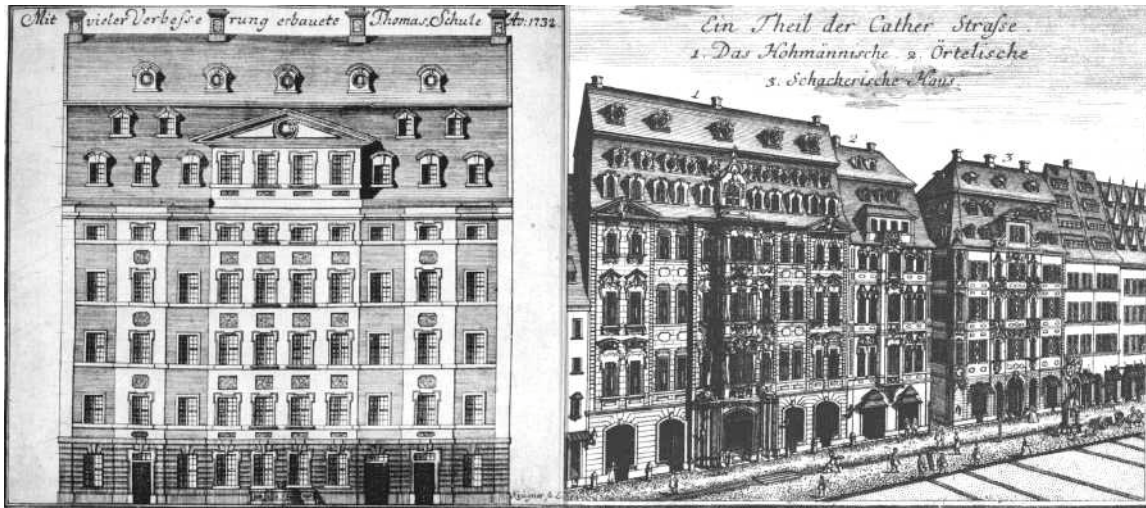




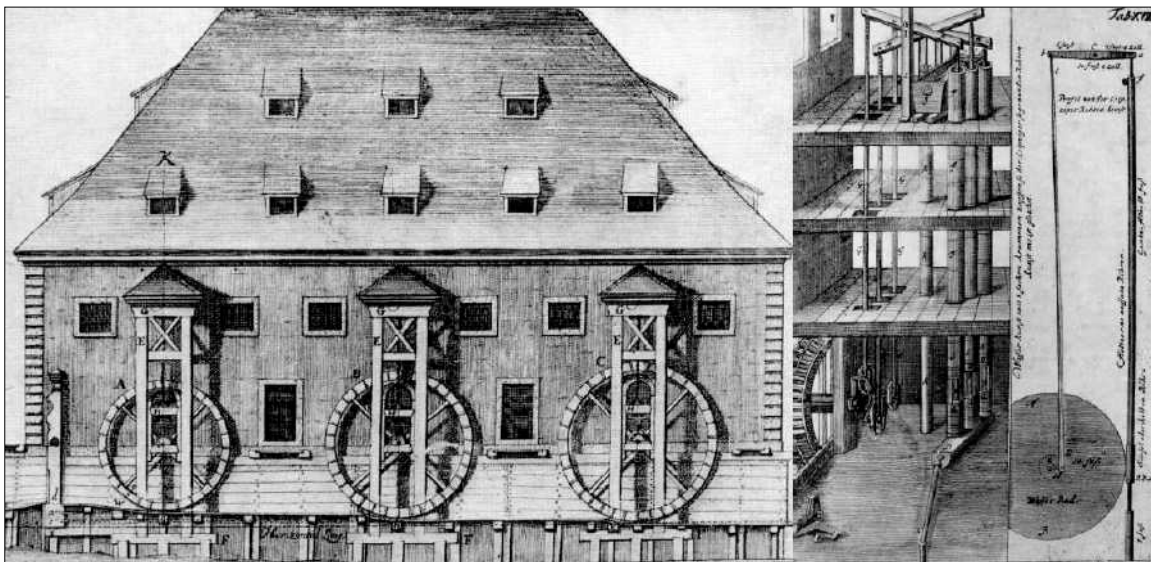
This view of part of the city is taken from the gardens and promenade surrounding the city wall. The dominant roof and tower in the center mark the Thomaskirche. The large building to the right of it and seen end-on is the Thomasschule. Note the height – this was after the 1732 remodeling and enlargement when extra floors were added. Bach looked out over the more formal city park to the rural scene beyond, which Goethe later described *idyllic*.



Here we see another view (left picture) of the Thomas School (left) and Thomas Church (facing). Bach lived and worked in the School building along with the choir. Note the date of this engraving is 1723. At that time the School building was old and decrepit, damp and unhealthy. In 1730-1 it was remodeled inside, additional upper floors were added, and the building was given a fashionable new facade. Bach is normally associated with the Thomaskirche. It is not so widely known that in fact the Nikolaikirche (at right) was the Hauptkirche, the Head Church of the Town and the Seat of the Superintendent. Bach's first cantata performance as Cantor was given on May 30th, 1723 in the Nikolaikirche, as were subsequent Council Election Cantatas. Sunday cantata performances were given alternately in the two churches, as were special works for festive days.



On the left is the architectural drawing of the "with much improvement rebuilt Thomas School Anno 1732". Bach's living conditions thereafter were much improved! On the right is "a part of the Cather(ine) Street". Zimmermann's Café which hosted Bach's Collegium Musicum was located in the center building in the picture. It was in a fashionable street... and in good company – the Hohmann House on the left was the Military Governor's Residence, while the house on the right belonged to a Doctor Schacher. Note the quality of the buildings, the paved streets, and there was public lighting at the street intersections and on important buildings. During the mid-1700s approximately one-third of all the inner-city buildings were remodeled or rebuilt. Such was the quality of Leipzig's building facades that Amsterdam publisher Peter Schenk produced a book of engravings in 1722.



The Waterworks Building was situated on the Pleisse River. The giant water wheels did not drive stone corn-grinders, but 50-foot high pumps (see section on right) which pumped a mix of river and spring water up to the header tank in the roof. This gave the necessary pressure to drive the water down, and through a network of pipes (Röhrenfahrt) which fed reservoirs in squares throughout the city. Ladles on chains (Schöpfwerke) were used to draw up water from these reservoirs. A network of "water mains" had existed in Leipzig since 1504; its precise location through the city's streets is still preserved on plans held by the city today. Some important buildings were connected directly to feeder pipes; during the 1720s and 30s there was much redevelopment in the City, and new buildings were all connected to the water supply.



Leipzig's eight Coffee Shops played an important role in the social and musical life of the city. We end this brief tour of Bach's Leipzig with an idealized view of Richter's Coffee garden which nonetheless captures the lively cultured atmosphere of the city in 1736 when this frontispiece to the Song Collection "The Singing Muse by the Plesse" was published. Note the variety of activities - conversation, spinet-playing, cards, and yes, bottom right - snooker! Elegant, cultured, sophisticated, commercially prosperous, cosmopolitan... this was the city in which Bach and his family were fortunate in spending twenty-seven years.

Chapter Five

LEIPZIG 1: 1723-1729 – Cantor and Director of Music

Leipzig, with a population of 30.000, was the second city of Saxony, the center of the German printing and publishing industries, an important European trading center, and site of a progressive and famous university. It was also one of the foremost centers of German cultural life, with magnificent private dwellings, streets well paved and illuminated at night, a recently opened municipal library, a majestic town hall, and a vibrant social life. Outside its massive town walls were elegant tree-lined promenades and extensive formal gardens. The old-established university drew scholars and men of distinction from far and wide, and the famous book trade contributed much to the cultural life of the city. One of Leipzig's most important features was its international commerce. When the Leipzig Trade Fair was in progress, the respectable town was transformed into a show-ground mixing business with pleasure, and was popular with members of the Royal Court of Dresden. Many connections were established between nations on these occasions, and this in turn had a beneficial effect on the civic economy and culture as well as the international variety of its music.

Bach moved to Leipzig on May 22, 1723, where for the remaining 27 years of his life he was to live and work as Cantor, or *Directore Chori Musici Lipsiensis* – Director of Choir and Music in Leipzig. He would have known the town from previous visits, as he had come, for instance, in December 1717 to test the large new organ (53 stops) in the University Church, the Paulinerkirche, just completed by the Leipzig organ builder Johann Scheibe. Despite the Leipzig Council's almost disrespectful reticence in appointing him, Bach's arrival was clearly a major event in the musical and social world, and one North German newspaper described it in great detail: "Last Saturday at noon, four carts laden with goods and chattels belonging to the former Capellmeister to the Court of Cöthen arrived in Leipzig and at two in the afternoon, he and his family arrived in two coaches and moved into their newly decorated lodgings in the school building". The Bach family at that time comprised his wife and four children, of eight, nine, twelve and fourteen years of age. May 31, 1723, marked the inaugural ceremony for the new Capellmeister with the customary speeches and anthems, putting an end to six unsettled months for the city in filling the post.

The school of St Thomas was situated on the western wall of the town, not far from the imposing Pleissenburg fortress with its large tower on the south-western corner of the town wall. The school had around 60 boarders, aged between 11 and early 20s, and provided the choirs for at least four city churches. These boarders were mainly from deprived backgrounds and were maintained at the school on a charitable basis, and they also occasionally had to sing outdoors at funerals and in the city streets for alms.

Bach's apartment in the school was divided between the ground floor and the next two floors. From the window of his study (Componierstube) on the first upper floor of the Thomasschule, Bach would look out west over the town wall, to a magnificent view of the surrounding gardens, fields and meadows, a view about which Goethe later wrote "When first saw it, believed had come to the Elysian Fields". Adjacent to the Thomas Schule was the narrow St Thomas gate (Thomaspfortchen) set in the town wall with a small bridge over the town's moat leading to a popular walk bordered with lime trees which followed the town wall between the moat and the Pleisse river. Along here were some of the eight Leipzig garden Coffee-houses situated outside the town, where much of the musical life of the city took place during the summer. Indeed the city was nicknamed 'Athens on the Pleisse', and offered many attractions for the summer holiday-makers in its well cared-for parks and pleasure gardens beside the river Pleisse and its idyllic surrounding countryside.

Though contemporary newspaper reports stated that the incoming Cantor's apartments were "newly renovated", the building itself, dating from 1553, was however, in a somewhat dilapidated condition; discipline was practically non-existent, the staff quarreled among themselves, and the living conditions were unhealthy. Parents were unwilling to send their children to a school where illness amongst the pupils was so prevalent, and consequently, there were only 54 scholars out of a possible 120.

The Cantor's duties were to organize the music in the four principal churches of Leipzig, and to form choirs for these churches from the pupils of the Thomasschule. He was also to instruct the more musically talented scholars in instrument playing so that they might be available for the church orchestra, and to teach the pupils Latin (which Bach quickly delegated to a junior colleague).

Out of the 54 boys at Bach's disposal for use in the different choirs, he stated, '17 are competent, 20 not yet fully, and 17 incapable'. The best singers were selected to form the choir which sang the Sunday cantata; one week at the Thomaskirche, the other week at the Nikolaikirche. A 'second' choir, of the same size but less ability, would sing at the church without the cantata. The 'third' choir of even less ability at the Petrikirche, the 'fourth' at the Neuekirche.

The orchestra used for the cantatas consisted of up to 20 players. The city had, for a century or more, maintained a Town Band (Städtisches Orchester) consisting of four wind players and four string players. It may be assumed by the presence of the near-legendary Gottfried Reicha among them both as wind and string player, and after 1719 their "senior", that they were players of a high standard. Surprisingly perhaps to present-day readers, they were expected to be proficient in the violin, reed, flute and brass families. They were under the control of the Thomaskantor.

Bach would certainly have taken steps early on to ensure that the instruments used were in top condition. We know that the stringed instruments used were maintained during the 1730s, and several of them built, by the celebrated Leipzig instrument maker (and Court Lute-maker) J C Hoffmann (Hoffmann's instruments are still in possession of and played in the Thomaskirche today). Hoffmann incidentally also built a viola pomposa, a tenor of the violin family, to Bach's orders.

Music-making was a popular pastime, and the regular concerts at Zimmerman's Coffee House and other musical venues would indicate that there were no doubt musicians in the town who could be invited to attend in the gallery for church performances. Thus it may be assumed that Bach could count on a fairly professional orchestra. Bach's many arias featuring oboe obbligato attest to the presence of a good oboist among the town's wind players (possibly Reicha himself?). Viola and violin obbligati Bach would normally play himself. It is highly unlikely that there was either a chamber organ or a harpsichord in the gallery – the main organ being used exclusively. The wealth and complexity of instrumentation in Bach's cantatas is evidence itself that musicianship of a high standard was not hard for him to obtain. His sons and pupils would also have participated, together with visiting musicians happy no doubt to have the honor of performing under the direction of the now famous Herr Bach.

In Leipzig there was none of the aristocratic ease of the Court of Cöthen, where Bach could make music as and when he liked; here he had to keep strictly to his duties within the organized life of church and school. Singing classes were held from 9 to 12 am on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. On Thursdays the Cantor was free, on Friday he taught in the morning. Rehearsals for the Sunday Cantatas took place on Saturday afternoons.

The Sunday services began at 7a.m, with a motet, hymns, and an organ voluntary. The cantata, usually lasting about 20 minutes, preceded the hour-long sermon, or if the cantata was in two parts, it came before and after the sermon. The main service finished at about mid-day, after which there followed a communion service.

There were also week-day services for Bach to superintend at the four churches, also in one of the ancient hospitals and in a 'house of correction'. Although these services were simple and required only a few hymns, the Cantor had to organize a group of about nine singers to work on a rota system. Apart from this, he had to attend and compose music for funerals and various other occasions. Bach also took a lively interest in the divine services at the University church, the Paulinerkirche. It was only after he had conducted eleven services up till Christmas 1725, that he discovered that the Cantor of Leipzig was no longer officially director of music in the University church, this position being given to the moderately talented organist of the Nikolaikirche. A long dispute between Bach and the authorities arose over this, and it was only after he had appealed to the Elector of Saxony at Dresden that a compromise was reached.

Bach nonetheless performed his duties as required, pursuing during these early years his long-held objective of providing a complete set of cantatas for every Sunday corresponding to the liturgical year. This self-imposed task was largely completed during his first 5 years, after which he produced cantatas with less regularity.

It may sometimes appear to listeners enjoying Bach's cantatas today, that some of the arias are – well – perhaps a little less imaginative than might be expected from such a great master. That this is in fact the case may be explained by recalling the educational customs of Bach's time. Much stress was placed on 'learning by doing' – by copying or transcribing works of the masters, by copying part-scores for performances, by working out continuo parts... and by composing simpler recitatives and arias for performance. It should also be recalled that any duties enumerated as part of a titular position were to be fulfilled, but not necessarily by the incumbent personally. Bach's position for example required him to provide instruction in Latin, which he did by delegation. Delegation was an accepted means of fulfilling obligations, and was also seen as means of instructing the more gifted pupils. While Bach did in fact delegate the composition of some recitatives and arias to his pupils, he would always set the tone by composing an opening chorus reflecting the scriptural theme of the week. In the case of more important occasions he would compose the entire cantata himself. The listener can usually be sure of Bach's personal authorship of a particular aria or recitative when it bears Bach's "signature" – accompaniment scored for strings, rather than simple figured bass.

One particularly special performance of a work by Bach was recorded in some detail: the cantata known as the Trauerode, BWV 198. In 1697, the Elector Augustus of Saxony assumed the Polish crown, a step that obliged him to adopt the Roman Catholic faith. His wife, Christiane Eberhardine, preferred her Lutheranism to her husband, however, so she renounced the throne and lived apart from him until her death on September 6th, 1727, an event which was deeply mourned in strongly Lutheran Saxony. Two weeks later, one Hans von Kirchbach, a nobleman student at the University of Leipzig, proposed to organize a memorial service in the Paulinerkirche during which he would deliver a valedictory address. Von Kirchbach commissioned a sometime librettist of Bach's, Johann Christoph Gottsched, to write verses for a Mourning Ode, and Bach to set these verses to music.

A difficulty arose, however, because of the fact that Von Kirchbach's choice of composer ignored the director of music at the University Church, Herr Görner, who as Bach's protocol senior would ordinarily have supplied the music for a University function of this sort. Görner protested, and Kirchbach was required to pay him twelve thalers in compensation. Bach was then granted permission to compose the Ode, albeit with a reprimand that he was not thereafter 'to assume the right to compose music for academic festivals.' The permission came on October 12th, but Bach must have had Gottsched's text a few days before. In any case, the score was finished on the 15th, just two days before the performance.

A great catafalque bearing the Queen's emblems stood in the center of the crowded church, and the service began with the ringing of all the bells of the city. Kirchbach delivered his oration after the second chorus. According to the program, the Ode was 'set by Herr Bach in the Italian style.' Herr Bach conducted the performance from a harpsichord, among the musicians in the gallery.

Much is often made in current biographical notes, of Bach's disputes with the Council. When fuller, more detailed and more recent research is taken into account these records may perhaps give an unbalanced picture of Bach's life there at that time. There is no doubt whatsoever that he was widely respected as a composer, musician, teacher, organist, and specialist in organ construction. This respect was to grow steadily, as Bach's reputation widened, and as he gained the official title of Court Composer to the Dresden Court – the Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. This comfortable security of position combined with the fact that Bach had established, during his first six or seven years' tenure, a more than sufficient repertoire of cantatas (it has been suggested that he composed in total some 300), allowed him to widen his musical scope of activity.

Chapter Six

The ROYAL VISIT to LEIPZIG, 1733 – A Grand Occasion



February 1st, 1733, marked the death of Friedrich August I (August the Strong), who had reigned as Prince-Elector of Saxony since 1694 and additionally as King of Poland since 1697. Saxony had not celebrated the enthronement of a new Elector-King for almost forty years, so the Coronation of August II was marked with dazzling celebrations throughout the Saxon Land.

According to Ancient Custom, the new *Landesherr* would visit the important cities of his territory, to receive there the greetings of the populace. Leipzig, being Saxony's most important city after the capital Dresden, was first to receive the Royal Visit.

On April 20, 1733, the Prince-Elector of Saxony and King of Poland made his entry into Leipzig ceremoniously accompanied by the Dignitaries of the City Council and the University. Entering through the Grimma Gate he was conducted to the House of the Apel Family on the Market Place, one of the city's grander Residences which was used to accommodate visiting dignitaries. Here the Elector descended from his Carriage and was conducted to his quarters.

The Official Celebrations were held on the next day. During the Church Service in the Nikolaikirche, Leipzig's main church, *Capellmeister* and *Director Musices* Johann Sebastian Bach conducted a performance of the Kyrie and Gloria (expanded several years later into the B-Minor Mass) especially composed for the Occasion. Though Saxony was fervently Lutheran Protestant, August I had converted to Catholicism in order to accept the Polish Crown, and his successor August II followed suit. So the Dresden Court was officially Catholic. Bach's Kyrie and Gloria were, diplomatically, acceptable equally to both faiths. Following the Church Service, His Majesty was conveyed in a *Chaise* or Carrying Chair to the Bourse, there to accept the Greetings of the Nobility (Ritterschaft). He was then conducted to the *Rathaus*, the Town Hall, receiving Greetings from members of the Council and University.

Finally he made his appearance on the Town Hall Balcony, where he received the greetings of the popular multitude, for the entire population of the City had gathered in the Market Place. Following a Welcoming Speech by one of the Ministers, the populace greeted His Majesty as if with one voice, raising their hats and the Witness Finger in traditional salute, then throwing up their hats crying *Vivat!* Long May He Live and Reign.

Description and illustration from *Bilderbuch aus der Geschichte der Stadt Leipzig*, Verlag Zieger, Leipzig 1897

Chapter Seven

LEIPZIG 2: 1729-1740 – The Collegium Musicum

Bach would now begin to devote more time to activities outside Leipzig; to examine for musical appointments, to advise on organ building, to lend support from time to time to such private establishments as at Cöthen and Weissenfels, where he was honorary Capellmeister from 1729-1736. In particular, Bach had become famous, not only as an organist and improvisator, but as an expert in organ construction. As a result he was frequently asked to advise on new organ specifications and to test newly completed instruments with a thorough and detailed examination and report, as was the custom of the time.

Bach developed a close working relationship with his contemporary, the celebrated Saxon organ-builder Gottfried Silbermann, who was also a personal friend of the Bach family and godfather to Carl Philipp Emmanuel. Bach may well have played any number of Silbermann's instruments, almost all of which were located in Saxony. In 1733 Bach petitioned the Elector of Saxony in Dresden for an official title, enclosing copies of the Kyrie and Gloria from the b-minor Mass; though unsuccessful, Bach tried again this time with the backing of his Dresden patron Count von Keyserlingk. Thereafter he received the title, and signed himself as Dresden Hofcompositeur. By way of acknowledgment Bach presented a two-hour recital on the new Silbermann organ in the Frauenkirche (tragically destroyed in the Second World War and now totally rebuilt, though of course the Silbermann organ was lost).

It is on record that the Council reprimanded Bach in August 1730 for leaving his teaching duties in the overworked hands of his junior colleague, Petzold; for not properly disciplining his choirs, and for his frequent unauthorized journeys away from Leipzig. Bach did not try to justify himself, which further annoyed the Council, and so they attempted to diminish his income. This drove Bach to write to his school-friend Erdmann in Danzig, asking him to find him a 'convenient post' where he could escape the 'trouble, envy and persecution' which he had perpetually to face in Leipzig.

The city would have lost Bach if his friend Gesner had not intervened on his behalf. Gesner had just taken over the post of headmaster at the Thomasschule after the death in 1729 of the former headmaster, and he used his influence to settle the situation between Bach and the authorities, and to secure him better working conditions. The 1730s was a great period of new building and urban improvement in Leipzig and between May 1730 and June 1732 alterations and improvements were made to the Thomasschule buildings, including the addition of two upper floors and some exterior "restyling". Bach's own accommodations were much improved in the process. The choral forces were much diminished during this period and so Bach produced a number of solo cantatas. The school buildings were reopened on June 5, 1732 with a dedicatory cantata BWV Anhang 18. At the opening speech, Gesner stressed the need for music within the foundation – which must have given Bach some hope for a brighter future in the school.

Unfortunately however, Gesner left Leipzig in 1733 to take up an appointment as professor at the University of Göttingen. His successor was Johann August Ernesti, 29 years old, a former senior member of the Thomasschule staff. Ernesti had entirely new ideas on education: Classics and Theology were out of date, and there must be more stress on subjects that would be useful in secular life. This led to disputes with Bach who particularly wanted more time to train his choirs and musicians.

This renewal of the old disputes with the school and church authorities must have been a considerable discouragement for Bach; in any case it is apparent that from then on he appeared less and less eager to provide the Council with church music. Salvation came however in the form of the Collegium Musicum; when Bach became its permanent director in 1729 he began to receive official recognition of the high regard in which he was generally held. It is worth examining the activities of this musical group in some detail as it gives a close-up view of everyday cultural life in the Leipzig of the 1730s.

In Bach's time, the city of Leipzig already had an established tradition of Collegia Musica – secular musical organizations, run mainly by the students of the city's famed university – dating back at least to the middle of the preceding century, if not its beginning. Many of Leipzig's most famous musicians were connected with the students' musical activities (among them several Thomaskantors) and contributed music of the highest quality. Various such groups came and went. At the beginning of the 1700s, two new ones – which were to enjoy a comparatively long existence – were founded by two young men at the University who were eventually to number among the most celebrated composers of their time. One was established in 1702 by the redoubtable Georg Philipp Telemann; the other was begun six years later, by Johann Friedrich Fasch. Fasch's group ultimately fell to the direction of Johann Gottlieb Görner, the director of music at the University and a constant musical rival of Bach's. After Telemann left Leipzig the leadership of his Collegium was taken by Balthasar Schott, the Neukirche organist.

In the spring of 1729, Schott moved to a new position in Gotha, and Bach took over directorship of the Collegium.

The story of Bach's Collegium Musicum is closely bound to a Leipzig coffee shop proprietor named Gottfried Zimmermann. The concerts were given on Zimmermann's premises, probably under his auspices. During the winter, the group played every Friday night, from 6 to 8pm, in Zimmermann's coffee house on the Catherine Strasse, centrally placed close to the Marktplatz. In the warmer months, the music was moved outdoors, to Zimmermann's coffee garden 'in front of the Grimma gate, on the Grimma stone road' – so the address is given in contemporary reports, with summer performances on Wednesdays, from 4 to 6pm.

That Gottfried Zimmermann was not only a restaurateur and impresario, but also a music-lover and quite possibly a competent musician, is indicated by the fact, as confirmed by several contemporary newspaper reports, that he frequently re-equipped his establishment with the latest musical instruments for use by the Collegium and other musical guests. One of his prize possessions in the late 1720s was 'a clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity' which was a Leipzig attraction in itself. It was replaced by an 'even finer instrument' in 1733. German harpsichords were larger and fuller in tone than their Italian and French contemporaries, offering a much wider range of sound. The new instrument would certainly have had two, possibly three manuals, and may have been the work of the famous Hamburg builder Hass similar to his 1740 instrument with three manuals and five choirs of strings (2', 4', 8', 8' and 16'). There may well have been a separate organ-type pedalboard.

Two types of concerts were given: *ordinaire* and *extraordinaire*. The former were the standard performances; the latter were for special celebrations (king's birthdays and the like), and were usually marked by elaborate festive cantatas, with trumpets and drums in full splendor. (Bach adapted many of these works into church pieces; the Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248, for example, is made up largely of such adaptations). About the regular concerts we know less; the Leipzig newspapers, in general, only announced the *extraordinaire* events. Presumably, instrumental music was heard, ranging from clavier solos through sonatas to orchestral works.

It was doubtless here that Bach's concerti for one or several harpsichords received their performances, many of these having been adapted from earlier (eg violin) concertos, or from concertos by other composers (eg Vivaldi). Occasionally, too, vocal music might be given; such an example is the Coffee Cantata, BWV 211, first presented in 1732. It is also on record that works of Handel, Vivaldi, Telemann, Locatelli, Albinoni and others were performed.

Admission was charged for the *extraordinaire* concerts, and also for those occasional 'special concerts' (*Sonder-konzerte*) which featured distinguished visiting artists. The regular concerts were probably free.

These concerts were serious events, given outside of the regular coffee shop hours, and were thus not merely an ornament to the usual culinary attractions. The performances of the Collegium were, in fact, hardly different from what we consider to be normal concert procedure today. Indeed, the word 'concert' began to be used expressly in connection with the Collegium during its later years.

The schedule of weekly performances, the composition of new works, rehearsing them, arranging programs, etc., reveals that the Collegium Musicum was no mere diversion for Bach. The fact is that this was, for much of his later life, his central artistic activity, the church becoming almost peripheral. In the years with the Collegium Bach satisfied a side of himself that certainly must have lain dormant since the happy and fruitful period at Cöthen. He remained its director from 1729 until the death of Gottfried Zimmermann in 1741.

Bach also enjoyed visits, often with his son Wilhelm Friedemann, to Dresden, where he would meet with friends in the Court Orchestra and perhaps visit the Opera. On one occasion he called upon his patron Count von Keyserlingk, whom he presented with the set of variations now known as the Goldberg variations after the count's harpsichordist.

Chapter Eight

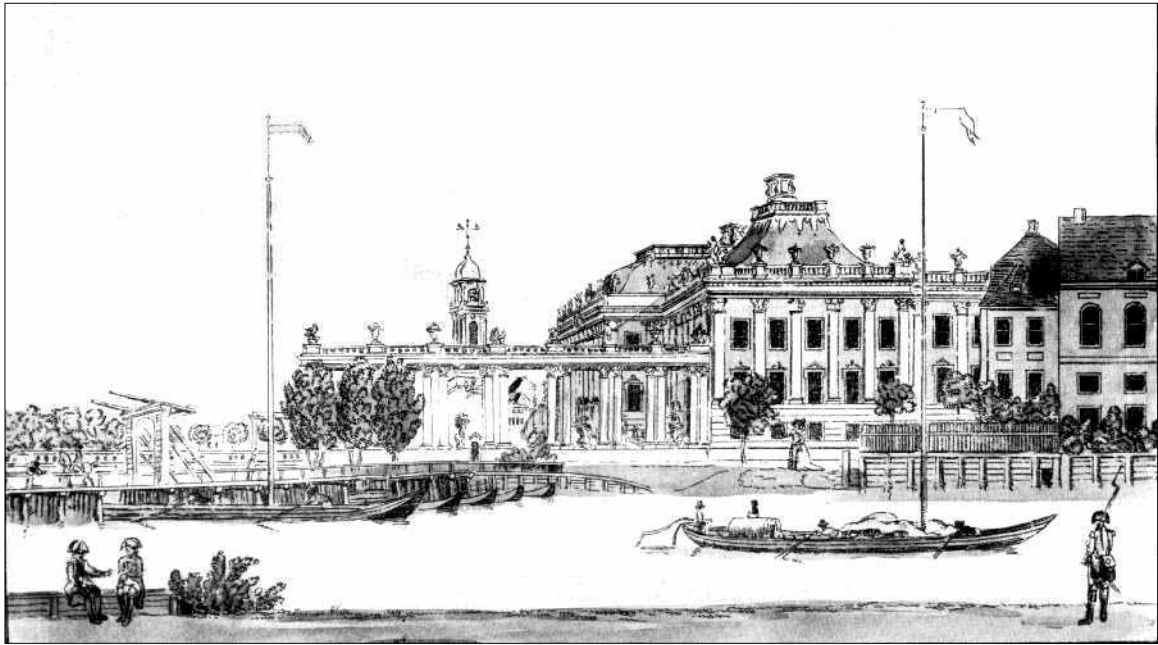
LEIPZIG 3: 1744-1750 – The Introspective Years

During the latter years of his life Bach gradually withdrew inwards, producing some of the most profound statements of baroque musical form.

In his own much improved apartments of the newly rebuilt Thomasschule Bach would welcome visiting musicians from all over Germany and many other countries. His son Carl-Phillip Emanuel was to write that 'no musician of any consequence passing through Leipzig would fail to call upon my father'. No doubt they and some of his sons would enjoy a private concert in Bach's large music-room, perhaps featuring concertos for 2, 3 or 4 harpsichords, for Bach kept six claviers and many other instruments.

This portrait shows Bach in his latter years.





In 1745, as part of the complex web of alliances involved in the Silesian Wars, Prussian forces attacked Leipzig, and although the City Fathers prudently saved their city by surrendering, Prussian forces briefly occupied the city garrison, departing on New Year's Day 1746. The city itself, and Saxony overall, were forced to pay heavy financial “reparations” for being on the “wrong side”.

Although Bach had received several Royal Requests to visit King Frederick the Great of Prussia in Potsdam, conveyed through his son Carl Phillip Emmanuel who was employed as Court Harpsichordist there, Bach would naturally feel that in view of recent hostilities such a visit would not be well received in Leipzig. After putting off the visit by pleading ill-health, in 1747 Bach finally made the long, 20-hour journey from Leipzig to attend at the Royal Palace in Potsdam.

The Palace was destroyed during World War II. Though dating from the early 1800s, this print shows the Palace at Potsdam as it would have been at the time of Bach's visit. The view is taken from the Long Bridge; in the illustration above we see the side view, the main front facade and entrance being to the left in the print.



The King and his Capelle normally played chamber music between 7 and 9 pm. The story, well documented in contemporary newspapers, recounts that on Bach's arrival, Frederick was about to begin his evening concert, in which he himself played the flute with the orchestra. He was given the list of people who had arrived at Court, and, laying down his flute, he said to his orchestra, 'Gentlemen, old Bach is here'.

The King cancelled his evening concert and invited Bach straight up to try his new fortepianos built by Bach's organ-builder colleague and friend Gottfried Silbermann. The King owned several of these instruments, located in different rooms. After Bach had played on all the different instruments, moving with the King and musicians from room to room, Bach invited the King to give him a theme on which to improvise; Bach of course rose to the occasion, improvising at length and with amazing skill. On his return to Leipzig, to show his gratitude for the excellent reception he had received at Potsdam, Bach developed the King's theme into a sequence of complex contrapuntal movements, added a sonata for violin and flute (Frederick being a flute-player), entitled the whole 'A Musical Offering' and sent it to the Court with a letter of dedication.

On the day following the musical evening, a royal procession made its way around Potsdam, as Bach was invited to play on all the city's organs.

The King's Summer Palace, called Sanssouci ('Without Care'), situated in the Royal Park nearby, had been completed and dedicated on May 1st, 1747, just prior to Bach's visit; it is still standing and open to visitors, as also the huge and impressive surrounding park.



Bach then became a member of the Mitzler society, a learned society devoted to the promotion of musical science, whose members were expected on joining to display some token of their learning. Bach's opening contribution was a set of canonic variations on the Christmas hymn, 'Vom Himmel hoch'.

In these last years of his life, Bach's creative energy was conserved for the highest flights of musical expression: the Mass in b minor, the Canonic Variations, the Goldberg Variations, and of course the Musical Offering displaying the art of canon. His last great work is the complete summary of all his skill in counterpoint and fugue; methods which he perfected, and beyond which no composer has ever been able to pass. This work is known to us as 'Die Kunst der Fuge' ('The Art of the Fugue', BWV 1080).

Bach had overworked in poor light throughout his life, and his eyesight now began to fail him. The Leipzig Council started looking around as early as June 1749 for a successor. On the advice of friends, Bach put himself in the hands of a visiting celebrated English ophthalmic specialist, John Taylor (who also operated on Handel) and who happened to be passing through Leipzig. Two cataract operations were performed on his eyes, in March and April 1750, and their weakening effect was aggravated by a following infection which seriously undermined his health.

He spent the last months of his life in a darkened room, revising his great chorale fantasias (BWV 651-668) with the aid of Altnikol, his pupil and son-in-law. It was in these circumstances that he composed his last chorale fantasia, based fittingly on the chorale "Before Thy Throne O Lord Stand". He was also working on a fugue featuring the subject B-A-C-H (B in German notation is B flat, while H in German notation = B natural). He had often been asked why he had not exploited this theme before, and had indicated that, despite its thematic possibilities, he would consider it arrogant to do so. Appropriately, perhaps intentionally, it was left unfinished at his death. (This incomplete fugue, normally appended to the Art of the Fugue in performances, has no discernible connection with the Art of the Fugue, though the Art of Fugue theme can be made to fit, as Gustav Nottebohm pointed out in 1880.) The last great Triple Fugue of the Art (Contrapunctus XI) may also have been written during his final days.

Then, on the morning of the 28th of July, 1750, he woke up to find he could bear strong light again, and see quite clearly.

That same day he had a stroke, followed by a severe fever. He died *'in the evening, after a quarter to nine, in the sixty-fifth year of his life, yielding up his blessed soul to his saviour'*.

Bach was buried in St John's Cemetery which stood one block outside the town's Grimma Gate in the early morning of July 31, and in the absence of any tombstone his grave was soon forgotten.

When St John's Church was rebuilt in 1894 a few Leipzig scholars and Bach admirers succeeded in having what were believed to be the composer's bones exhumed. Partial identification was established by a series of anatomical and other tests. The bones were laid to rest in a stone sarcophagus next to the poet Gellert in the vaults of the Johanniskirche, and many people went to pay homage to this tomb until the church was destroyed by bombs in WW2. Once more his remains were rescued and in 1949 buried, this time in the altar-room of the Thomaskirche where they remain to this day.

Chapter Nine

Bach's Four Shorter Masses: A Tale of Smuggling and Intrigue

Bach's Four Shorter Masses, BWV 233-6, include Bach's own selection of some of his finest choral and cantata movements. But...Why did Johann Sebastian Bach, a devout confirmed Lutheran working in a Lutheran city for a Lutheran Church and City Council... why did he compose Masses in Latin – and why were these Shorter Masses created almost entirely out of previous compositions? Our understanding of and answers to these questions have gone through several phases.

First came the recognition that during Bach's time and right up to the early 1800s, the liturgy of the Protestant churches in Leipzig regularly used a large proportion of Latin text taken from the Roman Catholic rites, often with the original tunes in plain chant. Thus for example, the *Magnificat* – of which we know two J.S. Bach versions – was sung not only at Evensong at Christmas, but also on other important feast days. The *Gloria*, which the Angels sang on the night of Christ's birth, was naturally sung then, even replacing the traditional Cantata, but it was also sung on other solemn occasions. The *Sanctus* was traditionally sung at Divine Service on all important feast days.

The Greek *Kyrie* was often used and was obligatory on certain Sundays, e.g. on the first Sunday in Advent. Even the *Agnus Dei* was sung in Bach's day in certain circumstances such as the Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary; at this time all forms of the feasts of the Virgin were celebrated in Leipzig. Finally, and most significantly, the Greater Litany in a form which combined Greek, Latin and German words, remained in use particularly during the Penitential Season in which there was no "figured music" (concerted music) e.g. in Advent and Lent – on such occasions it was chanted by a group of four boys from St. Thomas' Choir School, alternating with the full choir and the congregation. It is thus not at all unusual to find Latin works composed by J.S. Bach to words of the Roman Catholic rite for use in the Protestant services in the churches of Leipzig of which he was in charge – it would have been remarkable if it had been otherwise. Most probably at least three of the parts of the *Mass in b minor* BWV 232 were originally intended for such a purpose, although there is some doubt about the *Gloria* on account of its size; but it is known that parts of the Greater Doxology were sung.

That said, it is a mistake to describe the four *Missae Breves* as "Lutheran Masses", as is often done nowadays, and to assume that they were in fact used in Leipzig. Here we move on to the second phase of research. Abbé Carl de Nys has pointed out, significantly, that in the *Gloria* of these Masses Bach used the *Catholic* liturgy of France and Italy and not the official Protestant Liturgy of Leipzig, which is slightly different. This would make it unlikely that they would have been employed in the liturgy of Leipzig, and fairly certain that they were not composed for this purpose in the first place.

Though these Masses are often referred to as the "*Shorter Masses*", they should more accurately be known as Catholic *Missae Breves*. The term "short" does not refer to the length of each section of the whole score, but to the fact that only two sections of the "Common" Catholic service were composed: the *Kyrie* and the *Gloria*. The *Missa Brevis* as such was unknown in Leipzig. We need therefore to look for some further motive for their composition, leading us to one Count František Antonín von Sporck. The Count is known to have possessed copies of all four Masses, which were and still are sung regularly in the Chapel of the Count's castle at Lysa-on-the-Elbe in Bohemia (20 miles east of Prague).

Count von Sporck had been High Commissioner for Bohemia to the Electoral Court in Dresden for a considerable time. He was also a regular visitor to Leipzig, no doubt especially during Trade Fairs given his known interest in art, literature and music. He was a familiar and well-respected figure among the intellectual and artistic circles of that city, and Picander had introduced his first collection of poems in 1725 with an Ode addressed to the Count. Von Sporck maintained his own orchestra to a high standard, paying for a number of musicians to study in Italy.

He funded two theaters, one in Kuks, the other in Prague. His Prague Theater mounted two Vivaldi Operas, *Agrippa* in 1730 and *Alvida* the following spring. He was also personally instrumental in spreading the development of the *Cor de Chasse* or Valve Horn from France westwards into Germany.

It seems highly likely that von Sporck would also have been made welcome in the Bach household. Furthermore, Bach most probably knew the Count from meetings in Carlsbad when Capellmeister Bach accompanied Prince Leopold and his Cöthen Court in 1718 and 1720, for the Count was a regular visitor to Carlsbad and was active in organizing the regular “Musical Festival” there, to which Bach contributed some performances on his visit with Prince Leopold. The four Shorter Masses are believed to have been composed expressly for the Count. This explains the “assemblage” of previously composed Cantata movements (most of which the Count would not have known) and the use of the Catholic liturgy.

The reason why Bach made the especial effort to compose these Catholic Masses lies in the fascinating story of the Count himself, and the religious/political conditions in Bohemia under which he had to live.

Count František Antonin von Sporck was born on March 9, 1662. His father died in 1679, and coming of age in 1684 he inherited the family palace in Prague, numerous estates in Bohemia and a substantial fortune. Prior to this, in 1680 and 1681 he had already "*done the Grand Tour of Europe*", as was customary for young noblemen of that time, including Rome, Turin, through southern France to Madrid then north to Paris, returning to Bohemia via London, the Hague and Brussels. He went back to Paris in spring 1682 when at the Court at Versailles he made the acquaintance of the Valve Horn and had two of his musicians learn to play the instrument. Back in Bohemia they passed on their skills, and their instruments were soon copied by Nurnberg instrument makers.

In 1694 a source of therapeutic waters was discovered at Kuks, one of the Sporck estates; here Sporck was to build a Spa, with imposing buildings, a castle, and a hospice with the Church of the Holy Trinity for retired servicemen for which he set up a foundation. The cultural activities of Count von Sporck were unusually multifaceted. Few noblemen of their time could take pride in the publication of almost 150 books of a religious and philosophical content, often translations from German or French. Sporck had his own engraving workshop. He conducted a rich social life, several prominent German men of letters visited him at Kuks.

However there was a dark cloud overshadowing the Count's life, and especially his wide theological and religious interests: censorship, oppressive, and rigorously enforced. After the Czechs lost to the Habsburgs at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620, the Czechs struggled under a strict, absolutist regime; censorship was all-pervasive, and books had to be smuggled into Bohemia from abroad. In the early 1700s enforcement was in the hands of the Jesuits, reinforced in 1715 by a government order banning the publication and dissemination of all satirical books, tracts and pictures. Unofficial printing offices were to be closed down. Printing presses were allowed to operate only in university towns and towns with higher authorities.

Count von Sporck was deeply interested in non-orthodoxy and in the teachings of non-Catholic theologians, and himself published numerous theological works. He financed the printing of theses in theology, philosophy, medicine and physics. Sporck's printing office in Lysa was closed by the Jesuits in 1712, so he had most of his titles printed outside Bohemia. These were then smuggled into the country in various ingenious ways. In 1725 he had a whole non-Catholic library smuggled in from Silesia, although the import of such banned literature was punishable by death. On July 26, 1729 however, Kuks was occupied by a military division of the Carraf Regiment and Sporck was handed an Imperial Decree authorizing the sequestration of all of his books. Kuks had a well-endowed library, housed in a separate building of its own. Sporck was arrested and deported to Prague to be interrogated by the authorities. His library, containing 30,000 volumes, was seized and examined. Sporck was finally accused of heresy and its propagation, with threatened punishment of loss of land-rights, estates, a fine of 100,000 gold pieces, the burning of his books and life imprisonment under strict guard. He was however, spared the worst: on March 13, 1733 he was convicted only for printing books without having them pass through censorship, and fined 6,000 gold pieces.

While the verdict and fine may have been relatively lenient in comparison to the more drastic alternatives, it must nevertheless have weighed on his artistic, cultured and inquiring mind. Leipzig was but a short journey, and this pleasant cultured lively city would have been attractive to von Sporck, not only as a haven of liberty and free thought, but more practically as a source of literature. At the beginning of the 18th century Saxony was by far the most developed German territorial state with Leipzig as its economic capital.

The city's tri-annual fairs brought a cosmopolitan atmosphere and a breadth of vision as merchants gathered from all over Europe. Leipzig was the center of book publishing in Germany and the inhabitants had extensive intellectual and cultural interests; their cultivation of literature and the fine arts, as well as the setting-up of libraries and rich art collections evinced a wide-ranging pursuit of entertainment and education, and the city enjoyed a rich musical life. For Count von Sporck, visits to Leipzig must have been a welcome relief from the stifled atmosphere in Bohemia as well as intellectually stimulating, the tri-annual Leipzig fairs providing an opportunity to review the latest literature – perhaps for purchase and illicit import into Bohemia.

Thus it was that the Count appears to have been a well-known figure in Leipzig as a lover of literature, art and music. Picander had introduced his first collection of poems in 1725 with an Ode addressed to the Count. In addition, there must have been many culture- and music-based friendships formed in Leipzig. Given the Count's love of music and his considerable endowment of music in Bohemia, surely it is also quite conceivable that he could have been a frequent, and admiring visitor at the Bach household. Indeed Bach and von Sporck most probably became acquainted when both visited Carlsbad in 1718 and 1720. There must, too, have been an underlying sentiment of sympathy among his Leipzig friends for the constricted atmosphere under which the Count had to live.

The Count might well have attended Services at St. Thomas' Church, or at least heard some of Bach's Cantata choruses in rehearsal. It only remained for the Count to drop a friendly hint, and for the inventive Bach to sidestep any possibility of Bohemian censorship by presenting the Count with some of his best Cantata movements cleverly disguised as Catholic liturgical music. Thus these "Shorter" or (wrongly named) "Lutheran" Masses might well be entitled "Bach's Bohemian Masses". Whatever their title, it is generally believed that these splendid "anthologies" date from around 1735/6. Count von Sporck would have had but a few short years to enjoy them in his Chapel at Lysa; he died in Lysa on March 30, 1738, not long after his 76th birthday.

Chapter Ten

Gottfried Silbermann: Master Organ Builder

Bach's great friend and colleague

Gottfried Silbermann (1683-1753) and Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) were contemporaries and worked together as colleagues and friends. They shared an interest and advanced knowledge of acoustics as applied to the voicing and location of organs. They would also work together in their later years on the escapement mechanism for the first Fortepianos – Silbermann was to make several for Frederick the Great, and it was in trying out one of these in the Palace at Potsdam, that Bach elaborated on the King's theme for the Musical Offering. Just as Bach became Honorary Court Composer at Dresden, so likewise did Gottfried Silbermann receive the title of Honorary Court and State Organ Builder to the King of Poland and Duke of Saxony at Dresden. On a personal level we may be certain that Silbermann was a frequent visitor at the Bach home in Leipzig – he was godfather to Carl Philipp Emmanuel who, like his brother Wilhelm Friedemann, held him in high regard.

Gottfried's father was a craftsman-woodworker from whom no doubt the young Gottfried learned the precision woodworking, so vital to avoid any wind-leakage, which is one of the hallmarks of his instruments. From 1702 to 1707 he studied the arts of organ-building with his elder brother Andreas in Strasbourg, and for two of these years with Thiery in Paris. Andreas himself had been greatly influenced by the more "southern" ideas and sounds of the German/Italian builder Casparini, who built many fine instruments in northern Italy including Venice. Casparini's finest instrument was built in Görlitz on the (present-day) Polish-German border from 1697-1702. It has three manuals and 56 stops including a particularly large pedal section of 21 stops. This instrument is noteworthy in the present context as Andreas Silbermann played a major role in its construction, assisting the then 80-year-old Casparini.

A condition of his elder brother's tutelage was that Gottfried would not work in his brother's "territory"! So in 1710 Gottfried returned to his native Saxony and set up shop centrally in Freiberg, bringing with him qualifications and certificates which immediately established his reputation locally.

His first commission was for a small, one manual and pedal, 15-stop organ for his home town of Frauenstein, which Silbermann built "at cost", waiving his personal fee and thus displaying a business sense which would become a feature of his career. So well-received was this first instrument, completed in 1711, that in the same year Freiberg Cathedral invited the young builder, then only 28 years old, to construct a new organ of three manuals and pedal with 44 registers. This was completed in 1714. Business moved briskly thereafter, and Silbermann's instruments would finally total 45, all within the relatively narrow area of Saxony. Such did his reputation grow, that Gottfried Silbermann felt confident to request an official title from Frederick I, at that time King of Poland and Duke of Saxony. His request is dated 10th June 1723 and on the 30th June he was granted the privilege he had sought: "Honorary Court and State Organ Builder to the King of Poland and Duke of Saxony". It sounds even better in Baroque German!

Gottfried Silbermann
Königl. Poln. und Chur-Fürstl. Sächsischer wohl-
gefällter Hof- und Land-Organ-Bauer

Perhaps the single most important feature of Gottfried Silbermann's instruments is their distinctive sounds. From the silvery flutes to the strong and reedy 16' Posaune in the pedal, Silbermann's sounds were unique, and indeed were constantly praised by organists in their testimonies of his instruments. Frequent reference is made to a play on his name, as organists praised his "Silberklang" or "Silvery Sounds". Mozart commented in admiration: "These instruments are magnificent beyond measure".

Arp Schnitger is another of Germany's famous builders, working mainly in north Germany and Holland. Comparison between these two builders reveals major differences largely brought about by the Silbermann brothers' exposure to French and Italian concepts, to which Gottfried added his own ideas based on his (for the time) extensive knowledge of chemistry and physics.

Thus in comparison to the work of Arp Schnitger for example, Gottfried Silbermann used larger proportions of tin in the pipe-metal and the tone of the pipes was thus brighter; the cornets made from ranks of pipes in harmonic series gave a striking reed imitation; and the general treatment of the tone mass in a Silbermann organ was more powerful and smooth than that of Schnitger's organs.

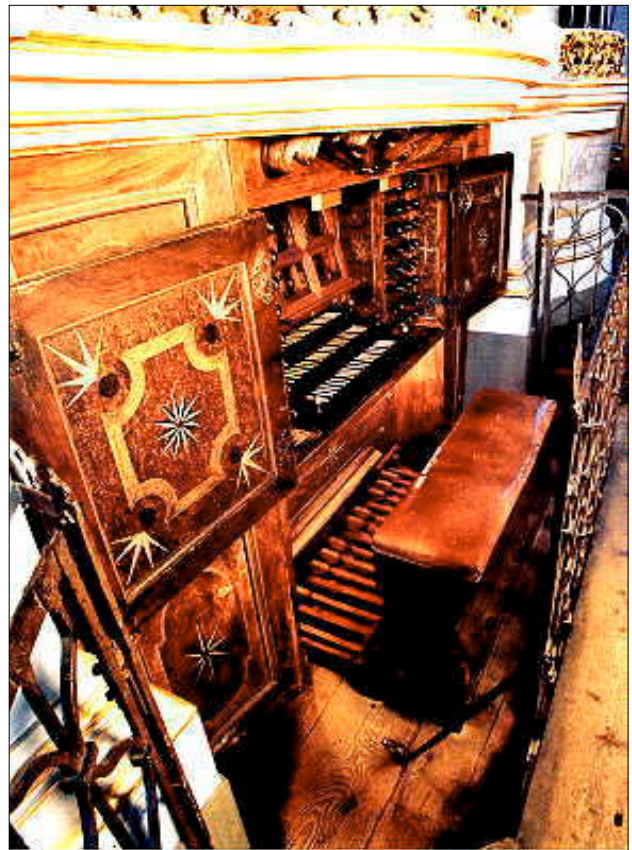
Silbermann was well-versed in the science of acoustics, and his instruments were carefully sited for maximum acoustical effect in each individual church. On first examination it would appear that many of Silbermann's smaller instruments are identical, and indeed they are both in appearance and specification. Deeper analysis however reveals major differences in final voicing and tuning, reflecting precisely the acoustical characteristics of each individual location. Gottfried also enjoyed an excellent appreciation and knowledge of music, which was essential if his instruments were to express with clarity the (largely contrapuntal) music of the time. J.S. Bach is known through contemporary comments to have himself been expert in organ construction, and the two no doubt exchanged ideas.

With his instruments gathered relatively closely together within or very close to the Saxon borders, Silbermann thus minimized the transportation costs for his materials. There are today in state of Saxony in southeast Germany, no fewer than thirty-one baroque instruments by Gottfried Silbermann, most of them in near-original condition.

In 1736, Silbermann built a fine 3-manual, 43-stop instrument for the Frauenkirche, Dresden. The organ was dedicated on Sunday November 25. A week later, on December 1st, as the *Dresdner Nachrichten* reported, "the famous Capellmeister to the Prince of Saxe-Weissenfels and *Director Musices* at Leipzig, Mr. Johann Sebastian Bach, let himself be heard from 2 to 4 o'clock on the new organ in the church of Our Lady, in the presence of the Russian Ambassador, Von Keyserlingk, and many Persons of Rank, also a large attendance of other persons and artists, with particular admiration, wherefore also His Royal Majesty most graciously named the same, because of his great ability in composing, to be His Majesty's Composer". The Frauenkirche with its Silbermann organ was destroyed during the second world war but is now completely rebuilt.

Gottfried Silbermann's last, and largest work was his 3-manual, 47-stop instrument for the Catholische Hofkirche, now renamed Trinity Cathedral, in Dresden. However Silbermann died during its construction, and the work was completed by apprentices, so the all-important final voicing, in which process Silbermann excelled, was not completed by the master.

However, his many wonderful village organs, and the great Silbermann organ in Freiberg Cathedral remain as a lasting tribute to this Master Organ-BUILDER of the German Baroque, whose fame had spread during his lifetime well beyond his native Saxony, and whose "Silver Sounds" would be acclaimed by famous composers and musicians long after his death.



Shown above: Top Left – the village church at Dittersdorf, and Right, Helbigsdorf.
Below, the Freiberg Cathedral Organ, with its ornate console.

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