

RCO Academy trip to Leipzig and Naumburg May 2015

The German train drivers who tried to sabotage the RCO Academy's trip to Leipzig and Naumburg by going on strike the day we were due to leave reckoned without British grit and determination. In the event all but one of the twelve active participants managed to reach Leipzig and Naumburg by combinations of buses, taxis and those trains which were running on the *Ersatz* timetable.



The Hildebrandt organ at St Wenzel, Naumburg

Photo by John Mansfield

We could choose whether to play on the Hildebrandt organ at St Wenzel, Naumburg or on the 'Bach' organ in the Thomaskirche, Leipzig. I had observed that the Bach organ was not there when I visited the Thomaskirche in 1972, and with this in mind I elected to play at Naumburg, where the Hildebrandt organ was tested and approved on September 27th 1746 by J. S. Bach and Gottfried Silbermann. In the intervening years some modifications were made but in 1993-2000 Eule of Bautzen carried out a restoration to the original 'without compromise'. The 'Bach' organ in the Thomaskirche was built in 1999-2000 by Gerald Woehl using the specification of the organ at St George's Eisenach, designed by Bach's uncle Johann Christoph Bach. Bach knew this organ well and was fond of it.

The way time was allocated was that those of us playing the Naumburg organ had 15 minutes' practice time and about 25 minutes' playing time in the class with David Franke. We were also given 5 minutes to play at the Thomaskirche. The Leipzig players had the same in reverse, the teacher there being Ullrich Böhme. At Naumburg there was also a recital and a talk on the organ by David Franke.

Some of the course members were considerably more advanced than I was and seemed not to be fazed by the unfamiliar touch. (The minimum standard was Grade 7.) I found the position of the pedals – which apart from those at the very centre were further away than normal –

very off-putting. And the amount of travel in the manual keys was such that when David Franke tried to get me to adjust my articulation I felt like a very raw learner driver attempting a hill start. However the thrill of playing this organ, which Bach himself had approved, compensated for any feelings of technical inadequacy on my part. The modern 'Bach' organ in the Thomaskirche was not quite so challenging to play, but I was glad I had opted for Naumburg.

Naumburg took up the first day of the course, and on the second day the Leipzig players had their turn. Most of us also visited the Bach Museum which was instructive, and I did a guided tour of Bach's other church, the Nikolaikirche, which nowadays is famous mainly for being at the centre of the peaceful revolt against communist rule in 1989.

Throughout the trip the course leader Dr Frederick Stocken ensured that all ran smoothly. Not everyone stayed at the same hotel, but most of us ate together at the Thüringer Hof on both Wednesday evening and Thursday lunchtime. As one of the other participants remarked, the rail strike, by forcing most of us to travel together by taxi, improved the social aspects of the course. The trip was thoroughly enjoyable and I would welcome the opportunity to repeat it some time in the future.

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