

## **LEIPZIG: BACH, BAROQUE - AND BONSAI**

Michael H. Levin

This is a digitized version of an article from The New York Times print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them. However, the author has corrected a few minor fact errors below.

November 6, 1983, P. 20 Travel Section

Until 1933, Leipzig, a bustling city on the River Elster, was a jewel in Europe's cultural crown, a rich mixture of Bach and Lessing, music and literature, where couples divorced over political issues and men came to blows over interpretations of Beethoven sonatas. More than their native Poland or Russia it became home to thousands of immigrants from East Europe, a glowing future that erased the past. More than a home it became a life style, Goethe's Little Paris writ large and modernized, a bubbling mix of ideas, commerce and concerts where the measure of life was to play well if you played and to listen well otherwise. Its world-famous fur, oil and chemical industries, its booming book trade begun by Gutenberg, its university savants, its thronging music students centered around the Gewandhaus Concert Hall and the Conservatory founded by Mendelssohn were only symbols. More than Berlin or Budapest - without the former's flashy decadence or the latter's Slavonic gloom - it was a city that existed through the eyes, ears and fingertips, a sensual capital of the mind.

Then the border began to shut down in the first phase of the Final Solution. Leipzig's bright lights went out with the rest of the Continent's. Publishers like Peters and Schocken, conductors like Bruno Walter, artists and scientists like Arrau, Kollwitz, Teller fled to friendlier climes. The long night of the Nazis descended, and advancing Russians leveled what Allied bombers left.

But Leipzig, like Paris, is a state of being as well as marble. Its very motto, taken from a line of Goethe, brims with an optimism that transcends events. "Mein Leipzig, mein Leipzig," it runs, "lob' ich mir mein Leipzig." This means "I praise you, my Leipzig." But it really means that Leipzig is where life is.

Appropriately, Leipzig has been undergoing the latest in a series of renaissances that began with the rise of trade in the 15th century. A trip there is a vivid reminder that

place can be stronger than politics -- that the past remains present, and waves of destruction may be merely detours in a city beyond time.

Start with being there, the magic and the memories. East Germany may be grim and regimented, but you would not know that from the Hotel Merkur. A silver-and-concrete skyscraper built in 1981 by a Japanese firm that splits profits with the anti-capitalist government, the Merkur rises from a bonsai garden five minutes from the main railway station, its bulk belied by astonishing airy interiors, a Guggenheim-cum-Carleton of the Eastern Bloc. It has four excellent restaurants (Italian, Middle Eastern, Japanese and one "international" offering local game and fish), a lobby as graceful as a flower arrangement, a rooftop bar that seems transported live from Los Angeles, a fitness club complete with sauna, bowling alleys and what may be the world's only butcher-block swimming hall. It also has immaculate service, plus 450 rooms with refrigerated mini-bars, wraparound mirrors and panoramic views over the medieval market in the Old City. And there are few other places where you will hear a busboy humming Beethoven's "Für Elise" while he clears tables, inventing variations as he trundles his cart away.

Nor would you know that from Leipzig itself, an industrial town of parks and woodlands whose elegant villas and burnished classical facades line leafy, curving boulevards, turn unexpected corners onto winding lanes. The city is breathtakingly beautiful, there is no other word for it, fluid as a partita, as painfully sweet as a solo violin, dense and rich as the manuscripts in the great Bach Archive by the zoo. Though much has crumbled, more has risen or been restored.

And there is music everywhere: in the practice scales drifting from third-floor apartments, the Bluthner pianos and other instruments made locally, the half-dozen recitals during a nondescript weekend, the doorplates of piano teachers reciting that the occupant studied with Teichmüller or von Pauer - master teachers who died in the 1930's, whom only a Leipziger would know. Even the streets are musical -- they bear not just the expected names of Mozart, Haydn, Chopin and Schumann but also those of Offenbach and Bruckner, of opera characters like Don Carlos and Hans Sachs, performers like Max Reger and Lauritz Melchior, conductors like von Bülow or Nikisch, the Toscanini of his time. Mixed in are streets more recently christened Lumumba, Ho Chi Minh and Ethel-und-Julius-Rosenberg. But like the red-and-white propaganda banners on official buildings, they are not part of the living Leipzig. Leipzigers smile and go on using their former names.

\*\*\*

For generations the Conservatory's Chopin Prize lured prodigies from all over the world to pace beside the Gewandhaus's marble columns before triumphant debuts in its velvet interior. Now the orchestra of Furtwangler and Walter plays in a swooping modern hall that resembles Dulles Airport. The Conservatory, founded in 1845 by Mendelssohn, is still there though, housed in the same high-ceilinged building with the arms of the Dukes of Saxony at its roofline, five floors above Grassi Street. If you visit during term time, you can walk its oak floors and practice rooms, sit in on master classes, breathe air alive with talent and ambition. You can feel for yourself that the tradition is well.

\*\*\*

Gold-leaf verses on a fountain honoring Franco-Prussian War dead erected in 1883, now spouting water from nymphs, dolphins and every available orifice on the plaza before the New Gewandhaus at Karl-Marx (formerly Augustus) Platz: "To reach for the stars/With thought's quick arc/To give back to earth/The blessings it brought/To ride the bright tide:/That's what life taught."

\*\*\*

Schiller wrote the classic "Ode to Joy" -- inspiration for Beethoven's Ninth Symphony -- in a house that still stands open to the public in Leipzig's Gohlis section, a monument to ordered 18th-century thought. Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig in 1813, the same year the Battle of Leipzig broke Napoleon's empire. Wagner was trained at Leipzig's Thomaskirche and returned to the Opera House again and again to conduct his own works. It is difficult now to recapture the enthusiasms and hatreds, the verbal duels between classics and romantics, the fist fights in the stalls inspired by Wagner's lush music. In the end he swept everything before him. But in Leipzig he was part of the larger tradition. Leipzig remained appreciative but unswept.

\*\*\*

Once Gerber Street was a warren of one-room shops sheltering fur traders too poor for respectable quarters in the Bruhl. Once the fur trade, conducted in dollars, was the only way to beat four-digit inflation. Now the Hotel Merkur rises above Gerber Street from a broad plaza cleared for free by British bombers, and million-mark loaves of bread have been replaced by price-controlled groceries. But the Bruhl still survives, center of an ancient auction trade in mink, fox and Russian sable, site of a mammoth yearly fur exposition, its past life memorialized by buildings decorated with busts of marten, bear and other pelts.

\*\*\*

A two-minute walk up Nikolai Street and a quick right turn brings you opposite the Goethe Memorial, a bronze statue striding with characteristic energy before the rococo facade of the Old Stock Exchange. On your right is the block-long colonnade of the medieval Town Hall with its steep pitched roof and splendid onion-dome clock tower. On your left, beneath the Madler-Passage, is Auerbach's Wine-Cellar, where Goethe caroused as an undergraduate and later set the famous "Faust" scene in which Mephistopheles bewitches drunken students. Directly across the marketplace are the squat round apse and flying buttresses of the Thomaskirche, Leipzig's true center.

Founded in 1212 as an Augustine monastery church, the Thomaskirche is named for St. Thomas but consecrated in every other way to Johann Sebastian Bach. For over a quarter of a century until his death in 1750 Bach was its choirmaster and organist, producing the bulk of his major works there. The Thomaner Choir he directed is still going strong, still performing Bach motets and cantatas each week. Mozart, Liszt, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Mahler all played in this church. But the reason they played is the same reason former Leipzigers dream of returning to this site to perform: The Master lives and supposedly is buried there beneath a plain bronze plaque in the floor (he was forgotten until Mendelssohn revived his music; identification is uncertain). And though the whitewashed interior has none of the great cathedrals' exaltation, it is not unusual to see pig-tailed music students drop wildflowers in silent homage or bend shyly to touch Bach's name.

\*\*\*

Red-and-white banner stretched across the New Town Hall, a Victorian drip castle encrusted with busts, gargoyles, obelisks, niches, pilasters and pediments: BY PRESERVING THE UNION OF PARTY AND PEOPLE, WE WILL FULFILL THE PRINCIPLES AND TRADITIONS OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF THE SOCIALIST DEMOCRATIC PARTY. It doesn't sound better in German, either.

\*\*\*

Leipzig's nickname is Fair Town, for the city hosts the world's largest industrial/scientific fair, housed in 17 buildings scattered through the Inner Ring and 50 pavilions at a gigantic fairground to the east. The fair began with medieval markets, which became Imperial trade fairs in the 17th century, then mercantile events in the 18th. For a hundred years the routine has not varied. Twice a year, in

March and September - the Spring Fair for heavy construction and machinery, the Autumn Fair for industrial chemistry, textiles and synthetics - the heavens rain visitors and exhibits from 100 countries.

Hotels groan, taxis and rental cars are booked for weeks, students share lodgings and sleep under stairs or in bathtubs so their landlords can rent every space. The official line is that socialism is not poisoned by capitalism's cut-throat competition between old and young, the owners of production and their wage slaves. But the fair belies that: A premier East-West trade window, it grows larger and more competitive each year.

\*\*\*

Banner near statue of Leibnitz, philosopher, co-discoverer of calculus and another local luminary: EVERYTHING TO STRENGTHEN OUR WORKER AND PEASANT POWER. Beneath it, a book vendor selling "Lady Chatterleys Liebhaber," a recent hit in the German Democratic Republic.

\*\*\*

Near the Conservatory looms the Reichsgericht, a hulking black pile that could pass for the Dark Tower in "Lord of the Rings." From 1888 to 1945 it was the Supreme Court of Germany, one of the main products of Bismarck's unification drive. For four months in 1933 it also was the site of the Nazis' greatest show trial, a stacked-deck attempt to link Georgi Dimitroff and other Communist leaders to the Reichstag Fire. Minister of Justice Goering gave the opening address for the prosecution, and the judges and court staff were hand-picked. But Dimitroff conducted his own defense, and a jury of Leipzigers acquitted the defendants, thwarting the regime's plan.

Now the Reichsgericht is the Dimitroff Museum, centered around a carefully preserved courtroom in which visitors can hear wire recordings of the Reichstag Trial, home of a fascinating collection of revolutionary propaganda. It is one of the few places in Leipzig that insists on being paid in East German marks. But if you have none and say you're from America, the attendant may let you in free.

\*\*\*

In 1938 local Nazis pulled down the statue of Mendelssohn, which had long stood in front of the old Gewandhaus. In 1964 the restored statue was installed in the inner

foyer of the New Gewandhaus, just beyond a huge mural depicting the creation of the world from melody and song.

\*\*\*

In the end Leipzig is like the ghost bride of the German folk tale, who enchanted the baron in his forest but turned to smoke when the priest began their nuptial blessings. The town remains, as it has for nearly a thousand years, an elusive marriage of East and West, old and new, iron faith and insouciant individuality, in which the past is vividly present but can shift and recede if you blink. It is part of East Germany of course, and the Socialist republic still intrudes in omnipresent exhortations and housing shortages, the sameness of goods in department stores, the drab, sad resignation of people in the streets to a hundred bureaucratic barriers and government entanglements.

But Leipzig possesses the different air of a place that has always regarded itself as specially blessed. In part that difference is due to an exuberant classical architecture that still dominates the monotony of more recent offices and housing blocks. In part it is due to the Fair, whose commerce fosters a shrewd skepticism - plus pockets of individual enterprise - in other spheres. But mostly it stems from Leipzig's glorious music, which has not changed though the city was virtually emptied during the war.

To Leipzig, music is still the tongue that speaks freely, a dash of necessary glamour, the path upward, an intersection of hope and reality that allows enchantment to be resumed at will. It is no accident that one of the new state's first official acts was to rededicate Bach's resting place on the bicentenary of his death, in 1950. For Leipzig is as close as the Eastern Bloc comes to a holy city, and musicians are its priests and acolytes.

Standing in the sunlight before the Kaffeebaum Inn, where Leibnitz dined, Robert and Clara Schumann lived and Robert Blum organized the liberal revolution of 1848, one Leipziger summed up the difference. "Berliners pop gum in the face of the world," he said. "But Leipzigers sing to it."

MICHAEL H. LEVIN is a lawyer and writer who lives in Washington.