

DRESDEN, WEIMAR AND LEIPZIG: ALL THE MAHLER SYMPHONIES, 11-29 MAY 2023

DRESDEN

We arrived in **Dresden** by means of long train journeys from Trieste, via Verona and Nuremberg. We found our way to the imposing Steigenberger Hotel in the largest platz in the centre of the city flanked by the fully restored Frauenkirche, one of the largest and most beautiful churches in Germany. The

platz was given over to what seemed a permanent market with masses of stalls of every kind including many outdoor eateries, an odd situation in this most elegant old city.

Interior of the dome inn the Frauenkirche, Dresden



At the hotel, we gathered up all 16 of our friends arriving at different times and from different places, but all in time for welcome drinks in the hotel and our welcome dinner. Our German sojourn in Dresden, Weimar and Leipzig is a marathon over nearly three weeks with three performances in Dresden and thirteen at Leipzig's Mahler Festival.

Musically, Dresden, the capital of the German state of Saxony, is world-famous for its great opera company, the Semperoper and the company's equally famous orchestra, the Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden. The Semperoper and orchestra are housed in what I believe to be the most beautiful and structurally perfect opera house anywhere, and where many of Wagner's and Strauss's operas have had their world premieres over the past 150 years.

We were lucky enough to see two incomparable performances, not always the case these days with many directors wanting to show off how clever they are updating classic operas to

contemporary times. Monteverdi's *Orfeo* was our first, and virtually the first opera ever written (1607) that is still performed today. The notion of a story performed on a stage with singers and musicians was then evolving but Monteverdi's status and musical brilliance in charge of music at the court of Mantua ensured its success. Today a performance needs musicological expertise to pull together an authentic performing version. The new production at Semperoper used every corner of the large stage, life size puppets doubling all principal characters and the addition of a large range of lutes and other baroque instruments to the orchestra. The great tenor Rolando Villazon wowed everyone as Orpheus and the musical and stage drama was sensational.

Over the next three days, we all revelled in the offerings of this great city. The central old city, razed in the terrible Allied bombing of February 1945, is now fully restored to its majestic original state though the stone work of most of the grand classical buildings are heavily stained black from the firestorm. But Dresden is much more than the old city. The Elbe river divides the new and old cities. The tree-lined foreshores and parks on both sides of the river provide a marvellous outdoor recreational facility for everyone. One day we all boarded a large ferry that took us some 20 ks up and down the river under the many bridges, giving views of many impressive buildings and estates that line the river.

Perhaps the most impressive insights we had in Dresden were the amazing visual arts and crafts, mostly of the baroque period on our visits to The Green Vault and the Zwinger Palace. The Green Vault is the treasure house of the 17th century Grand Duke August the Strong, where we trailed through many rooms of priceless hand carved or blown objects in gold, silver, glass and ceramic, all created and supervised under the Duke's eagle eye. The huge Zwinger Palace is the repository of larger scale paintings, sculpture and porcelain, much of it from the same period. I was especially impressed with the incredible porcelain galleries featuring work of the baroque and earlier periods from Japan and China and especially from the Meissen ceramic works near Dresden that still operates.

Two days after *Orfeo* we were back at Semperoper for Wagner's great 5 hour comedy set in the Nuremberg of the Middle Ages, *The Mastersingers*. Sally and I have seen two productions in recent times in Berlin and Munich, both contemporary updates which were real duds. Even though the Semperoper new production was updated and set in and around an opera theatre, it maintained the true spirit of Wagner's concept, was funny, entertaining, well sung and highly enjoyable.

On the night between our two operas, we attended a terrific concert by Dresden's concert orchestra, the **Dresden Philharmonie**. Since WW2, it has been a poor relation with no suitable venue, but in 2017, a brand new concert hall of outstanding design and acoustics was completed within the footprint of the city's entertainment centre, the Kulturpalast. The program included Rachmaninoff's Paganini Variations played by a superb Russian born pianist Anna Vinnitskaya, as well as Berlioz' Symphonie Fantastique.

WEIMAR

Having heard so much about the city of **Weimar** as the birthplace of the German Enlightenment, and seeing it is only two or three hours drive from both Dresden and Leipzig, I decided two days there was a must between our musical peaks. It was the right decision as it is not only a beautiful small city (population 65,000 cf. the other two about 500,000 each), but our visits to its main institutions were fascinating. The city itself is a delight to wander around; all the central streets are tree lined, many forbidden to traffic and it seems invaded and surrounded by luscious parks and gardens.

While the world knows Weimar best as the place where the ultimately infamous Weimar Republic was founded after WW1 in 1919, its history and cultural influence since the mid-18th century was incomparable. **Goethe**, the most famous and influential poet, playwright, novelist and even politician in German history, lived there and was the central figure in what is known as Weimar's Golden Period, along with his friend, the playwright Friedrich Schiller. In the so-called Silver age in the middle of the 19th century, the great pianist and composer Franz Liszt lived in Weimar and generously facilitated the careers of other musicians and composers, notably Hector Berlioz. Early in the 20th century, the so-called Weimar New Age ushered in new ideas of cultural education that led to the Bauhaus movement being first established in the city. We visited the Goethe House, the Liszt house, the Bauhaus and New Age museums and the Anna Amalia Library to get a taste of the city's fascinating history.

LEIPZIG

And so to Leipzig, the central purpose to our journey! In 12 days at the Seaside Park hotel, we seemed to become residents, trundling every day the kilometre to and from the famous **Gewandhaus** concert hall and its even more famous orchestra. As the days wore on and we heard one more astounding concert after another of Gustav Mahler's great works, walking down the steps and out to the large platz seemed more and more unbelievable, a suspension of the world we live in.

One reason for the incredulity was listening each night to a different great orchestra from around Europe; on our last day, to two orchestras, in the morning and in the evening! Here is not the place to traverse the responses to each of the 13 concerts, but I can't resist a few thoughts about what I saw as the most special highlights.

Ancient Glasses on display in Leipzig City Museum



After a recital by American baritone Thomas Hampson on our first night of songs by Mahler, his wife Alma and their contemporaries, the first major concert was given by the host orchestra the **Leipzig Gewandhaus** conducted by Andris Nelsons, its music director, of Mahler's spectacular 2nd Symphony, the Resurrection. To our surprise and disappointment we were all seated in the very back row of the Gewandhaus,



an indication of the huge local and international demand for seats. The distance from the stage made the performance seem rather remote and underwhelming. Some of our group were puzzled that the concerts were not performed in chronological order, a consequence of each visiting orchestra's commitments elsewhere. For the next performance where we were again in the back row, the effect was even less satisfactory, as the 4th symphony is Mahler's most intimate and the program included *The Song of the Earth*, his deeply nostalgic and incomparable orchestral song cycle, where the solo voices were difficult to hear clearly. This problem is much to do with the voices having to surmount Mahler's large orchestra, despite its mostly delicate instrumentation. Our agent and tour manager, Claudia then

went to see the Gewandhaus box office to try to get better seats. Through much haggling she was able to significantly improve the seats for the other concerts.

.It's fair to say the first overwhelming experience was the performance of the **5th symphony** by the **Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra**. The gods were smiling for this concert. First the 5th is a brilliant orchestral score with a generally optimistic and extrovert tone; second the Concertgebouw is one of the world's greatest orchestras, with a long commitment to Mahler's music dating back to his time. Thirdly, the conductor was the Korean master Myung Whun Chung, who caressed every note of the score, all without a score.

The next performance was **Mahler's 9th**, generally regarded as his most profound reflection on the beauty and transitory nature of life. The performance was given by the *Applauding Gewandhaus Orchestra after Mahler 2* great Hungarian Ivàn Fischer and the orchestra he created himself 30 years ago, the **Budapest Festival Orchestra**. It was a deeply moving performance cheered to the echo by the audience.

On our last day in Leipzig, two equally memorable concerts were given, a remarkable send off at the end of this unprecedented festival. In the morning the **Czech Philharmonic** under the

Russian master Semyon Bychkov, its music director since 2017, played the **6th symphony**, Mahler's most austere and dramatically tragic work. The music itself was so powerful, but Bychkov's direction made it doubly so.

In the evening we had the **8th symphony, Symphony of a Thousand**, the last to be performed at the festival. It is a huge choral work with almost 500 musicians and singers on the stage and in the stage boxes. Along with the 2nd with its major choral element, Andris Nelsons and the Gewandhaus Orchestra claimed host's privilege by performing the opening and closing symphonies of the festival. And what a huge event it was. The sheer sublime quality and quantity of the sound was overwhelming and was given a stupendous ovation that went on for ever. Wending our way out of the Gewandhaus, for most of us the last time ever, was highly emotional.

During the days of these of this extraordinary sequence of concerts, mostly we relaxed in

pleasant Leipzig, enjoying warming spring weather, our preferred eateries, visiting museums and gawking at the presence of another festival, many times the size of our Mahler Fest. This was the Festival of Goths where the streets thronged with people of all ages dressed in bizarre outfits of black gold and silver beyond imagining. Apparently there were something like 30,000 visitors.

With our agent and manager Claudia

We also caught trains or trams organised by the indomitable Claudia to interesting places outside Leipzig, such as Halle, the city of Handel's birth and education where Europe's major festival of his music is given each year and we were give a guided visit of the Handel house and museum. The 2023 Festival was about to start the week after we visited. Perhaps even more interesting was the trip to Torgau, which promotes itself as the City of Renaissance and Reformation. We had a very knowledgeable guide who traversed the town (scarcely a city) with us giving fascinating insights of the Reformation and in particular

about Martin Luther and his remarkable wife Katherina who lived and worked in Torgau. Our guide took us to the hugely impressive Castle Hardensfels and its restrained and beautiful Protestant Chapel, the first and only church consecrated by Luther himself in his lifetime.

PARMA



Our son Adam who lives in Tartu, Estonia and works as the timpanist and Principal of Percussion at the Vanemuine Orchestra, joined us in Leipzig for the performance of the 8th symphony. The next morning the three of us caught the train to Milan, an all day journey, spending the night there before catching another train to Parma, an hour's journey. Gertrud (Trudy) Leopard, Adam's lovely Estonian fiancée, is completing a year there of her Masters in Music degree under an Erasmus scholarship at the Arrigo Boito Conservatorium in Parma.

We had five wonderful days in Parma with Trudy and Adam. It's an elegant and historic city, full of very old and imposing piazzas, churches as well as colourful narrow streets. By good luck, Trudy was playing timpani in a major year-end concert of the Conservatorium Orchestra in Parma's main concert hall on our last night, a very special occasion for all of us followed by a late dinner at a well known trattoria. The next day we said heartfelt farewells before catching the train to Milan for the first leg of our return journey to Sydney. But the farewells are not for long. In August we will be back for the happy couple's wedding in Tartu, Estonia.

HANOI

As we had never been to Vietnam, and were flying Vietnam Airlines, we decided to spend a night in Hanoi on the way home. It was a fabulous experience. We were booked in the top line hotel Hotel de l'Opera, across the square from the old French Opera House. We wandered the busy, even chaotic streets, walked around one of the city's lakes, and had dinner with Sally's cousin Rod Crouch who is living and working in Hanoi as a school Principal. For many years he has worked as Principal of mostly Asian schools.

It has been an amazing eight weeks of the greatest travel, new places, unique musical experiences and enjoying it all with about 40 friends. Who can ask for more, and indeed we may never experience such a cornucopia again. I think all of us were blessed .

For Sally and me, we are off for the wedding in Estonia in August, and later in the month, we gather up another group of friends for our next musical journey in Austria at the Festivals in Salzburg, Innsbruck and the remarkable Schubertiade in the Austrian Alps.

Antony Jeffrey