



A Journey to the Land of J. S. Bach

By Tim Frakes

Friday, September 13, 2002

Our trip to the land of J. S. Bach began with a large infusion of cash. Actually, it was vouchers from Lufthansa, the German airline who sold more tickets than seats. We volunteered to take another flight six hours later in exchange for \$800.00!

This is the first international trip Julie and I took together since our adventure to Zaire in 1988. Then, we were newly married with no children. This time, mom flew in from Colorado to stay with Emily (12), Connor (10) and Jack (6). God have mercy on her soul.

Our journey to central and eastern Germany was to make a video on the life of Johan Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). We visited his birth home of Eisenach, and the towns where he worked, Arnstadt, Muhlhausen, Weimar, Cothen and Leipzig. The plan was to tell the story of his life in video. Prior to this trip, I had written a script and recorded interviews with several Bach experts.

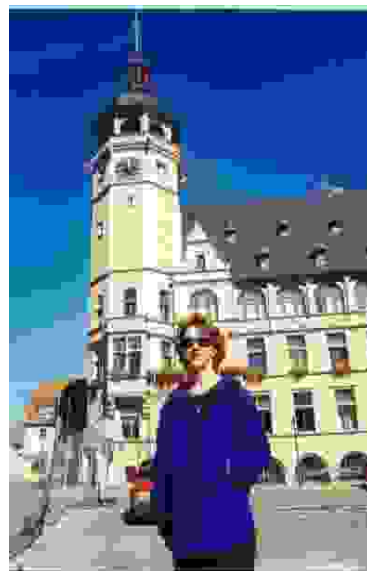
Julie was my traveling companion for the first five days. Then I met up with our photographer, Jim Quattrock and our on camera host, Melissa Ramirez. From there, we will finish up the show in Leipzig by recording on camera narration segments.

Bach is one of the world's great musical geniuses. He composed more than 3,000 pieces of music. More than 2,000 of them have been preserved and then passed down to us. He lived during the Baroque period of European history, so the music reflects that flowery style.

After re-ticketing on a United flight to London, Julie and I had a quick dinner in the airport and then boarded our Boeing 777 for Heathrow. Our new tickets meant connecting with a Lufthansa flight in London that would take us on to Frankfurt, Germany.

Saturday, September 14, 2002

The flight to London went well, except for cramped quarters in coach. We had a long walk through London's Heathrow Airport and made our connection. We were in Frankfurt by noon. Our rental car, a Volvo station wagon, had a diesel engine. After reviewing the maps, we headed out onto the Autobahn for Erfurt.



Julie in the Cothen town square.

The thing for Americans to remember about the Autobahn is to keep to the right. Except for road construction, there is no speed limit. Traffic in the far left lane often exceeds 160 kilometers per hour. If you make the mistake of passing a truck, and don't pull back into the right lane, a black Mercedes will pull up on your tail and honk like crazy.

We drove north out of Frankfurt through the state of Hesse, and then east through Thuringia. Three hours later we arrived in Erfurt, our home for the next few days. We rented a room in a house about 10 minutes walk from the city center. The Kleinhample's run a bed and breakfast. The room includes a private bath and breakfast in the morning.

Every time I go to Europe, it takes me a while to figure out how to use the phone cards and pay phones. This trip was no exception. After several tries I gave up. We unpacked and went on a long walking tour of the city. Erfurt is fairly large and very beautiful. The 11th century Dom St. Marie Cathedral dominates a large plaza in the center of town. Much of the city was bombed to powder during World War II. The ruins of one Church still stand as a silent reminder.

Fighting jet lag, we walked for a long time looking for a restaurant. I finally recognized a place we used as a location for shooting the video, "Opening the Door to Luther" several years before. The Christofel décor is a cross between new age and the Middle Ages. We had a hearty German meal of meat a potatoes while listening to recorded Monks singing American pop songs. Then, it was a taxi cab ride back to our house for a well deserved nights rest.



An 18th century engraving of Cothen.

Sunday, September 15, 2002

Our morning began with a typical German breakfast of rolls, cheese, cold cuts and coffee. Our host, Herr Kleinhampel spoke only German, so we had some fun trying to communicate.

Europeans are famous for being efficient with space. The driveway to the Klienhample house was just wide enough for a car. No room to spare. Every time we pulled the large (by European standards) station wagon in or out, Julie held her hands over her ears, hoping to avoid the sound of scraping metal.

After breakfast we left Erfurt and drove to Anhalt-Cothen, a small town 50 kilometers north of Leipzig. The weather was beautiful.

On the way, we passed many of the huge propeller-like wind mills that occupy many farm fields. These energy producing giants are just beginning to show up in the U.S. It looks like a good idea to me.

Bach lived in Cothen (pronounced Curtin) for several years. He worked for Prince Leopold at the castle, and wrote the Brandenburg Concertos here. Cothen has narrow, cobble stone streets that snake between charming houses with colorful flower boxes. At the Bach museum in the castle, the curators made us put on huge fussy gray slippers over our



The author tilting at windmills.

shoes to protect the floor. You have to slide around like a cross country skier. The museum, inside the castle walls, is full of Bach artifacts including period instruments and paintings.



The castle in Weimar.

Trying to avoid a traffic jam on the Autobahn, we decided to take side roads to Leipzig. It's fun to see the countryside and little towns, but it sure takes longer. Leipzig is a large, modern city. The city has an impressive network of electric trolley cars, modern sky scrapers and elegant shopping malls. It was here, on the streets of Leipzig, that East Germany's non-violent pro-democracy movement began in the late 1980's. It led to the fall of communism a few years later.

Bach spent the last 20 years of his life in Leipzig as the Cantor at St. Thomas Church. St. Thomas is in the city center, surrounded by a grand plaza. Much of the former East Germany is still under a massive re-construction project. On the property immediately adjacent to St. Thomas, a large hole has been dug in preparation for a new sky scraper. The sounds of heavy equipment are everywhere. September 2002 was an interesting time to be in Germany because

of the general elections. Current Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was up against conservative challenger Edmund Stoiber. The major political issue is the economy.

In some parts of Germany unemployment is more than 20 percent. All the money spent during reunification has come with a price tag.

Julie and I stopped for lunch in a restaurant next to St. Thomas where I ordered Pizza Napoli. The menu was in German and our Bulgarian waitress didn't know English. Pizza Napoli turned out to have anchovies. Yuck! The anti-smoking craze that has swept North America sure has not reach Leipzig. Many Germans still puff away in restaurants and stores.

After lunch we got back in the car and headed for Erfurt. Julie was tired, so I ended the day in the Lone Star restaurant, sipping German beer and listening to Country and Western music.

Monday, September 16, 2002

This morning we drove 20 kilometers east to the city of Weimar. Bach lived here before moving to Cothen. Weimar is famous for more than Bach. Faust author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, artist Lucas Cranach the Elder and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche all hail from this Thuringian town. Weimar was also the seat of German government after World War I. The city center is a labyrinth of winding cobble stone streets old church steeples. It's a great place to spend time because of the charm and numerous museums.

Weimar is also infamous as the city associated with



3 Prisoners at Buchenwald.

World War II Nazi concentration camp Buchenwald, just outside town. Between 1937 and 1945, more than 56,000 people were put to death. The camp has been preserved and partially reconstructed. We spent an hour walking the grounds and touring a prison where inmates were held and tortured.

The re-constructed perimeter fence gives you a sense of what it must have been like. The "Wald" part of Buchenwald means "Forest" The Nazi's chose this spot in order to keep the camp secret. The crematorium still stands. A large smoke stack points skyward. The clock over the main gate is stopped at 3:15 p.m., the hour camp inmates overpowered their guards in advance of the American troops.

Next, we headed south to the town of Arnstadt. Bach began his professional career in this village as an organist. The beautiful town square has a refreshingly modern statue of a young J.S. Bach in an unusual, reclining pose. We recorded footage of the church Bach worked in and had lunch in a restaurant next door.

From Arnstadt we drove two kilometers east to Dornheim, a tiny village where Bach married his first wife, Maria Barbara. In Arkansas they would call this a "Poke and Plum" town. "You poke your head out the window and are plum out of town." We ended the day by driving a few kilometers west to the Hohenzolern Castlet on a hill overlooking the countryside. The castle has been fully renovated and turned into a restaurant. On the hillside approaches to the castle, locals were busy picking berries used in making wine. It was a beautiful scene as the early autumn sun set over the horizon.

Tuesday, September 17, 2002.

Our final morning in the Kleinhample home included breakfast with a retired Swiss school teacher named Rosa. Rosa was one of the first English speaking persons we had encountered since arriving in Thuringia and we enjoyed getting to know her. Rosa found the Klienhample's just like we did - through the Erfurt tourism office. She was on vacation, traveling alone through Germany.



Berg Gleichen near Gotha.

After breakfast we paid our bill in cash (135 Euros for three nights) and said goodbye to our hosts. On the way to Eisenach we pulled off the highway and climbed to Berg Gleichen, a medieval castle just outside of Gotha. Gleichen is in ruins today, but the exterior walls and tower are in good shape. They have even restored the king's bedroom. The castle guide sheet mentions that at one point, the King went off on a crusade and returned with a Moslem wife. This caused quite a stir since he was already married. "It's good to be the King!"

We then drove west to the town of Eisenach. This is a big Lutheran town where Martin Luther spent part of his childhood in boarding school. Years later, he spent time in the Wartburg Castle which over looks the town. Prince Frederick the Wise brought Luther here for safe keeping after the upstart Monk had thumbed his nose at the Pope. Two hundred years later, Bach was born here. We spent quite a while driving around looking for a parking spot. I'm still not sure how parking works here. They have automated parking machines. You drop in a Euro coin, and out comes a receipt which is placed on your dash board. Yet when we inquired at several places, they said we couldn't park on the street, even with the receipt. Finally, we located the Bach House Museum which had a large parking lot.

The Bach House Museum while interesting, is not the actual house he grew up in. It does date from the period and was possibly owned by his father, Johann Ambrosius Bach. The tour included a performance of Bach music on authentic period instruments by one of the curators. If you are into J.S. Bach, this is the place to visit. It has a large collection of pictures, documents and period furniture.



Italian artist Masterbee.

From Eisenach we drove north through the countryside to Muhlhausen, the town Bach worked in after Arnstadt. At the St. Blasius Church, I was shooting interior shots when a funny little man with long gray hair and black pajamas walked up and said, "Hello"! He introduced himself as Masterbee, an artist from Italy. The church commissioned him to create long fabric draperies which hung throughout the cathedral. At first, I figured he was angry that I was taking pictures, but then, it became clear he was curious about video. I framed a few shots for him and he seemed to like it. We wound up exchanging business cards. He even gave me an autographed poster featuring his work!

Our day ended in Fulda, about 150 kilometers to the southwest of Muhlhausen. Fulda is not connected with Bach, but I couldn't get a room in Frankfurt because of a large trade fair going on in that city. We picked Fulda because it was in the guidebook and near Frankfurt. Wow! What a beautiful place. We checked into our hotel after dark and walked along the Pauluspromenade past the Michaelskirche, a fantastic Benedictine monastery dating from the year 820. At night the large rotunda and elaborate gardens are beautifully lit up. We had dinner in an Italian restaurant and called it an evening.



MOSAIC Host, Melissa Ramirez.

Wednesday, September 18, 2002

It was still dark when Julie and I started for the Frankfurt airport. We parked the car and I walked her to the Lufthansa check in line to say goodbye. It was hard to say lose my traveling buddy half way through the trip, but five days away from the kids is enough. Downstairs at arrivals I met up with Melissa Ramirez, the MOSAIC host, her mother Carmen and my friend and colleague, Jim Quattrochi.

They exchanged some dollars for the new European currency, the Euro, and we headed for the parking garage. Although Julie had taken her large suitcase with her, our Volvo wagon still had my backpack and all the video equipment. Now we had to cram three new people and their suitcases inside. As we approached our car, I pushed our fully loaded luggage cart up to a bright yellow, two seat Mazda sports car and said, "Here is our car!" Carmen's eyes got wide. "Just kidding," I said.

We loaded the Volvo station wagon with very little room to spare and drove to Leipzig. Our hotel, the Mercure Guttenbergplatz, was about a mile from the city center. My new travel companions were worn out from the long trip, so I left them at the hotel and ventured out into the city. \$1.40 buys you a ticket on the Leipzig train which runs all over the city on a track in the middle of the street. Their power comes from an overhead electrical line. I jumped on the No. 15 and headed downtown to the Hauptbahnhof, (that's

German for train station).

Renting a bicycle at the train station is a great way to feel like a local. Plus, you can cover much more ground. The best part, it's cheap. Only eight dollars a day! Leipzig is a busy city with lots going on. Thousands of tourists and locals cram the central shopping mall. It is very modern and full of fancy shops and restaurants. They even had a brass band featuring the music of J. S. Bach. I rode around for more than an hour until I found an internet cafe near my hotel. For one Euro, you can check your email and brag to your friends about your European travels!

Thursday, September 19, 2002

The remainder of my time in Germany was devoted to recording the on-camera portion of our J.S. Bach video. We started out in the St. Thomas Church in central Leipzig. Bach was hired as the cantor at the church and he spent the last twenty years of his life here.

We recorded Melissa sitting at the church's massive organ. St. Thomas is a huge cathedral with vaulted ceilings, fabulous stained glass windows and ornate altar. About an hour into our shoot we were introduced to Johann Sebastian Bach. Actually it was Klaus, an unemployed actor from Wittenberg. The Wittenberg staff had arranged for him to come down for our shoot. Klaus worked in the advertising business until a few years ago. He is living proof of Germany's unemployment issue.

Setting up television lights in the balcony, I privately worried about shorting out the electrical system and starting a fire in the historic old church. I'd hate to have that legacy hanging round my neck. We recorded a few stand-up's with Melissa, then turned our sites on Klaus. He was dressed in period costume complete with a long, flowing white wig. It was amazing how much he looked like the statue of the real McCoy standing outside the church. We had Klaus sit at the organ, and stroll around the church. He did a great job. Afterward we found a restaurant and had lunch. Klaus, who spoke no English, ordered a huge slab of pork, which he carved up in short order.

After lunch we continued shooting with Melissa in Leipzig. While shooting, a street musician with an accordion set up shop a few feet from us. "Let's get him to play Bach for us while you read your lines!" I said to Melissa. The plan worked out fine, except the Bulgarian musician didn't know how to play Bach. Oh well. Never assume.

As the day wound to a close, our plan was to meet up with a "Young Bach" actor and record him grieving over the loss of his parents in a local grave yard. I send Jim on ahead to set up and waited for our young actor to arrive at the St. Thomas Church. In short order, a 12 year old boy named Toni, pulled up on his bike. It turned out he lived a few blocks from the grave yard, so I decided to follow him through town on my rented bike. Toni knows the city well, and we really flew through crowds, alleys and between street cars on the way to the grave yard. We made it safely across town and met Jim. Toni used our car to change into his rented costume, a velvet green suite with tails and ruffles. Jim shot some beautiful scenes with Toni in the rustic old cemetery.





Hard at work in Leipzig.

Friday, September 20, 2002

After breakfast in the hotel, Melissa, her mother, Jim and I drove north to Cothen. It was a lovely day - clear skies and mild temperatures. The town was quite when Julie and I were here on a Sunday. Now the streets were filled with shopper and street vendors. Kiosks filled the central square cooking sausages in preparation for the lunch crowd. Because Cothen is off the beaten track, tourists are scarce. We recorded Melissa delivering lines on the bridge over the castle mote, and then inside the walled grounds.

While shooting in the museum, Jim made a discovery I'd missed on our first visit, The Hall of Mirrors. It is a restored concert hall on the third floor of the main building. The spacious room features floor to ceiling mirrors, an elaborate ceiling and statues of Bach and Prince Leopold. Sitting in the room you can imagine life at an 18th century court dance. After a quick bratwurst from street vendor in the market square we stopped by the local graveyard in search of Bach's wife's grave. His first wife, Maria Barbara Bach died here in Cothen. No luck finding the grave. Women in the 18th century didn't pose for a

portrait unless they were royalty. There are no known paintings of either Maria Barbara or his second wife, Anna Magdalena.

Back in Leipzig, we had an appointment with the St. Thomas Church Boys Choir. Bach himself worked with this organization. The choir is still in existence and performs regularly at the Church. Their recordings and reputation are world famous. The ELCA's Wittenberg office had pre-arranged an opportunity for us to record them during rehearsal. My hope had been to record the audio for use in our video. It turned out their rehearsal was a "dress" rehearsal in the St. Thomas sanctuary. We threw up some lights and got a microphone on Melissa.

The result was some beautiful stand-up's with the choir singing in the background. We also were able to record close-up footage of the boys singing. While we worked, I turned around and to find the entire sanctuary full of people. The performance was a sell-out and ushers had opened the doors early, giving the audience the added treat of watching the dress rehearsal.

Saturday, September 21, 2002

We said goodbye to Leipzig and drove west to Weimar to record more stand-up's with Melissa. While we were shooting at the castle, our taping was interrupted by the driving sound of a helicopter. It was an air rescue team called in to fly victims of a car crash to the hospital. A river runs right behind the castle and two cars apparently collided, flew off the road and down into the river. One car came to rest on top of a second vehicle which landed upside down in the water. The area was swarming with police, ambulances and the helicopter.

After Weimar, I drove our group back to Buchenwald for a quick tour of the camp. Then it was on to Arnstadt where we shot a stand-up with a group of local skate boarding youths. The skateboard craze is big in the former East Germany. The boys were disrupting our recording in the town square, so we worked them into the script!

From Arnstadt it was off to Eisenach to wrap up the shoot. While recording Melissa in front of the Bach House Museum, a drunk stumbled over from his table at a sidewalk café. He was really bombed and kept trying to make faces in the camera. At one point he put a hand on Melissa's shoulder. Jim and I were about to take his head off! Fortunately he backed off and whet back to his beer.

That night, we had dinner in Eisenach near the Hotel Kaiserhoff . Later, a local band entertained us with America "oldies". The place was packed. We laughed listening to them play the Garth Brooks hit Ackie Breakie Heart as Germany couples danced up a storm.

Sunday, September 22, 2002

Sunday morning I had a rare opportunity to worship with out video equipment in a congregation other than my own. I chose St. George in the town square. This gothic cathedral is one of the more famous churches in Protestant history. Not only was Bach baptized here, Martin Luther worshiped at St. George's as a school boy. Later in life, he worshiped here during his stay at the Wartburg Castle. For artistic beauty, St.



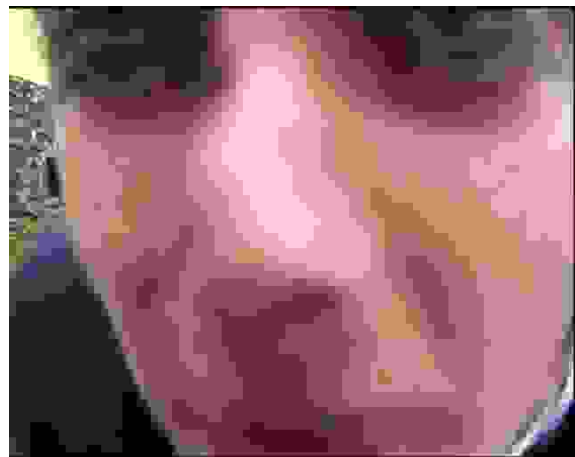
Tim and Jim in Leipzig.

George's is hard to beat. Vaulted ceilings, flying buttresses and magnificent art give the worshiper a small slice of heaven. Unfortunately, the spirit appears to end with the physical building. At the door, 5 minutes before worship started at 9:00 a.m., an usher shoved a German language hymnbook at me with no greeting or welcome. Only 50 or so worshipers attended a service in a building designed for 1,000. While the organ was glorious, few sang above a whisper, if at all. The dry sermon was read by the pastor. Of course, it was in German, but the non-verbal interplay between preacher and congregation told it all. In an effort to focus attention on the pastor's sermon, all the lights in the cathedral are turned off, except for the one above the pulpit. When the hour long service ended, people shuffled out the door like commuters on a New York subway.

Final Thoughts

As I look back on this trip to the land of Johann Sebastian Bach, I can't help but think that the old composer was looking out for us. Every door we wanted to open did. The weather was beautiful. Our hosts were gracious. The story just seemed to tell itself.

Our last day in Germany coincided with the German Federal elections. News papers and television were crowded with



The town drunk.

stories related to the big campaign issues. Unemployment and a possible U.S. led war with Iraq. It has been more than a decade since the fall of communism and German reunification. The decision to make one large German nation was wise, but the effort is not without its down sides. East Germans used to state run programs are finding the capitalistic safety net isn't catching them. Racial tensions are also flaring as thousands of African and Asian immigrants seek to join in the new German nation. As an outsider, it appears that the Germans will work things out in the long run. It is a beautiful nation and a great place to visit.