

HAJ

for Bruce Hunter

You never really return from a pilgrimage. Perhaps not from any voyage where you reached your destination.

We began our descent towards a green plain dotted with small farms. Some of us looked tired, some relieved, and some apprehensive. Everyone had the sense of not really knowing what had happened and what would happen next. Many had hand-baggage with HAJ tags that would soon be united with larger cases in the hold. We seemed a very varied group, and it was hard to believe that we were all headed for the same destination. But soon after take-off the captain had greeted us with a welcome aboard message "to all passengers on this special pilgrimage flight".

We landed. A bus was waiting at the foot of the ramp. There was music as we entered the terminal: boy sopranos and baroque woodwinds. Our luggage was not there on the carrousel, but we were met by Herr Buxtehude, the tour representative, who welcomed us to Hanover airport, HAJ, and handed out stones from a sack. Some of us recognized the music, from J. S. Bach's cantata "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" with the words "Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel wär". Some sang, some produced instruments -- you don't entrust your violin or your oboe to the checked baggage -- and joined in. Some looked thoroughly confused, especially those dressed in voluminous white garments. We marched round and round the carrousel, throwing stones at a spot on the wall beside it. Someone said they had been around seven times before our actions produced any response.

The belt began to move and luggage arrived. Herr Buxtehude gathered us together and spoke to us, like an elementary school teacher pointing out something obvious. "We are all here for the HAJ pilgrimage to Coethen and Leipzig, the Mecca of all Bach-lovers. It goes without saying that we all share Bach's faith, at any rate his faith in the redemptive power of music. If I may put it this way, we will all *tritt auf die glaubensbahn* as our coaches take us along the *autobahn*." This was not the only time Buxtehude broke into German. He would regularly say *teufel* for *devil*, *bahn* for *road*, and especially *todt* for *death*. He explained that in the next 28 days we would experience 12 cantatas in the churches for which Bach wrote them, performed, in the ways he would have expected, on instruments of his time. As he put it, we would

all hear and struggle to understand distant echoes of angel voices reinterpreting ancient lore. "And on the last three days of our pilgrimage", he continued portentously "just when you think nothing musically or spiritually deeper is possible for you, we have arranged a special experience."

We loaded onto the three coaches. There was grumbling from the men in white robes and the women in head-scarves, who insisted on a separate coach for each of them. Two weeks of constant traveling and listening followed. There was not time to hear all the cantatas, the mass, and the passions, and we wondered what the principle of choice had been. Sometimes it seemed to rotate through the Sundays of the year, and sometimes it seemed to move linearly from early to late in Bach's life. We did feel we were moving, though, as if at the same time we were penetrating further and further into the mists, and emerging more clearly into illumination. We compared the unusual dreams we were having. In all of them we were walking, sometimes towards a bright sun and sometimes in the dark, sometimes stumbling and sometimes striding, often repeatedly climbing the same mountain, and often towards a plain where an immense crowd was standing. It was at once troubling and exhilarating.

Two days remained. We were in Leipzig, at the Thomaskirche. Herr Buxtehude assembled us and announced our final two day experience. We would be part of a performance of the Christmas Oratorio, in biblical costume, taking part in the less demanding chorales and helping with the orchestra when we were capable of it. We dressed in long robes. Some of us were already in the right kind of loose body-enveloping and head-covering garment. Some of the women did a fair amount of face-covering too, to the extent that it was compatible with reading scores, singing, and playing woodwinds. The music was distributed and we began.

It was a disaster. We had joined the pilgrimage from love of music or love of God. Or love of Bach, which needs deep roots in neither. And so many of us had tried our hands at music, and some had spent many years torturing those hands towards its skills. But devotion is not competence and we sounded terrible. The real musicians and the real *musikdirektor* looked fiercely at Herr Buxtehude. Something had to give.

We were demoted to scenery. We wandered around forming appropriate tableaux to fit scenes loosely connected with the birth of Christ. Our particular focus was on the bass recitative "was Gott dem Abraham verheissen". We spent two days attending to the relationship between Abraham and God, and the deal between them, the oath each

made, that in exchange for the devotion of Abraham and his descendants God would go easy on the sacrifice of those descendants. The serious ones among us called this our meditation on the Oath, *der Eid*. The more cynical among us wondered if God had kept his side of the deal.

The performance was on the evening of the second day. The music was overwhelming, since we were so near to it and by rehearsing it we had felt our way through it so often. We could imagine being part of it forever. We handed back the scores, reluctantly and with a sense of separation and loss. Herr Buxtehude appeared from the audience and shepherded his meandering and bewildered flock towards the coaches. Our departure from HAJ was at 7 the next morning and it would be a rush to get there on time. We drove through the dark, each lost in their own thoughts, absorbed by their own music. You don't come back from a pilgrimage: part of you is always there.