

Leipzig Reunion – From Maestro Jim Ross

The year was 1981. He was self-confident - ready to tackle the world, as someone in their early-twenties often is. He had won several prestigious music competitions as a horn player. He was ensconced in an historic and iconic musical institution with a revered conductor named Kurt Masur. And, he was one of the few Americans living behind the Iron Curtain in East Germany.

For three years, he was part of a privileged group in a privileged orchestra, but he earned an East German salary and lived in an East German bubble. He admits to being homesick one Thanksgiving and forfeiting much of his monthly paycheck to a phone booth in Leipzig in order to hear the voices of his family. His conducting career started here.

From April 28-May 6, Alexandria Symphony Orchestra (ASO) Conductor and Music Director Jim Ross led a group of ASO patrons on a music tour of Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig. He connected with musicians he had known during his time at the Gewandhaus including current members of the horn section. He visited with friends in various venues. And, he shared his insights and impressions with his fellow travelers.

Following are some of his reflections on his earlier experiences and the recent ASO tour:

What did this trip mean to you personally?

Well, it was big for me in at least two aspects. It was my first air travel since February 2020, and it turns out I've missed the strange rituals of flying to foreign countries. I'd forgotten things like not being able to bring water through security, the curious variegated functioning of foreign toilets, and the simple joy of communicating in another language. But the more important aspect was that Germany, specifically East Germany, was my musical home during the impressionable young years of my adulthood. That country now only exists in my memory and has been subsumed into the larger German project. This trip allowed me to search for the beautiful ghosts of my experiences there...and, despite the major political shift of the wall coming down in 1989, to find what has transcended and is still alive where I once walked, including most importantly, the warm, appreciative culture of music-making!!!

What has changed and what did you find remarkably the same, especially in Leipzig, but also in Berlin and Dresden?

I lived in Leipzig but visited Dresden and Berlin quite often. In all three cities, the general gray demeanor of East Germany has given way to polished facades, clean air, and only a few remaining signs of the huge re-building that took place in the first two decades after unification. To stand at the Brandenburger Tor in the very center of the once walled-off city of Berlin, to be able to walk from the old East into the old West Berlin and back again without having to pass through Checkpoint Charlie or Friedrichstrasse, to do so without having to look into the blank, frightening faces of border control guards who could never quite figure out why my American passport contained an official East German working visa...this was a new experience. To see Dresden all sparkling and colorful again like was apparently true before the war when it was known as the "Venice of the North," and no longer being referred to as the "Tal der Ahnungslosen" ("the valley of the clueless" - due to their lack of western TV access in East German times), to see the Frauenkirche, the Semper Opera, the Zwinger, all fully functional and forward-looking again...this gave me hope for our fractious world. To see how Leipzig has regained its stature as a bubbling center of business

and trade and openness to all that the world is inventing, to see the steep roof of Bach's Thomas church rise up above the sanctuary where I was once honored to blow my little descant horn, to stand on the Augustusplatz (formerly Karl-Marx-Platz!) with the opera behind me and the Gewandhaus in front of me and the trams running by me on which I used to head out to visit the Masurs. This was a mix of throwback and toss-forward. What has stayed the same is the color of the Saxon accent (still generally maligned among all the German dialects as the silliest sounding), the inwardness and thoughtfulness of the citizens there, and the strange way that music percolates in the minds of those walking the streets in all three cities. No wonder centuries of composers and performers have flocked there!

How would you characterize the classical music scene in the cities visited and the musicians you spent time with?

On this trip, we managed to hear three of the great historical orchestras of the world. The 140-year-old Berlin Philharmonic and the Leipzig Gewandhaus shared a similar history of music directors in the early 20th century (including Arthur Nikisch and Wilhelm Furtwangler), though the history of Gewandhaus concerts started a hundred years earlier, in 1781. The founding of the Dresden State orchestra, which we were able to hear in rehearsal, reaches back even farther to 1548 due to the court of Saxony and its electors' fascination with opera and musical grandeur. Despite this longevity, all three orchestras play with a liveliness and energy that belie their age. Yes, they all have a particular patina, a personal sound and way of blending, but they also play pieces we think of as warhorses as if they were new. Of course, much of the standard repertoire was played for the first or second time by one or the other of these orchestras; so they do "own" the experience of having played these pieces when they were fresh off the press. They continue to do so. All my musician friends from these orchestras seem so deeply grateful to be performing again, even with daily testing as part of their protocol to do so. They have a renewed sense of mission and love for the act of making live music.

How important are trips such as the one the ASO just sponsored?

Alexandria is a town whose long history coincides with much of that which we learned about the architecture, the cultural development, the cataclysms of war, and the music of Germany. Though our own orchestra here has a much more modest history (its roots stretch back 78 years!), we are an organization that strives to make old things anew, to be sensitive to the connections between our forefathers, ourselves, and our grandchildren for whom we are a sonic bridge. I believe all of us on this trip saw and heard and felt things that will inspire our own fresh thinking about how best to serve and connect to our community. We want to be as vital to Alexandria's future as these orchestras of Berlin and Dresden and Leipzig have been to theirs. And just to hear music being played at that astonishing level was breathtaking, pure inspiration!