

From Leipzig With Bach

An interview with Professor Ullrich Boehme, recent visitor to Australia, and current organist at Bach's own Thomaskirche

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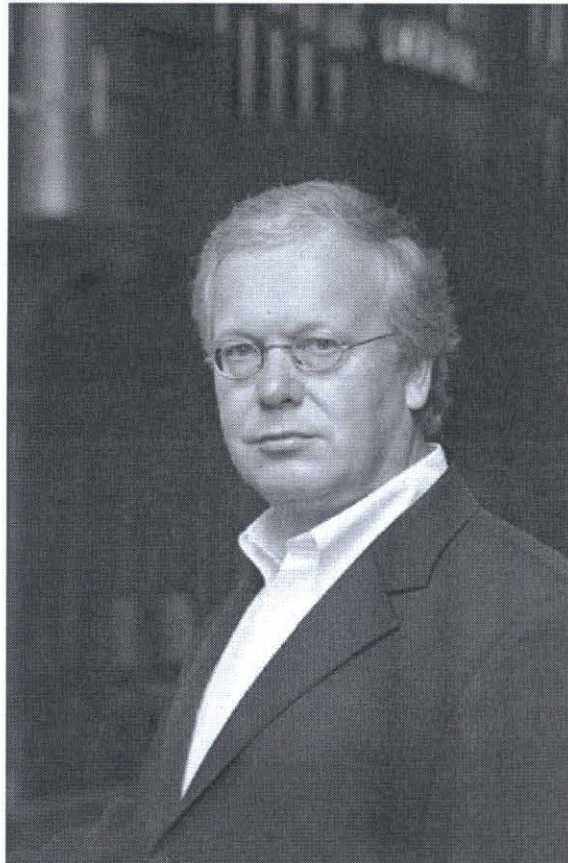
One famous 19th-century English humourist (WS Gilbert) complained: 'I have lost more time through being punctual than through anything else.' Fortunately Teutonic professors uphold a rather different chronological approach to civilisation. So when I strode up Melbourne's Collins Street to seek out its Athenaeum Club Hotel, where visiting Leipzig organ maestro Ullrich Boehme was staying – initially I had managed to confuse this hotel with Collins Street's other Athenaeum building – I felt abundant terror of arriving late.

We had arranged our interview for 5PM; and happily, as I entered the hotel dining-room where Professor Boehme and his friend Hans Schroeder awaited me, I noticed with relief that my watch and the dining-room clock alike said 5PM. ('Do you have German genes?', a smiling Mr Schroeder asked me. No, not German genes, just an ingrained aversion to that sloppy time-keeping embodied by the cruel witticism about an Australian speaking clock: 'At the third stroke, it will be 2:47, give or take five minutes.')

Born in 1956, Professor Boehme, even by the usual standards of touring artists (this was his first trip to our nation), is a busy man.

He had allowed me half an hour for an *Organ Australia* interview. Sure enough, we finished at 5:30.

Our interviewing procedure took a somewhat complicated



form. While the Professor's English far surpasses my German, he understandably felt more comfortable when speaking in his own tongue, and usually – albeit not always – did so. Mr Schroeder translated into English for me the Professor's replies to my (English-language) questions.

This slightly roundabout method ensured that in the transcript below, I have not only tidied up bits of grammar – in particular

eliminating my own profuse 'ums' and 'ahs', which reveal that I possess a hitherto unsuspected future in Australian politics – but have put into the first person various remarks by the Professor which Mr Schroeder translated for me in the third person. Therefore, where Mr Schroeder said 'Professor Boehme is', I have rendered this as 'I am.' And so forth. In what follows, 'RJS' = myself; 'UB' = Professor Boehme; 'HS' = Mr Schroeder.

RJS: Professor Boehme, you came, I understand, from Vogtland in Saxony. Rather close to what is now the Czech Republic, is that right?

UB: Yes. Vogtland is the most southern part of the old GDR. It's connected to Bavaria, and to the Czech Republic.

RJS: Was it fairly close to Bach's own Thuringia?

UB: It's not that close to Bach country, but on the other hand, I lived in a small village where we had a beautiful old organ.

RJS: I gather, Professor, that you were already playing the organ regularly when you were just 13 years old. How did that appointment process occur?

UB: In that village, where my father was a pastor, there was no

director of music (as we would call it today) available. So I had to fill in. I'd had some training in piano-playing,

RJS: But still, 13 years old!

UB: Yes, it was just a jump into deep water and playing the organ.

RJS: I see! And later, I believe, you studied with leading organists in the GDR, Professor Hans Otto and Professor Wolfgang Schetelich. How would you summarise the impact of your teachers upon your playing?

UB: The most influential, probably, would be Mr Otto. And aged 16, I came to the Academy of Church Music in Dresden. Hans Otto was the cathedral cantor in Freiberg. You know, where the famous [Gottfried] Silbermann organ is. One of the most famous organs in the world. And he invited me for a concert, when I was 16. It was my first concert in my life. And it was on that organ.

RJS: Professor, were you involved with the Dresdner Kreuzchor (1) during your studies, or later?

UB: In Dresden, of course, the Kreuzchor was present and participated in the Vespers. That continued in Leipzig, sometimes with the Thomanenchor [St Thomas's Church choir].

RJS: And from what I gather, in 1985 – the Bach tercentenary year – you were chosen from a large number of applicants to be chief organist in the Leipzig Thomaskirche itself. What was the process for that selection? What did it involve?

UB: My predecessor, Hannes Kästner, was about to leave, and some friends informed me about this opportunity. And I then was on a shortlist of three candidates. It was a very, very hard process, all weekend, and at the end of it, I was the lucky one.

RJS: Yes, lucky indeed, and lucky for us all. Professor, I hope this question doesn't seem impertinent, but then, we Australians probably take our freedoms too much for granted. Working in a church environment in the former GDR: did the government try to discourage people from religious music?

UB: It's a very interesting and a very important question to ask, because in the GDR, the Protestant Church, especially, somewhat resembled an island, a special region, which would strive to keep a certain distance from the authorities. They had some degree of freedom within this church, which was, well, hardly possible, unimaginable, in the secular sector. An example: I think it's a very interesting piece of information, because in my position, as an organist at the Thomaskirche in a church environment, I had the freedom to go on concert tours, and leave the GDR for a time, without any detailed examination or hassles. But an engineer, let's say, of a company: well, before he could leave, his entire family and friends were scrutinised before they reluctantly gave him the OK to leave. I think the idea was that for the state, it was not a problem that I wouldn't come back, but it would be a problem when the engineer wouldn't come back! [Laughs.]

RJS: Could you tell us a little bit about your recordings for the Rondeau label? This label doesn't seem to be available yet in Melbourne stops, although I hope that will change. How did the Rondeau label come to be recording your performances?

HS: The Rondeau label is a German company, now located in Leipzig, and specialising in sacred music. A wonderful range of music, and predominantly the St Thomas Boys' Choir, and organ works. This label is represented in Australia.

RJS: Oh good.

HS: By a very large company in Sydney. Unfortunately we experienced, with this trip, as two and a half years ago when the boys' choir was here, that the recordings were not available here to do promotions. But we have arranged that the most recent CDs with Professor Boehme are available from today, so people at the concert tomorrow [Scots' Church, Melbourne, 27 September] and the next few days will have a chance to buy them. And I sincerely hope that ABC Classic FM, which programmes a lot of wonderful music, and Bach's music ... but I have never, never heard any recordings from the Leipzig Thomaskirche organs and Boys Choir, next year celebrating 800 years.(2) It's an exciting label, top quality.

RJS: I can well believe it. Professor Boehme, what advice would you give to young organists who are just beginning nowadays?

UB: Well, again, another interesting question: if a young person, whole-heartedly, would

like to embrace music and the organ, then definitely do so. But keep in mind that the employment opportunities – at least in Germany, and I think it's the same in Australia – for an organist, or general director of music in a church, are limited.

RJS: In Australia, certainly. Apart from Bach, Professor, which composers have you played most often?

UB: At the Thomaskirche there are two organs: one's a Romantic organ, a [Wilhelm] Sauer organ, and then a more recent one, which I designed myself. It's a Bach organ. With the two instruments, you can cover the entire range, from the very old, then Liszt and Reger, until contemporary music. I think the programme tomorrow here at Scots' will be a good example.

RJS: I noticed that there was some Liszt scheduled on the programme [it was Liszt's *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* Variations]. There is one last question that I would like to ask, Professor Boehme: if there was only one organ piece by Bach which you could choose as your favourite, what would that piece be?

UB: One organ cycle by Bach, the *Clavierübung III*: that would be the most important composition composed in Leipzig.

HS: I think some of that is also programmed tomorrow, right?

UB: Yes, the [BWV552] E flat major Prelude and Fugue.

RJS: Well, those were all the questions I had, and thank you very much indeed to both of you for your time, especially at this short notice. I believe you will be going to Sydney and Adelaide as well.

UB: Yes, that's correct. I enjoy it very much to be in this country.

[As well as the Melbourne event mentioned, Professor Boehme gave a masterclass on the interpretation of Bach's organ output – this masterclass likewise being at the Scots' Church – on 29 September. His New South Wales recital took place on 30 September at Sydney University's Great Hall. In South Australia he played on 2 October at Adelaide's Town Hall. The Rondeau label's website is www.rondeau.de]

NOTES

(1). The Kreuzchor (Choir of the Church of the Holy Cross) is Dresden's oldest musical group, having been operating since 1388. *Organ Australia* readers whose memories stretch back to the 1960s probably discovered Schütz's sacred music through the Kreuzchor's recordings, which were numerous and quite widely available in this country (some have been re-released in CD format).

(2). Yes, it's true. In 2012, the Thomaskirche, its choir, and its school will have been in existence for exactly eight centuries. Three institutions of their city, Leipzig, three pillars of cultural life which today still realise their mission to live faith, to shape music and culture and to educate. More information about them, as well as about Professor Boehme's CDs, can be found at the www.rondeau.de site mentioned before.