

When I arrived for Sunday service at the Basilika Ottobeuren, part of a vast centuries-old Benedictine abbey close to Memmingen, Bavaria, every seat appeared taken. The basilica's white façade was designed by Johann Michael Fischer and is considered one of the key examples of Baroque architecture in Germany. But the reason people visit the basilica, especially on Saturdays and Sundays, is that it is one of the country's great centres of organ music.

The church interior is white and gold and rococo. There are gorgeous frescoes on the ceiling. Some of the older men and women were dressed traditionally, the men in leather shorts and lovely embroidered jackets, the women in dirndls. My German is poor and I could not follow the sermon but once the organ began sending out waves of richly coloured sound, I found myself moved.

The instrument that people come to hear was built by the legendary French-German organ-maker Karl-Joseph Riepp and completed in 1766, shortly after the abbey's 1,000th anniversary. "The organ is the voice of the congregation," Josef Miltschitzky, the church's organist, told me after the service, explaining that every possible note and personality can be found among the thousands of pipes. But there's also a more integral relationship between the instrument, the worshippers and the



church in which they sit. Organs are designed for physical spaces, so the church is as much a part of the instrument as the pipes and keyboards. A good organist knows how long it will take for a note to travel from one end of the church to another and so the tempo of music is to some extent determined by the church's architecture.

Unlike listening to a regular symphony, where music often feels as if it is coming from a particular direction, an organ's sound completely occupies the church. I found myself overwhelmed, unable to separate from the music. In contrast, organ music outside of the building it is designed for is like theatre on a television screen.

Josef took me on a tour of the organ loft. It was high above the pews and full of ramshackle furniture, and this messiness felt friendly, intimate. Handsome and tall, with a grey beard, the organist laughed easily and often. He opened a wooden cabinet that contained some of the organ pipes to show that someone long ago had plastered the cabinet walls with sheet music. Then he opened another cabinet, just bigger than a wardrobe, and invited me to climb inside it. There were a series of narrow wooden steps and pressing upon me in the dimness were pipes that were short and stubby like votive candles; others were about as thick and long as a baby's arm. It was hard to believe Josef knew each of these pipes and had a sense as to their personality and how to mix and match them to fill a vast space with music that feels supernatural. He told me that as a young man he had gone against the advice of his elders, who suggested he make the most of his academic talents by becoming a dentist.

My trip was organised by Brown and Hudson, a luxury travel company that tailor-makes itineraries according to the interests of its clients, including setting up meetings with experts and practitioners in whatever the field might be. My trip took me to Berlin, Dresden, Munich and out to small towns beyond, for a mixture of recitals, encounters and tours, but the Germans are mad for organs and it is hard to be in the country without being in easy proximity to some extraordinary instrument. Visiting these organs (and many churches have regular concerts and public tours), is a way to experience the music of Bach, Handel, Liszt and Mozart the way they expected it to be heard, but it is also to see this odd passion that Germans



Pipe dreams

Germany | On a tour of the country's historic organs, Akhil Sharma experiences the music of Bach and Mozart the way they intended it to be heard



Clockwise from main: the organ at the Basilika Ottobeuren, Memmingen, photographed by Florian Jaenicke; chief organist Josef Miltschitzky; the workshop at the Jehmlich Orgelbau company in Dresden; the city's cathedral

Getty Images; David Brandt



the country, even though "almost every church already has one!"

Whether or not one is interested in music or musical instruments, almost everybody is interested in how big, complicated machines are constructed. Jehmlich Orgelbau, the Jehmlich family's organ company, is located on the outskirts of Dresden, a city in the former East Germany with a Baroque centre that seems to have been lifted right out of a picture book. Almost everything one sees is a reconstruction, however — the city was largely levelled during the second world war and what we see is a faithful copy.

Jehmlich Orgelbau's workrooms are high-ceilinged and there is little electric equipment, since most repairs are done in a historically accurate manner. As Ralf walked me around the workrooms, he pointed out things that can only be seen when an organ is dismantled: an enormous organ bellow from the 1600s (before motors, organists used to work with an operator who, when given a signal, would begin pumping the bellow),

an organ pipe wide enough for a man to crawl inside, another pipe that was the size of a pencil. Ralf also explained how carefully the lips of a pipe have to be cut and folded to create the right tone. Every specification must be carefully considered — "When a congregation is deciding about an organ, it is deciding for the next generation also," he said.

In older organs, the keys are mechanically connected via rods to the pipe, but in the 19th century manufacturers began to link keys to pipe via pneumatic tubes, a system that gave way to electronic cables in the 20th century. The latter systems make organ design far simpler because the pipes can be positioned a long way from the organist, but during the last century the "organ reform" movement in Germany began to champion a return to Baroque-style instruments with, among many other characteristics, mechanical key-to-pipe connections that, advocates insist, offer greater feel and control for the player.

We spent several hours talking and Ralf spoke of what it had been like when the company had been located in the GDR, how difficult it had been to get wood without knots and how the government's solution had been to try to merge the company with a coffin-maker. Walking through the workrooms seeing organs in various states of assembly was like being in a hospital for whales.

Dresden and its environs might be to organs what Rome and Florence are to Renaissance painting. For anyone with limited time, the ones to focus on are those built by Gottfried Silbermann, the Antonio Stradivari of organ makers. Silbermann was a friend of Bach, whom he probably consulted in building his instruments, and the organs are considered so extraordinary that no less than



Mozart declared, "These instruments are magnificent beyond measure."

At the Protestant Cathedral in Ulm, another stop on my trip, the organist Friedemann Wieland told me that when he plays a Silbermann organ, it is like his fingers are being guided. Andreas Wittmann, an organist at Saint Anton in Munich, described these instruments, built largely in the first half of the 1700s, as sounding "both old and healthy" — that is, nothing feels rushed and so every note feels like it has the right shape and length, making it emotional without being hysterical or maudlin.

The last organ that Silbermann built, in Dresden cathedral, is also his biggest and probably his greatest. It would have been destroyed during the second world war, except that, in preparation for the likely bombing, the 3,500 pipes were dismantled and hidden away.

While the exterior of the cathedral is Baroque and has a 272ft tower, and there are statues of historical and religious figures lining its roof, inside it is elegantly simple. The organ also appears surprisingly modest. Some of the pipes are displayed within a white and gold wooden framework but these are only a small portion of the total. When the organ is played (concerts tend to occur on Wednesdays and Saturdays), even someone who does not know much about organs can tell from the silvery notes that what he is hearing is better than almost anything else that he has heard before. Search on the internet and even on a computer's speakers the music can make one's hair stand.

From Dresden I took a short flight to Munich in south-east Germany. While Dresden is so lovely one is afraid to touch anything for fear the gilt will rub off, Munich, the nation's third-largest city, has the clean practical prosperity that we associate with Germany.

The Frauenkirche, the catholic cathedral, is probably the most famous building in Munich — the onion domes on its two towers are a symbol of the city. The church was heavily damaged by Allied bombing and its main organ — with almost 10,000 pipes — was built in 1994. Centuries-old organs are surprisingly rare in German cities, not just because of second world war bombing but because their very prosperity allowed churches to replace old organs with new ones.

Hans Leitner, the cathedral's organist, met me before evening services at a café next to the cathedral. It was raining hard enough to make hearing each other difficult. "You touch people," he said, explaining that music is like preaching. Hans is in his mid-fifties with curly grey hair and a round face. Like every organist I spoke to, he saw his work as involving the spiritual wellbeing of parishioners. We talked for a while and I felt privileged to speak with someone who was so decent and honest; in some way, these conversations with organists about their spiritual mission was as interesting as climbing inside centuries-old organs.

Eventually Hans led me across an alleyway into a side entrance of the cathedral. We ascended narrow curving stairs till we got to the organ loft high above the pews. It was almost time for the service to start. The keyboard Hans sat behind was curved and there were several levels of keys and knobs. Seeing him sitting there reminded me of a pilot in a cockpit. He put out his sheet music. Far down below us in the cathedral, people were looking towards the front, where the sermon was going to be performed. Everything was quiet.

Then the music started.

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Akhil Sharma was a guest of Brown and Hudson (brownandhudson.com). A four-day organ-themed trip, similar to the one described but tailored to the guests' interest, would cost about €6,500 per person, based on two travelling, including private transfers and domestic flights between cities, accommodation and introductions to experts in the field