

ON ONE hand, everyone was very excited – here was a newly discovered work with authentically researched performances. On the other hand, this 1709 opera was to be staged by students, and was a two-hour return bus journey from town. It lasted a solid four and a half hours, and I'd never heard of the composer. Hm.

In fact, "Die Lybische Talestris" by J.D Heinichen, turned out to be a highlight of my musical trip to Leipzig's Bach Festival. The movement and dance were a delight, the costumes were intriguing and the whole opera, which Heinichen apparently wrote in just two weeks, was full of humour and fun.

It took place in a tiny, wooden 18th century theatre in the old spa town of Bad Lauchstädt. This yellow-and-grey building has an almost marionette-theatre charm, with long white benches inside and a tiny space for the orchestra. There is no room inside for a bar, so in the intervals we queued for pretzels and coffees from a wooden caravan outside, and two small boys in blue velvet suits marched around importantly, selling programmes.

I was entirely seduced by the unusual surroundings and some truly virtuoso performances – Jozsef Gal should become world famous one day, if there's any justice in the world. And by the time the opera ended, at midnight, I could have watched it all over again.

Leipzig's annual Bach festival, now in its thirteenth year, offers a huge variety of great concerts. This year's festival theme was Bach, Schumann and Brahms; next year they'll focus on Bach's influence on Liszt and Mahler. Director Dettloff Schwerdtfeger has brought concerts to the main railway station, there are cross-over "Bachosphere" events with rock and jazz acts like the Nigel Kennedy Quintet and the Leipzig BigBand.

There are even comedy events such as the truly brilliant puppet-theatre performance of Bach's Coffee Cantata which we saw, featuring a scowling bust of Bach, two enormous wigs and a large thermos flask.

As well as Bach, Mendelssohn, Robert and Clara Schumann, Richard Wagner and Edvard Grieg are also associated with Leipzig. Not surprising that it calls itself the "city of music" and indeed it seemed that, during the festival at least, even the street musicians preferred to go classical.

At one point I was unwillingly serenaded by two accordionists mangling Bach's Suite No. 2, quickly followed by a recorder player tooting along to a flute sonata and trying to juggle at the same time. The accomplished Jewish marimba player, Alex Jacobowitz, also became a familiar sight, playing the D Minor Toccata and other difficult works against the noise of traffic and barking dogs.

Bach organised the music in St. Thomas' Church (Thomaskirche) for 27 years, and it can be a moving experience to listen to his music in the place where he worked so hard. His grave is right before the altar, although, like Mozart, he was not fully appreciated during his lifetime, and was buried in an unmarked grave. After many years he was exhumed and re-buried here, and an eerie poster in the church compares his skull with contemporary portraits to

Go Bach to basics with a trip to Leipzig

Drenched in culture, this German 'City of Music' offers a charming experience never to be forgotten as **Jenny Woolf** found out after attending the unusual, but atmospheric annual Bach festival



convince the viewer that the correct bones have been put under the slab.

The world's finest Bach museum is just a step away from the church, in the house of Bach's friends, the Bose family. Brand new, state-of-the-art, it holds many original manuscripts and several unique treasures, such as an organ Bach actually played. Strangely, I was more affected by the Bach memorial in a nearby park, a modest decorated pillar designed and organised by Mendelssohn, who, in 1829, reintroduced Bach to a world that had largely forgotten him.

Mendelssohn liked Leipzig, where he was in charge of the Gewandhaus orchestra, but was posthumously reviled for his Jewishness, first by Wagner and then by the Nazis. But he is now appropriately commemorated, and I wanted to see his restored house. It is a rare survival. Leipzig, like many formerly East German cities, suffered architecturally in the war, and was then further trashed by insensitive Communist planning policies.

Mendelssohn's house was used for years as a paint factory, and ironically, this saved it for restoration. Nobody cared then about its beautiful staircases or

original parquet floors – nobody cared to rip them out either.

So they refurbished what was already there, using drawings, descriptions and original colour schemes to recreate the middle class family apartment where the composer spent the last few years of his life. Even his private concert salon is now back in regular use.

The festival's finale was a wonderful B Minor Mass in the Thomaskirche. From high in the choirstalls, I had a clear view of John Eliot Gardner's inspired conducting, and was sufficiently close to the action to have turned the pages of the trumpeters' music for them – if they'd asked.

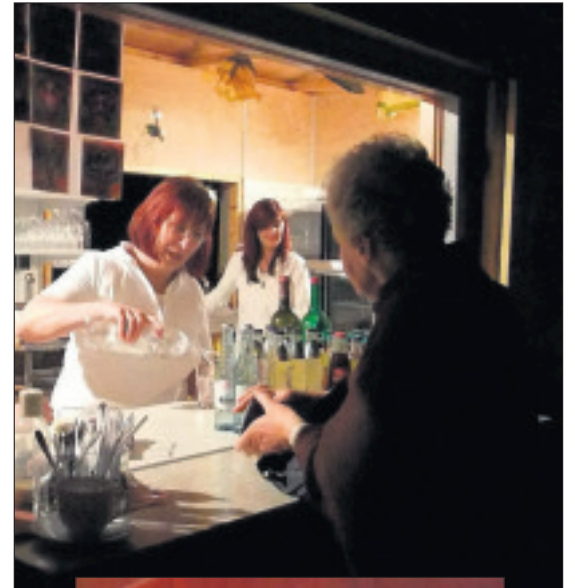
Afterwards, fighting down the crowded staircase, I spotted

Gardner surrounded by fans in a tiny room near the towering organ. How cramped it all was, yet what an atmosphere!

Of course Leipzig has a fine concert hall and opera house, but I felt that the pleasure of listening in these different and very individual venues made this festival visit more than a mere collection of concerts.

It was a complete experience; accordionists, marimba, caravan snack-bar, puppets, and all.

□ For further information about Leipzig, contact Leipzig Tourist Office (0049 341 7104-265, www.leipzig.de, www.ltm-leipzig.de). For information about the Leipzig Bach Festival 2011, contact www.bach-leipzig.de.



Leipzig delights ... clockwise from top: the snack caravan at Bad Lauchstädt; Jozsef Gal as Scandor in "Der Lybische Talestris"; the tiny orchestra pit at the theatre in Bad Lauchstädt; Mendelssohn's monument to Bach and the Thomas Church where Bach worked for 27 years.