



Organs of Bach's Time

Silbermann & Baroque organs in Saxony & Thuringia

23–28 September 2026 (MM 181)

6 days

Lecturers: James Johnstone
& Dr Jarl Kremer

Recitals on the finest Baroque organs to survive, some of them instruments which Bach and Handel knew.

Accompanied by organist James Johnstone, a Bach specialist, who gives recitals and demonstrations in association with the local organists, and by art historian, Jarl Kremer.

The organs are located in towns and villages off the beaten track.

For a maximum of 27 participants, the format of this tour is a hybrid between our own-brand music festivals and our small group tours.

The tour can be combined with *The Bach Journey*, 28 September–4th October 2026 (please contact us for full details or visit <https://www.martinrandall.com/tours/the-bach-journey>).

With clocks, organs were the most complex of mechanical instruments developed before the Industrial Revolution. As such they were a source of awe and admiration far beyond musical *cognoscenti* and their makers often enjoyed a level of fame greater than the musicians who played them.

The greatest of the composers for the organ, Johann Sebastian Bach, had the good fortune to live at a time and in a place where organ-building reached a peak of excellence which perhaps has never been surpassed. This was not entirely coincidence: interaction between players and makers was an important element in refining the skills of both sides.

The most famous of these organ builders was Gottfried Silbermann. He was born the son of a carpenter in the mountainous backwoods of Saxony in 1683, gained an almost monopolistic grip on keyboard manufacturing in the region and died a rich man in 1753. Nearly thirty of his fifty Saxon organs survive, some very nearly in original condition. They are famous – and always were – for their distinctive sounds, from the silver flutes to the strong and characterful 16' Posaune in the pedal.

Other organ builders whose work we see and hear on this tour include Zacharias Hildebrandt (1688–1757), an apprentice and later a rival of Silbermann, and Heinrich



Copper engraving c. 1730

Gottfried Trost (c. 1680–1759). All had some sort of collaborative or critical relationship with J.S. Bach.

This tour selects some of the finest instruments in a region exceptionally richly endowed with historic organs. Many are located in village churches far from cathedral or court, leading the visitor through terrain which is rural and remote. All of the organs visited are located in villages and small towns with wonderfully picturesque historic centres. Some organs have hardly been altered since they were built.

The tour is accompanied by organist James Johnstone, who performs regularly in Europe and America and who has won several prizes for his recordings.

The ten included recitals are exclusive to this group and twenty to thirty minutes long, performed by James Johnstone or the local organist.

Itinerary

Day 1: London to Merseburg. Fly at c. 9.00am from London Heathrow to Berlin (British Airways) and continue by coach (c. 2 hours) to Merseburg, a cathedral town on the river Saale; first of three nights here.

Day 2: Pomßen, Naumburg. The village of Pomßen has a church with an organ of the 1660s, a delightful instrument which is more Renaissance than Baroque, set in a

painted wood ensemble of gallery, chest and panelled ceiling. The church of St Wenceslas in Naumburg has a major Hildebrandt organ of 1748. There is also time for the cathedral with its exceptional 13th-century sculpture. Second of three nights Merseburg.

Day 3: Zschortau, Störmthal, Rötha. Visit three small towns outside Leipzig with outstanding organs. The Scheibe organ in the church of St Nicholas, Zschortau was tested by J.S. Bach in 1746 who found it to be 'efficiently and painstakingly well-built'. Störmthal has an organ by Hildebrandt which was inspected and approved by Bach in 1723 and is still in its original condition. In the fine mediaeval church of St George in Rötha there is a Silbermann organ tested in 1721 by Johann Kuhnau, Bach's predecessor in Leipzig. Final night in Merseburg.

Day 4: Altenburg, Ponitz, Freiberg. Travel from Merseburg to Freiberg via Altenburg and Ponitz. The court city of Altenburg is one of the rarely visited jewels of the former DDR, with a hilltop ducal residence featuring mediaeval fortifications, Baroque apartments and a quite remarkable collection of Italian Renaissance paintings. The chapel has a fine organ by Trost of 1739. After free time for lunch in Altenburg, travel on to Ponitz. Gottfried Silbermann began building an organ for the Friedenskirche in Ponitz in 1734, before the construction of the church itself had ended. Continue to Freiberg. Before dinner, there is an opportunity to hear the Silbermann in St. Peter's Church. First of two nights in Freiberg.

Day 5: Freiberg, Helbigsdorf. The morning is free in Freiberg. In the afternoon drive out to Helbigsdorf, whose church is home to Silbermann's smallest, double-manual instrument (1726–28). Freiberg cathedral is one of the most beautiful of Late Gothic buildings in Germany and has retained an exceptional panoply of furnishings. The organ by Silbermann (1711–1714) is one of the world's finest instruments; three manuals, 44 stops, largely unaltered. Dinner and final night in Freiberg.

Day 6: Freiberg to London. Drive to Prague and fly to London Heathrow, arriving c. 6.00pm.

For participants joining The Bach Journey: travel by high-speed train from Freiberg to Eisenach via Dresden (c. 3 hours). The first event of the day is dinner in your chosen hotel.

Organs of Bach's Time continued

Lecturer

James Johnstone. Organist specialising in the Baroque. He is a professor of early keyboards at the Royal Academy of Music and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. He has performed and recorded extensively as a recitalist and also as a continuo player with numerous ensembles, notably the Monteverdi Choir - now Constellation Choir and Orchestra. He is currently recording the complete organ works of Bach for Metronome.
www.jamesjohnstone.org

Dr Jarl Kremeier. Art historian specialising in 17th- to 19th-century architecture and decorative arts; teaches Art History at the Berlin College of Acting and the Senior Student's Department of Berlin's Freie Universität. He studied at the Universities of Würzburg, Berlin and the Courtauld, is a contributor to the *Macmillan Dictionary of Art*, author of a book on the Würzburg Residenz, and of articles on Continental Baroque architecture and architectural theory.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach (and first class train tickets for those joining the Bach Journey); hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 1 lunch and 4 dinners with wine; all organ recitals, admissions and donations, visits, etc.; all tips for drivers, guides, waiters; all taxes; the services of two lecturers and a tour manager.

If you opt to add the groups flights to this tour, the festival will be charged at the 'no flights' price.

All recitals are subject to confirmation from the relevant churches. Changes to the itinerary are possible.

Accommodation. Best Western, Merseburg (bestwestern.de/hotels/Merseburg/ Best-Western-Hotel-Halle-Merseburg): a comfortable 4-star hotel, located a short walk from the historic centre. **Hotel Freyhof, Freiberg** (hotel-freyhof.de): opened in 2016, this traditional hotel is situated in a reconstructed monastery, within walking distance of the cathedral.

How strenuous? Fitness is essential. You will be on your feet a lot, walking and standing around. The tour would not be suitable for anyone with difficulties with everyday walking and stair climbing. Some days involve a lot of driving, particularly the final day. There is a lot of coach travel with some long journeys. Average distance by coach per day: 95 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 27 participants.