

# Johann Sebastian Bach's Performance Environment in the *Nikolaikirche* from 1723 to 1750

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In order to present information pertinent to establishing the possible arrangement and placement of the choir and other musicians who performed under J. S. Bach's direction in the *Nikolaikirche*<sup>1</sup> and the probable acoustical properties of his performance environment, it will be necessary to review the history of construction and modification that this church underwent over the course of many centuries up to its current state. Numerous contrasting elements between and *Nikolaikirche* and the *Thomaskirche*<sup>2</sup> will serve to highlight some of the major differences that Bach experienced between these two most important performance venues in Leipzig during his tenure there.

The *Nikolaikirche* has variously been described as Leipzig's main, principal, municipal church which 'has long been one of the most famous, oldest, greatest<sup>3</sup> churches in Leipzig'. In reality the *Thomaskirche* is older than the *Nikolaikirche* with the latter having been founded in 1176 as 'the second city church' and being named after Saint Nicholas, the bishop of Myra and patron saint of merchants and wholesalers.

Both the *Thomaskirche* and the *Nikolaikirche* were originally built in the Romanesque style; however, at the time of the Reformation they were transformed into Late Gothic structures with the *Thomaskirche* undergoing a complete transformation to this style while the *Nikolaikirche* retained some of its Romanesque features<sup>4</sup>. This is still visible today at the west end of the *Nikolaikirche* where the organ is now the dominating feature but where originally Bach must have placed most, if not all, of his musicians. Also, during Bach's tenure in Leipzig, the *Seitenschiffe*<sup>5</sup> at the *Thomaskirche* gave the effect that they were somewhat narrower than those at the *Nikolaikirche* which still retained the features of the wider Romanesque vaulting.<sup>6</sup> At the *Thomaskirche* both side walls at the west end were covered with upper and lower wooden balconies, not to mention the wooden structures located on the east end closer to the altar, all of which would have contributed to reducing the length of sound decay (echo) particularly since the sound issued from a location high above the ground floor. According to Arnold Schering, the difference in acoustical effect between the *Thomaskirche* and the *Nikolaikirche* could be explained as follows:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is the St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig which will henceforth be referred to as the *Nikolaikirche*, although it is also known in German as the *St. Nikolaikirche* or in some older documents as *Nicolaikirche*.

<sup>2</sup> ditto – this is the St. Thomas Church.

<sup>3</sup> In German there is a possible ambiguity involved here since *größte* can mean 'great' in both quality and name as well as height. Some sources give the present-day height of the towers of both the *Thomaskirche* and *Nikolaikirche* as 68 meters.

<sup>4</sup> The reconstruction of the *Nikolaikirche* took place from 1513 to 1525 and of the *Thomaskirche* from 1482-1496.

<sup>5</sup> The German word, *Schiff*, here in an architectural context, means 'nave', hence, *Seitenschiffe*= 'side naves' or the secondary naves on either side of the main or central nave. The diminutive associations connected with the word 'aisles', the usual translation of *Seitenschiffe*, do not seem to equate entirely with the German word.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Schering, *Johann Sebastian Bachs Leipziger Kirchenmusik*, Leipzig, 1936, p. 157, gives an illustration of the west end blueprint for the changes in construction, before and after the major expansion and renovation of the *Thomaskirche*, that took place in the years beginning with 1885.

<sup>7</sup> *idem*, p. 161-2.

Wirkung und Ausübung der Kirchenmusik müssen in dem so beschaffenen Raum [Thomaskirche] unter anderen Bedingungen gestanden haben als in S. Nicolai. Orgel und Schülerchor ragten nicht, wie dort [Nikolaikirche], sichtbar in die Kirche hinein, sondern bildeten ein von der Gemeinde getrenntes Reich für sich. Sie lagen im "zweiten Stock" über der steinernen Empore, und zwar vermutlich ein Stück zurückgerückt derart, daß die Vorderwand der beiden etwas vorgebauten Stadtpfeiferemporen mit der Front dieser Steinempore abschloß. Standen die Sänger vorn an der Brüstung neben dem Rückpositiv, so dehnte sich vor ihnen das mächtige Hallenschiff aus.... Schall und Hall müssen hier ganz andere gewesen sein. Namentlich der Chorgesang mag, da er aus größerer Ferne und Höhe, um vieles entmaterialisierter geklungen haben als in der Schwesterkirche [Nikolaikirche]. Wiederum muß die Fülle der Einbauten den Schall in hohem Maße gedämpft und nachhallende Akustik, wie sie sich heute an entfernten Punkten des Schiffs oder der Emporen bemerkbar macht, unmöglich gemacht haben. Die zahlreichen Holzbekleidungen scheinen unvergleichliche Träger günstiger Resonanz gewesen zu sein, so daß Vorteile für gewisse Orchesterbesetzungen und für das Verstehen des gesungenen Worts heraussprangen, die später verloren gegangen sind.

[The performance and effect of church music must have taken place under different conditions in a space as such as that offered by the *Thomaskirche* compared to that of the *Nikolaikirche*. The organ and choir lofts did not extend visibly into the nave of the church, but rather created a realm unto itself separate from the congregation. They were on the "third floor or balcony"<sup>8</sup> above the stone balcony and probably had been pushed back a ways so that the front wall of the city pipers' loft which had been extend forward somewhat were flush with the front of this stone balcony. If the singers were standing at the balustrade next to the *Rückpositiv*<sup>9</sup>, they would have seen in front of them the mighty central nave extending outwards.... The sound and echoing from this point [in the *Thomaskirche*] must have been completely different [from that in the *Nikolaikirche*]. Specifically, the singing of the choir [in the *Thomaskirche*], since it would come from a greater distance and height [compared to that in the *Nikolaikirche*] would have sounded much more *entmaterialisiert*<sup>10</sup> than at its sister church [Nikolaikirche]. On the other hand, the abundance of additional [wooden] structures would have dampened substantially the sound, not at all like the long decay time and the resounding echoes as they can currently [1936] be perceived at distant points in the nave or on the balconies. The extensive surfaces covered with wood appear to have provided an incomparable support for a favorable resonance so that advantages were created [in Bach's time] for certain instrumental combinations and for understanding the words sung by the vocalists. These advantages were later lost [with all the structural changes {expansion and modifications undertaken after Bach's death}].

Just before the Nikolaikirche, as Bach knew it, endured yet another major renovation involving a change from its mixture of Romanesque and Neo-Gothic architectural styles, heavily overladen with Baroque embellishments, to Neo-Classicism, Carl Benjamin Schwarz made some watercolor paintings (1784-1785) of the interior of the church in which he captured the amalgamation of the three architectural styles before they were mainly forced to submit to the rigors of Neo-Classicism. This major reconstruction mainly took place from 1785-1786 and lasted, according to some sources, until 1797.

A comparison of Schwarz's depiction of the west wall of the Nikolaikirche with later photographs of the same area will make quite apparent to the reader/viewer that such substantial changes would have a profound effect upon acoustics and the area from which the musicians performed.

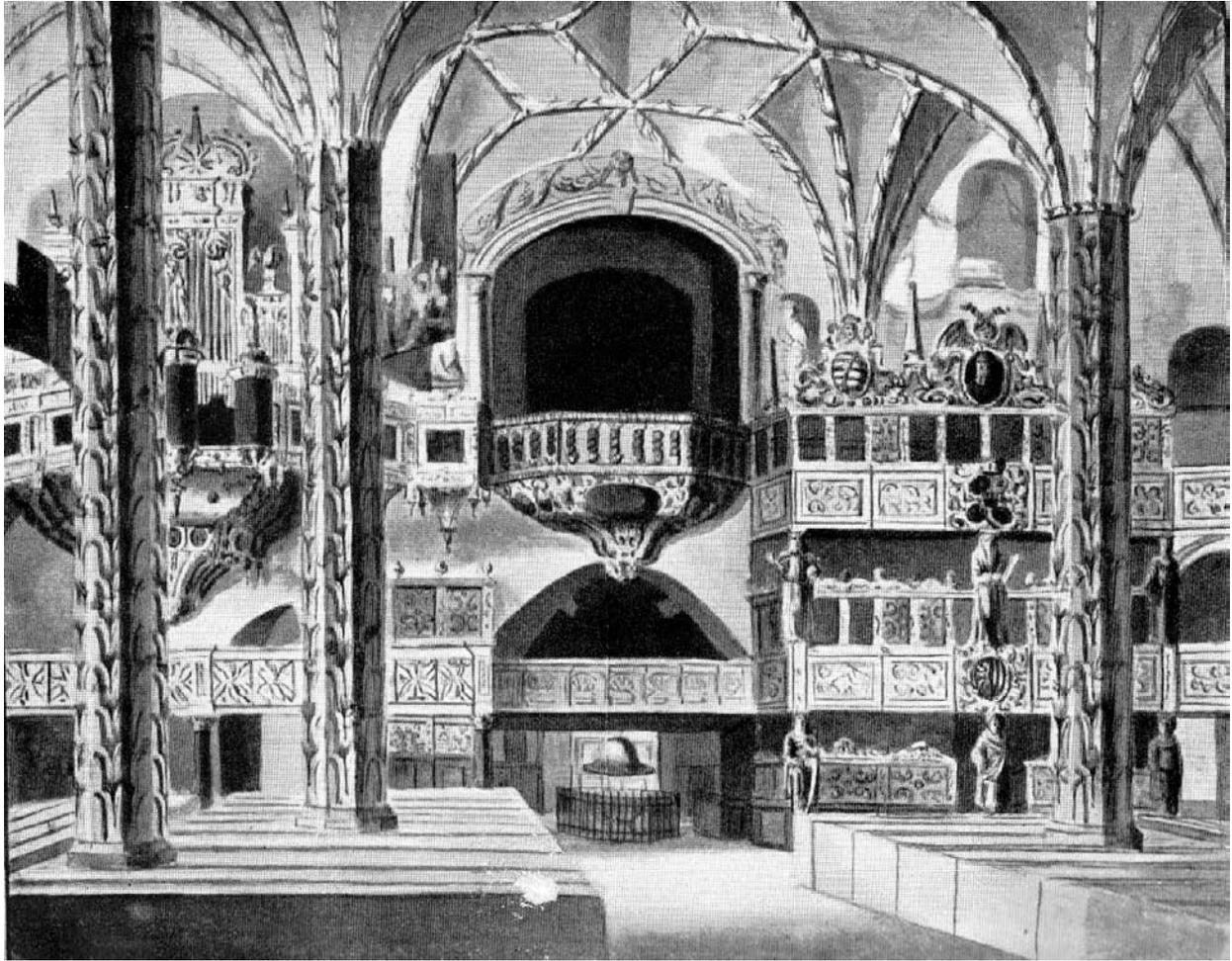
Here is Schwarz's watercolor (only in black and white) from 1784 or early 1785:

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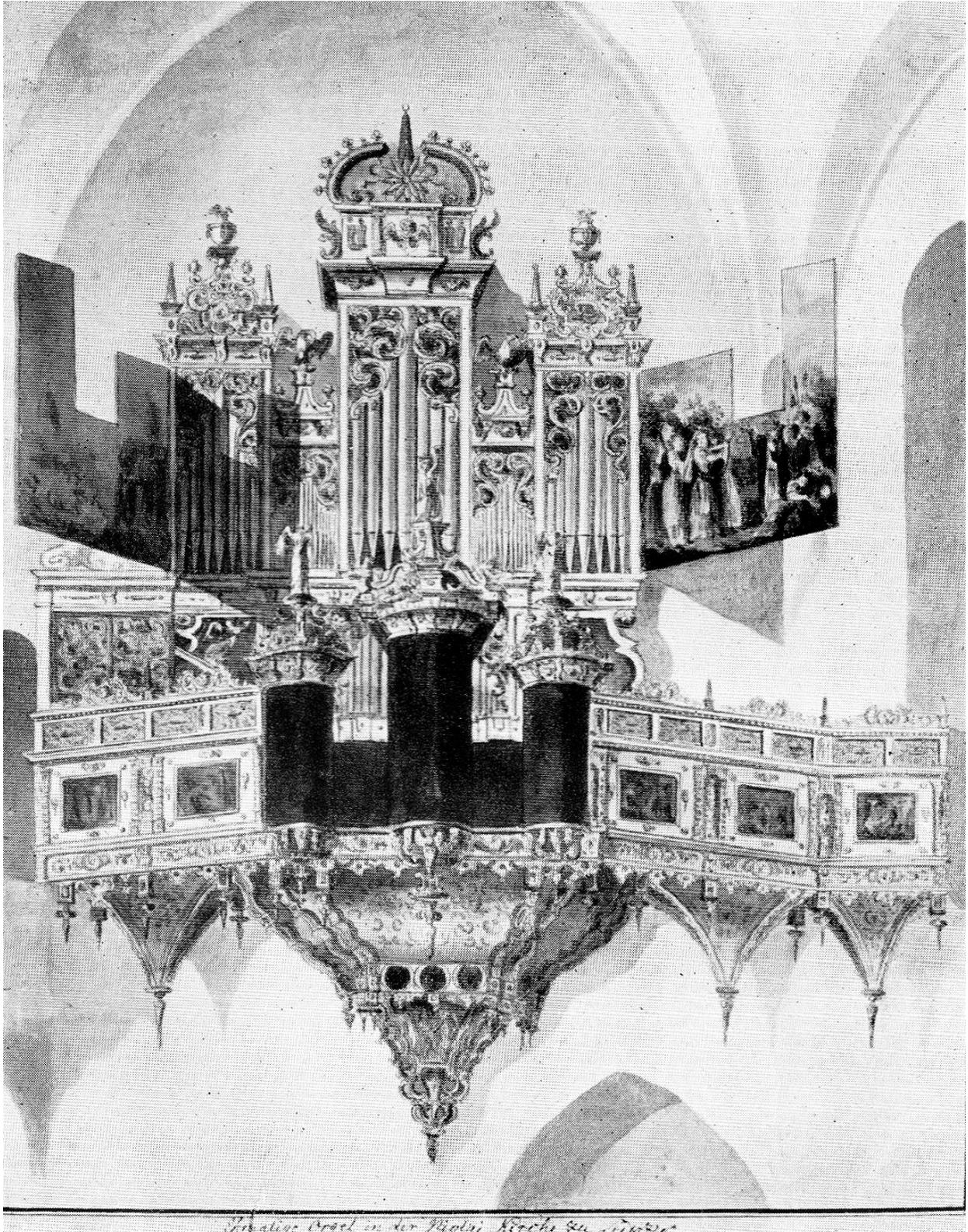
<sup>8</sup> *zweiter Stock* = 2<sup>nd</sup> story or floor in British English, but 3<sup>rd</sup> story or floor in American English.

<sup>9</sup> the *Rückpositiv* is a portion of the organ located behind the organist and is hung from the edge of the loft or balcony.

<sup>10</sup> *entmaterialisiert* = 'dematerialized' here implies having no apparent physical connection (as when the audience sees the performers), hence 'disembodied', 'spiritualized' or 'ethereal'.

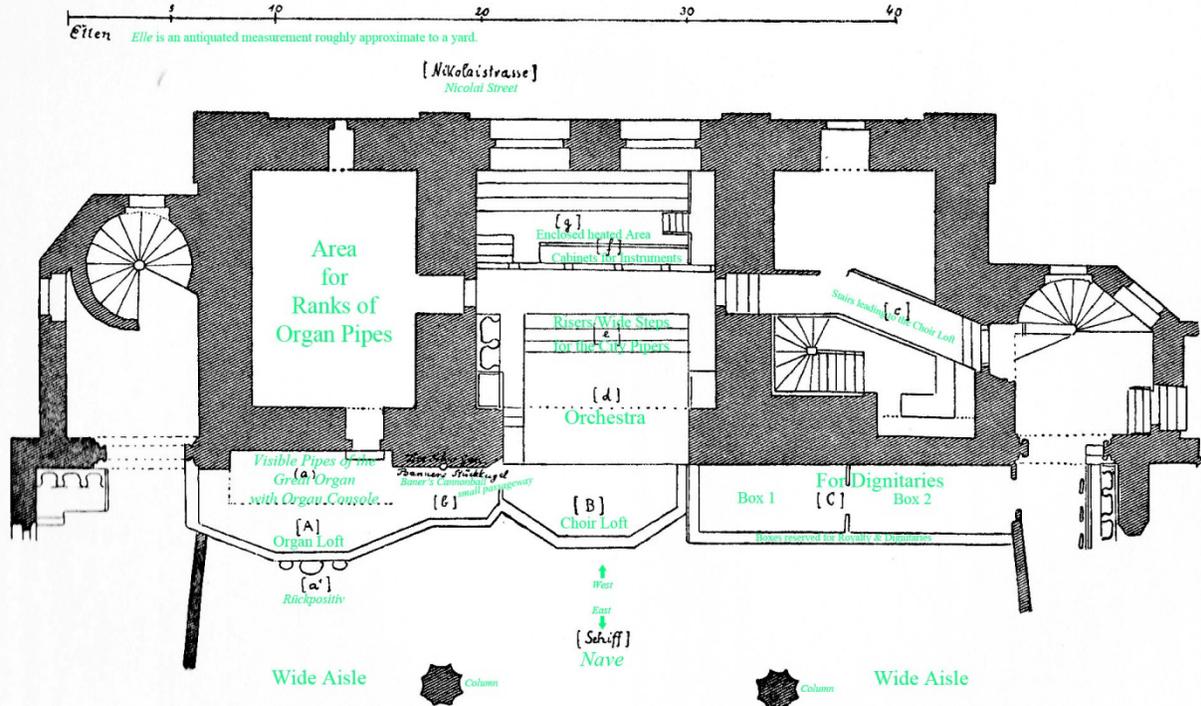


This west-wall view shows, among other things, that the balconies spanning the back wall appear to be relatively low. The most striking feature is the gaping hole in the middle of the top balcony, a place normally reserved for a large church organ. This is the choir and orchestra loft which has one great disadvantage: the large church organ is located on the left facing a side nave or aisle and makes communication between the performers and the organist rather difficult. The artist's depiction of the Romanesque vaulting over the choir/orchestra loft makes it appear that this resembles somewhat a band shell which would help to project the sound directly into the main nave. An odd feature should be noted here: the *Rückpositiv* is placed sideways at an odd angle so that the viewer might see it better. In reality, it had the usual position assumed by such an organ division, balanced and lined up properly as shown here in Schwarz's own watercolor depiction from the same set of paintings:

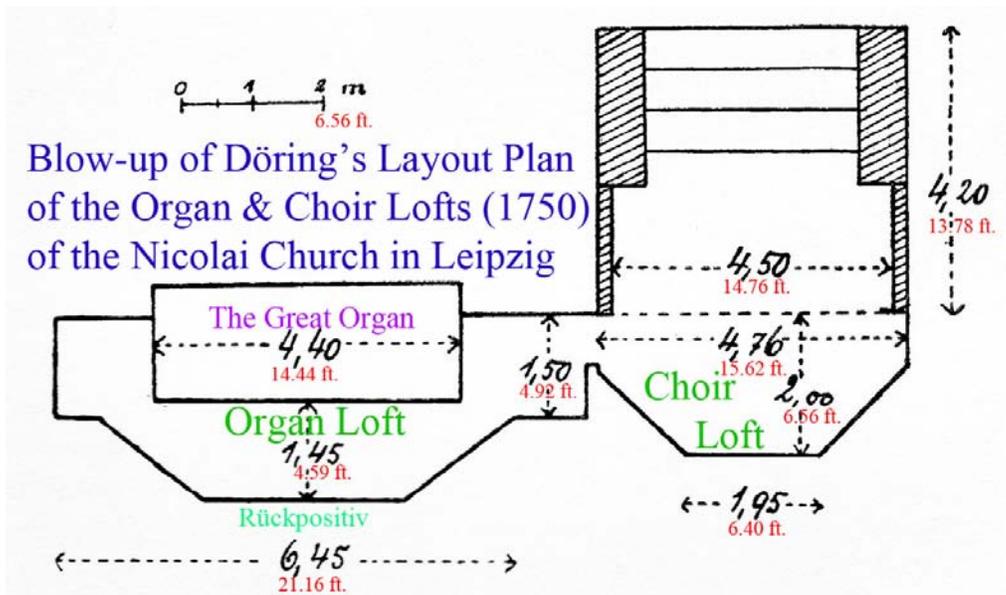


*Barocke Orgel in der Pölni Kirche zu Würzburg*

A closer examination of the performance area is made possible by the ground plans of the *Nikolaikirche* prepared by Johann Gottfried Döring at the request of Mayor Born in 1750. Here is drawing of the west end with an additional blowup of the critical organ and choir/orchestra lofts:

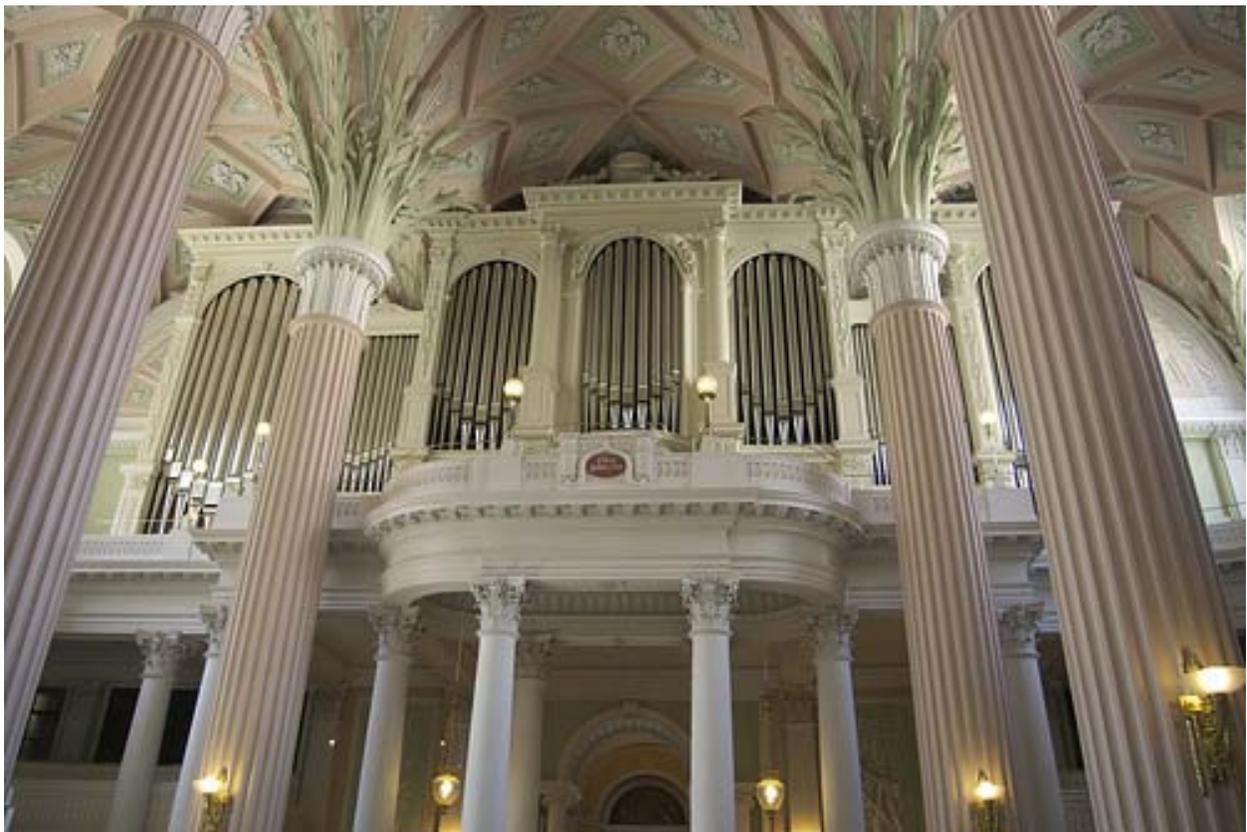


Orgel- und Schülerchor der Nikolaikirche nach dem Grundriß des Ratsmaurermeisters J. G. Döring vom Jahre 1750.  
Organ and Choir Loft of the Nicolai Church according to the Layout Prepared by J. G. Döring's (Master Bricklayer) in 1750.



[Schering gives further details regarding the placement of musicians beyond what is already indicated above. I may add these later as I find the time to do so.]

From the following contemporary photographs of the same area, it should be possible to understand just how significant the changes have been so that it will not be possible now to assert that performances of Bach's music in the *Nikolaikirche* will sound just like what the audience would have heard when Bach first performed his sacred music there.



Here is another view with a performance in progress:

