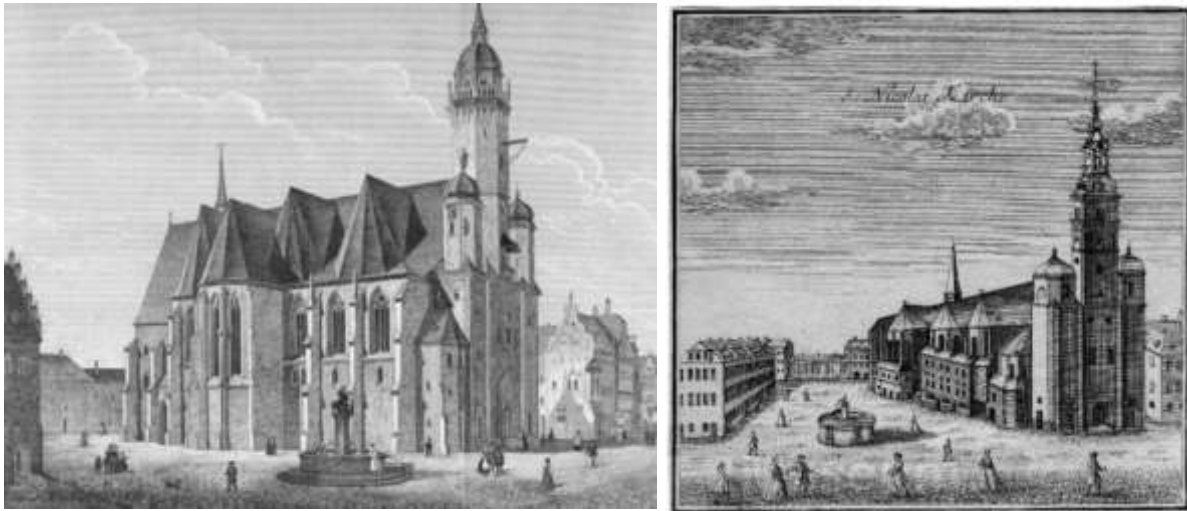


III. THE NIKOLAIKIRCHE

This chapter will deal with the exterior and interior of the other main church in Leipzig, a description of the *Musikchor* in Bach's time and of the acoustics of the church. Aspects that have already been sufficiently brought up in the chapter on the *Thomaskirche* will not be discussed again.



Afb. 1a/b. *Nikolaikirche*, seen from the northwest.

Left: H. Budras, copper etching ca. 1840; *Nikolaikirche* second half of the 16th century, *Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig*, nr. Mü.IV/55

right: Joachim Ernst Scheffler, copper etching 1749 (with *Vorbau* and raised central tower). *Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig*, nr. Mü.IV/57c

1. How was the *Nikolaikirche* built up, both externally and internally, at the time of Bach?

Whereas the *Thomaskirche* (St. Thomas Church) was a monastery church, the *Nikolaikirche* (St. Nicholas Church) was traditionally a church of and for the bourgeoisie. This difference in origin no longer played a significant role after the Reformation, but it was still recognisable from the fact that the annual renewal of the Council took place here. In modern literature no description of the *Nikolaikirche* in Bach's time can be found.¹ However, there is an extensive description of this building by Johann Jacob Vogel from around 1710;² in addition, pictures have survived.

The *Nikolaikirche* was built in the 12th century as a Romanesque basilica; the western facade with two towers still contains many Romanesque elements. Around 1395, the church was given a new slate roof and the altar choir was enlarged and rebuilt in Gothic style. Around 1520, the church was rebuilt and extended again; since then, the *Nikolaikirche* has been a three-aisled, late-Gothic hall church similar to the *Thomaskirche*. After 1539, the two towers on the west portal received their low 'Italian' hoods; in 1555, a third, tall, octagonal

¹ A study such as Herbert Stiehl devoted to the *Thomaskirche* is not to be found for the *Nikolaikirche*.

² Johann Jacob Vogel, *Leipzigerisches Chronicon*, Leipzig c. 1710, p. 95-107.

tower was built between them, crowned with a lantern. In the 17th century the tower was rebuilt and raised to 76 m. As a result, the Romanesque portal collapsed after 1750. In 1759 a new portal was built in the late baroque style.³ In the top of the tower lived the tower keeper, who not only had to ring the bells, but also indicate the time at many different times by blowing a small horn or, at dusk, a trumpet.⁴ In 1610, the slate roof of the choir was raised to the same height as the roof of the nave, ca. 18 m.⁵ In the same century, a *Vorbau* (Front building) was placed on the northern outer wall, west of the northern transept, as had been done in the *Thomaskirche*. A lower *Vorbau* was built east of the transept (Fig. 1b).

The interior of the nave was about 30 m long and about 27 m wide, i.e. almost square. Thus, the church differed from the elongated *Thomaskirche*. The vaults were supported by five pairs of columns. After 1663 the floor was mostly covered with sandstone tiles.⁶ After the Reformation and during the Baroque period, the church was modified several times. In the period 1663-1688 the interior took on the shape that Bach had known throughout his time in Leipzig. Vogel describes the church around 1710 as one of the most beautiful and luminous in Germany. The columns were decorated with gilded foliage. The vaulting showed a star pattern. Perspective paintings were applied to the east and west walls of the church.⁷



Fig. 2. Interior in 18th century, view to the east with altar choir, galleries and ancient pulpit. Ink drawing, Carl Benjamin Schwarz, 1785. Deutscher Fotothek, nr. 90095659.

³ Gerhart Pasch, 'Die *Nikolaikirche*, Baugeschichte in zehn Jahrhunderten', *Die Nikolaikirche zu Leipzig und ihre Orgel*, Hermann J. Busch (editor), Leipzig 2004, p. 17-22.

⁴ Vogel 1710, p. 101.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Like in the *Thomaskirche*, galleries were built, but here much more regularly: two-storey galleries were built along the walls of the entire nave. The lower gallery was made of wood, the upper one mainly of stone, which allowed for a plastered vault at the bottom. On contemporary images both galleries seem to be on a lower level than those in the *Thomaskirche*. The galleries could be entered via doors with spiral staircases behind them. The whole church was painted, with much white and gilding. The woodwork was richly decorated with palm motifs.⁸ Notable elements in the altar choir included the altar, as well as the sacristy with library and the confessional, which were located on the left and right hand side of the altar choir. In the nave, Vogel mentioned the sandstone pulpit with sculpture and the baptismal font located on the far west side.⁹ Like in the *Thomaskirche*, many pews were placed in the *Nikolaikirche*. According to Vogel, their symmetrical arrangement, together with that of the galleries, contributed to the exquisite appearance of the interior (Fig. 2).

In the *Nikolaikirche* the *Musikchor* comprised the *Schülerchor* (the part where the pupils were to be found) and the great organ. The *Schülerchor* was located against the west wall in the middle of the second floor (Fig. 4). In 1663 the balcony was deepened and provided with a balustrade painted in black and gold. Underneath, on the first floor, there was room for dignitaries. Seen from the church, to the right of the *Schülerchor* was the large and beautifully decorated seat for the elector (*Fürstentuhl*), which was supported by caryatids. On the left side next to the *Schülerchor*, i.e. on the second floor, was the large organ (chapter XVIII). It was richly decorated with paintings and carvings. Along the walls there were another large number of private lodges and chapels. According to Tanya Kevorkian, in 1708 there were 769 *Stände* (regular seats in pews) and 343 *Bänklein* (small folding pews fixed in various places in the church) for men. For the women the numbers were 804 and 528. In addition, there were chapels and standing places. So in total the services could be attended by 2500 to 3000 people (fig. 3).¹⁰ Although the nave of the *Nikolaikirche* was smaller than that of the *Thomaskirche*, there was apparently more room for churchgoers.

From 1784 to 1797, the church was thoroughly rebuilt: the baroque styled Gothic hall church was changed into a classicistic *Predigtsaal* (Preaching Hall; Pasch citation). The whole interior was adapted to the new taste. The columns were given an antique look with stucco; the star patterned vault was transformed into a coffered ceiling, also with stucco; the windows were provided with colourless glass and round arches; the floor was completely renewed with black and white tiles, and the predominant colours became white, pink and green, while the choir was given new stucco, white and gold with paintings. The organ was demolished and replaced by a new organ made by the firm of Trampeli. Thus the interior of this church as it looked in Bach's time has definitively disappeared. In 1860 the Trampeli organ was pulled down again, and two years later replaced by a new organ built by the firm of Ladegast. At the time of its construction, this was the largest organ in all of Saxony. In 2002-2004, changes to the church hall compared to the situation in 1797, which had been made in the course of later years, were reversed during an extensive renovation. The Ladegast organ was also expanded and restored to its former glory.

⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

⁹ Ibid., p. 97f.

¹⁰ Tanya Kevorkian, 'The Reception of the Cantata during Leipzig Church Services, 1700-1750', *Early Music* 30/1, 2002, p. 26-44, on p. 27 and 42, n. 4.

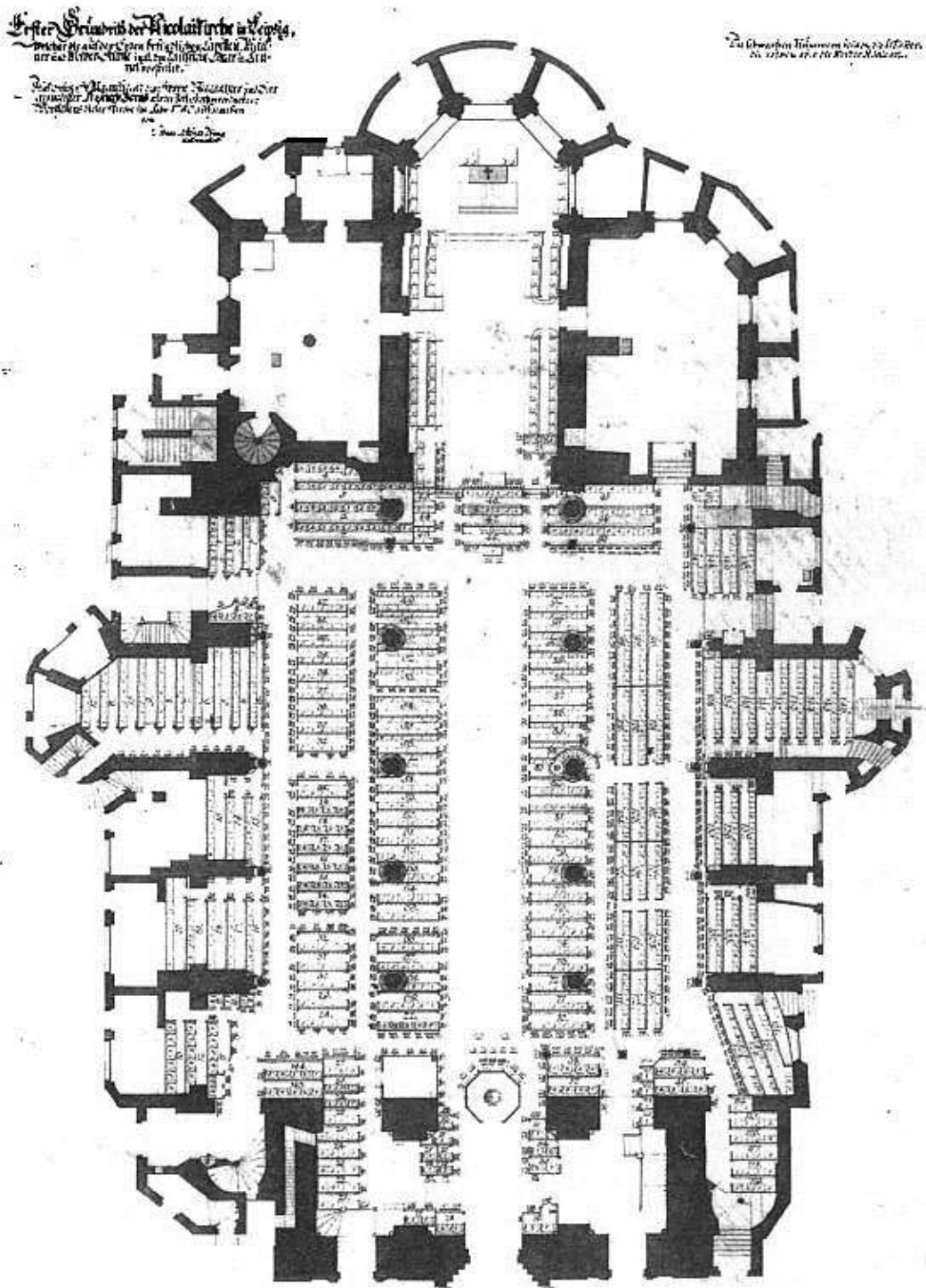


Fig. 3. Seating plan of the Nikolaikirche (1750), including Bänklein.
 Stadtarchiv Leipzig, nr. RRA 246.

The Nikolaikirche was about 30 meters long, and thus shorter than the Thomaskirche, but could hold at least as many people. The church has been described as one of the most beautiful and luminous churches in Germany, partly due to its symmetrical construction with two galleries painted in light colours. This church also had a Vorbau on the north side.

2. How was the *Musikchor* structured in this church?

We do not possess contemporary pictures of the *Musikchor* of the *Thomaskirche*, but we do have good descriptions. For the situation in the *Nikolaikirche* it is exactly the other way round: there are only few descriptions, but there are pictures. A coloured engraving by Benjamin Schwarz from 1785 immediately gives a good impression (Fig. 4). In the middle, below, is the entrance with the baptismal font; on the first gallery are seats for dignitaries and on the second gallery, the *Schülerchor*. To the left of the *Schülerchor* (*Schoolboys' choir*) you can see the organ, to the right the elector's seat. ^A There are four notable differences from the *Musikchor* in the *Thomaskirche* in Bach's time:

1. The musicians were not seated in front of the organ, but next to it; the organ was meters away from the *Schülerchor*.
2. There were no galleries for the instrumentalists; like the singers, they were seated in the *Schülerchor*.
3. The main part of the *Schülerchor* was not in the nave, but in the west portal building, under the middle big tower.
4. The *Schülerchor* had a vaulted ceiling, which reverberated the sound into the church.



Fig. 4. Interior of the *Nikolaikirche*, west wall with organ, *Schülerchor*, organ and *Fürstenstuhl*. Carl Benjamin Schwarz, watercolour, 1785. Stadtarchiv Leipzig, nr. RRA (F) nr. 314.

A ground plan of the upper gallery, made by the *Ratsmaurermeister* (mason master of the council) Johann Gottfried Döring in 1750, clarifies a number of issues (Fig. 5).

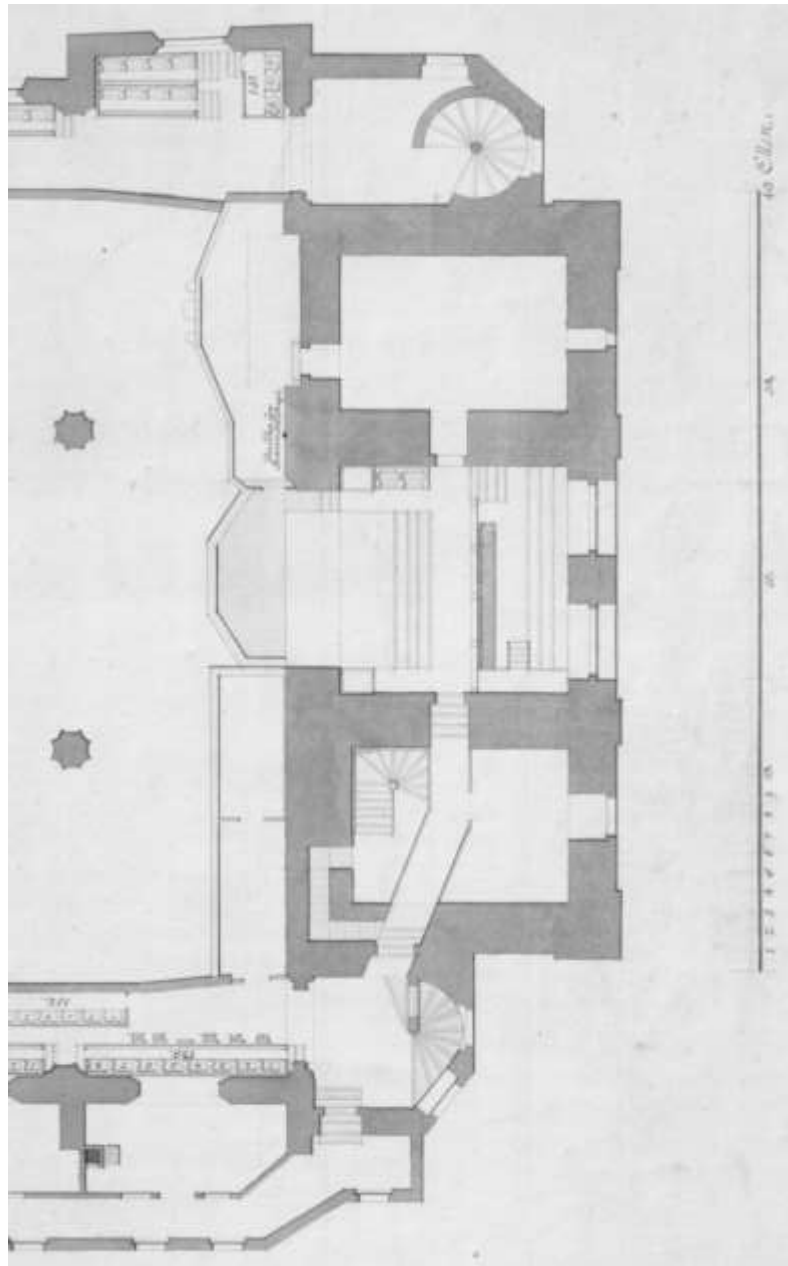


Fig. 5. West portal building at the height of the upper gallery.

Drawing by Johann Gottfried Döring, 1750, detail.

Stadtarchiv Leipzig, Signatur RRA (F) Nr. 248.

On the left, from top to bottom, the organ gallery, the *Schülerchor* and the Elector's seat are drawn. The entrance to the *Schülerchor*, seen from the church, was in the right corner (on the drawing below), and led through the portal building, under the towers and past the *Fürstentuhl*. There was also access from the portal building itself via a spiral staircase. Between the organ gallery and the *Schülerchor* was a narrow passageway. Behind the *Schülerchor* there was apparently a wall, behind which there was a large cupboard for storing instruments, as well as a heated room where students could warm themselves during breaks in

winter when it was unbearably cold.¹¹ At the back of the *Schülerchor*, a few lines suggest the steps built in 1663, which were called *Tritte* (steps) for the *Stadtpeiffer* (town wind players) in various Council documents.¹² **In 1669, raised seats (*Tritte*) with desks were manufactured for the instrumentalists, as evidenced by a 1756 note by Vogel.¹³**

In 1724, on the occasion of the first performance of the *Johannes-Passion*, the *Schülerchor* was modified to provide more space for the required number of performers.¹⁴ How this was achieved is unknown; possibly it meant that more steps and music stands had to be built, or that the back wall could be moved to the back. In 1739/1740 another alteration to the *Schülerchor* took place: the *Zimmermeister* (carpenter) reported that he had built a new stage for the *Music*.¹⁵ This too is a somewhat obscure note. Whether it is a matter of replacement or modification is unclear. Schering suggests that it might concern the stand for the harpsichord.

On the drawing the contours of the organ are vaguely visible; of the *Rückpositiv* only the parts that protrude in front of the balustrade are schematically indicated with circles; for an illustration of the organ see another drawing by Schwarz (*Fig. 2* in Chapter XVIII).

Schering converted the ells in Döring's sketch to meters (1 ell = 56,6 cm), and based on this he made a drawing of the *Musikchor*, but his drawing deviates so much from Döring's plan that reproduction here does not seem useful.¹⁴

The *Musikchor* was changed beyond recognition during the construction of later organs: the room was converted to house part of the organ and bellows.¹⁵

The Musikchor of the Nikolaikirche was also located on the west wall, but had a different structure compared to the Thomaskirche. Singers and instrumentalists were positioned centrally in a recess in the tower on the second gallery. They had limited space there. The singers were standing on the balustrade again, the instrumentalists behind it; they did not have their own galleries. A vaulted ceiling reverberated the sound into the church. The organ was also located on the west wall, but much further southwards.

3. How were the acoustics in the Nikolaikirche?

The furnishing of the *Nikolaikirche* was - as far as can be ascertained - largely comparable to that of the *Thomaskirche*. If so,, it can be stated that the effects on acoustics mentioned in § II. 3 are equally applicable to the *Nikolaikirche*. In addition, one can point out three differences with the *Thomaskirche*:¹⁶

1. The church was shorter and wider, causing some 25% smaller volume. Assuming that the reverberation was similar, the sound was slightly louder. Incidentally, the square shape of the church had little influence on the acoustics.

¹¹ Arnold Schering, *Johann Sebastian Bach's Leipziger Kirchenmusik*, Leipzig 1936, p. 149, n. 3; Johann Kuhnau, *An die Hochlöbliche Universität zu Leipzig unterdienstliches Memorial*, 1717, in Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, Zweiter Band, Leipzig 21916, p. 864.

¹² Schering 1936, p. 148.

¹³ Church accounts 1739/40, see Schering 1936, p. 149; Dokumente GLT VIII/C 80, p. 95.

¹⁴ Schering 1936, p. 148. See also § V.2.

¹⁵ **Tour of the tower rooms led by the sexton of the Nikolaikirche on 19 September 2022.**

¹⁶ Based on information from acoustician Martijn Vercammen (5 November 2015).

2. The singers were not on the first but on the second floor. The greater the distance between sound source and listener, the less direct the sound. This is reinforced by the greater 'angle' the sound must make to reach the ground floor. The greater this angle, the greater the shielding, especially in the treble range. However, that effect will probably not have been so strong because this second floor was relatively low.
3. In the *Nikolaikirche* the singers were standing on the balcony of the *Schülerchor* just in front of the west wall, and the instrumentalists behind it, in a niche with a vaulted ceiling. Fig. 4 shows that the walls and the ceiling in the *Schülerchor* were probably plastered. Consequently, the rather large recess in which the instrumentalists sat had hard plastered walls, which reflected sound relatively well. The surfaces behind, to the side and above the instrumentalists provided early reflections that gave a clear but also well-mixed sound in the church.¹⁷ A possible disadvantage was that there were different conditions for singers and instrumentalists, perhaps to the advantage of the instrumentalists - exactly what one would prefer not to happen.

The acoustics of the Nikolaikirche probably differed little from those of the Thomaskirche. However, the position of the musicians in a niche in the tower with a small balcony in the church may have had a great influence on the sound. On the one hand, it was less direct, but on the other hand, it was clearly audible because of the reflection from a vaulted ceiling.

Rens Bijma, version 8 November 2022.

With thanks to Albert Clement, Jos van Veldhoven and Martijn Vercammen.

^A Vogel 1710, p. 96f.

An der Abend Wand ist zu rechten Seiten der oberen Emporkirchen gleich / der **Fürsten Stuhl** / welcher/ wie er heute zu Tage stehet/ Anno 1663. bey Renovirung der Kirchen [...] erbauet worden [...].

Hinter dem Fürsten Stuhl gehet man auf dem **Schüler-Chor** / welcher An. 1663. weiter heraus gerücket / mit einem neuen Geländer / so schwartz angestrichen und vergüldet ist / versehen worden. Under demselben sind derer damals lebenden Herrn Bürgermeister Bildnüsse / und zwischen denenselben ist eine mit güldenen Buchstaben gefertigte Inscription [...] zu sehen. Under diesem Chor ist eine **Empor-Kirche**, darauff die Herren Assessores der Churfürstl. Sächs. Schöppenstuls in der ersten Reyhe have their Stüle. [Neben dem Schüler-Chor stehet an der Abendwand das grosse und herrliche **Orgelwerck** / welches schöne gemahlet / mit Bildern und Schnitzwerck geziehret ist / [...]

^B Johann Jacob Vogel, *Leipzigerisches Geschichts-Buch Oder ANNALES [...]*, Leipzig 1756, p. 736f.

(borrowed from Andreas Glöckner, '„zu besser Bequemlichkeit der Music“, Über einige neue Quellen zur Leipziger Kirchenmusik', *BJ* 99, 2013, p. 335-348, on p. 340).

Den 24. May [1669] wurden in der Niclas-Kirchen auffm Schüler-Chor die erhöhten Pulte und erhabenen Tritte vor die Stadt-Pfeiffer und Kunst-Geiger aufgesetzt.

¹⁷ That this can work well is known from the Cathedral in Klagenfurt, although there the niche is situated against the ceiling.

^c Johann Zacharias Trefurth, council actuary, 'Akten die Kirchenmusik [...] betr.', 3 April 1724, *BD II*, no. 179, p. 139f.; Dokument GLT VIII/C 12; *Ibid.* VIII/C 13, p. 46 en 15, p. 49.

Wurde vermeldet, wie bey EE. Hochweisen Rathe der Schluß gefaßet worden, daß die *Passions Music* des CharFreytags in denen Kirchen zu *St. Nicolai* und *St. Thomae* wechselweise gehalten worden; [...] daß vor diesesmahl mehrerwehnte *Passions Music* in den Kirchen zu *St. Nicolai* gehalten werden möchte; [...]

Hic:

Er wollte solchem nachkommen, erinnert aber dabey, daß [...] kein Raum allda verhanden [...], bittet allenfalls ihme auf den Chor noch einige Gelegenheit, damit er die bey der *Music* zu brauchende Personen wohl *logiren* konte [...].

Senatus:

Es sollte der Herr *Cantor* auf EE. Hochweisen Raths Kosten [...] die Gelegenheit aufn Chor, so gut es sich thun liese, mit Zuziehung des Obervoigts machen [...]