

An Englishman in Thomann

Thoughts on a first visit to Thomann, December 2010.

The session wasn't going well. I thumped 'stop' on the computer, sighed, and looked at the clock on the studio wall. Ten o'clock at night. I'd been working in the studio, all day, on my own, and now I was tired, frustrated, uncertain about what I was doing and *desperate* for a beer. I couldn't get the words right and in any case I was singing out of tune. My throat had just started to hurt too. I flopped down into a chair. "I don't have to do this," I thought to myself. "I can just give up. I can just stop. It's only a frivolous Christmas song competition. No one will ever know that I tried to do this and then quit, and in any case, it doesn't matter. No one's going to die if I don't finish this song. I can just pack it in and go to the pub." The notion seemed deliciously tempting. But then I thought of Ben. Ben is a fantastically talented guitarist, and he'd very kindly agreed to come over the following day and play his guitar for me on my tune. I didn't want to appear a quitter in front of Ben. I didn't want to phone him and say, "Forget it Ben. I've packed it in. I'm not going to enter the competition. I never win stuff anyway, so it'll just be a waste of time. But thanks for your offer." No, that wasn't a very edifying thing to have to do.

"Come on," I said to myself. "Let's get this thing finished." I hauled myself up out of the chair, cleared my throat and put the headphones on. I stood at the microphone and hit 'record' on the computer keyboard...

Ben and I got the recording finished the following day. I mixed the song, turned it into an MP3 and sent it via email to Thomann. I'm not accustomed to entering competitions, much less winning them, so, in the words of that great British comedy institution "Viz", *imagine my surprise* when I got the phone call. A girl called Emily, the Thomann International Team manager, called me a few days later to tell me I'd won. Yes, I had *won* the 2010 Thomann International Christmas Song Competition!

My prize was to be an all-expenses-paid trip to Thomann, with the intention of looking round the shop and warehouse, attending the recording sessions for the staff of the Thomann International team to record the vocals on my song and €500 to spend in the shop! Fantastic! I thanked Emily profusely and hung up the phone, then eagerly began calling and texting my family and friends to let them know my news.

My trip to Thomann coincided with the first major snowfall of the winter in the Bavarian part of Germany, so it was after a couple of hours' delay at Dusseldorf airport that my connecting flight touched down at Nuremberg. Emily was waiting for me in the arrivals hall, bearing a laminated sign with my name - spelt correctly for once! - on it. We exchanged greetings and then shortly afterwards were in Emily's car, speeding through the snow-covered German countryside on our way to Thomann.

After about half an hour we swung into the beautiful Bavarian town of Bamberg where my hotel was situated, and Emily gave me an hour to check in and get showered before coming back to pick me up for my inaugural Thomann experience.

The first thing that struck me as remarkable about Thomann is where it is situated. It is in a small village surrounded by fields, and it would appear that the only way to it is by car or on foot - there didn't appear to be a train station or bus stop anywhere nearby. The car park is beside the main warehouse building, which on the day I arrived looked like a cross between an aircraft hangar and a huge heap of snow. It was big,

man. I mean *big*. And the warehouse is by no means the only building that Thomann occupies in that small German village called Treppendorf.

I was shown first into the main open-plan office area and introduced to a few members of staff. Most of the staff were sat at computers, talking into their headsets in an impressive variety of different languages, and various different national flags adorned certain walls and pillars around the office, no doubt delineating the lingual or geographic areas that the staff were dealing with. And the second thing that struck me was how cheery and good-natured everyone appeared to be - there was obviously great camaraderie among the staff, and a certain infectious enthusiasm for what they do. I really began to feel I was in the middle of something very important. Emily furnished me with a coffee, and sat me down at a desk to browse the latest issue of "Hot Deals" which featured my name in print (ah! At last!) while she assembled the relevant members of staff for the recording session in the nearby studio.

Staff assembled and woolly hats donned, we trudged through the snowy road up to Stefan's studio. Stefan Krug is quite frankly one of the most (there's no other word for it) *jolly* people I have ever met. He is always exuberant and good humoured, and his studio is well-appointed, very well equipped, and above all, *warm*! The staff formed themselves into a group and gathered round the microphone (a Neumann, for any curious geeks like me out there!) to sing their hearts out. A few takes later we were done. I sat for a while talking to Stefan about highly technical things ("Stefan... what does *this* button do?") and then Emily bundled me back into the car to go back to Bamberg for the evening. We sampled some of the excellent local beers at a charming German pub, munched our way through a delightful pizza at a local restaurant, then Emily dropped me back at the hotel to prepare myself for the following day's Thomannerie.

An important thing to remember about Thomann is that it is truly international. They ship their goods all over the world, and as well as this necessitating fantastic and diverse linguistic skills, it also means that Thomann needs to carry *stock*. Lots and lots of it.

The following morning, as Emily showed me into the huge main Thomann warehouse, I began to realise the sheer scale of this operation. The warehouse staff whizzed around on scooters in amongst the seemingly endless racks of boxes, cases, crates and cartons, and forklift trucks busily shuffled around depositing or collecting pallets of stuff. Emily cheerily greeted various staff members as they passed (does she know *everyone* in this company?) and as she strolled confidently through the warehouse, began explaining to me the system of selecting and packing up the orders from customers. She indicated left and right with her hands as we walked past the huge shelves, telling me how things happen once an order comes in, and I gazed around in somewhat amazed fascination, nodding in benign agreement from time to time as if I somehow understood. The system was too arcane for me to comfortably remember, but suffice it to say it was accurate, speedy and very impressive. Apparently it can be as little as twenty minutes before an incoming order is despatched. As small crates trundled by on waist-height conveyor belts, we climbed some metal stairs inside the building for her to show me the automated stock selecting system.

I stood at the top of the stairs on the metal gantry, and gazed in awe at the sight ahead of me. Enormous corridors of shelves the height of houses disappeared into the distance, receding into a vanishing point too far away to discern. Huge robots with mechanical arms slid along the spaces between the shelves, selecting precise locations and removing individual items of stock. In the subdued lighting it was something reminiscent of "Monsters Inc". Warehouses like this do not only exist in Hollywood CGI films - at least one is real and here in Thomann. I watched in amazement for a few moments, and then, thoughts running away with me, I asked Emily somewhat ghoulishly how many injuries there'd been in the warehouse since the

introduction of this automated stock system. She looked at me in a rather puzzled way. "How do you mean...?" she asked.

"Well," I said, gesturing in the direction of a large robot as it hurtled towards us at alarming speed, before stopping suddenly and selecting a guitar lead from a shelf, "you wouldn't want to get in the way of one of those things, would you?"

"Well, no," she said, "but then human beings aren't allowed down there. It's an *entirely* automated system. Of course we wouldn't let people down there... *far* too dangerous!"

This made a very real degree of sense to me, and I spared a grateful thought for the fact that I was high up on a metal walkway - well out of the reach of one of those large, heavy, and relentlessly obedient androids.

We walked further along the walkway until we surveyed the packing area beneath us. Looking down on it from above, it appeared like an Alpine mountain ridge with river valleys cascading off to the sides. Items of customer orders were briskly sliding along the top of the mountain ridge, before jets of compressed air nudged them down the appropriate channel and into their correct packing cartons. Members of staff, who seemed surprisingly enthusiastic about what they were doing, filled any empty spaces in the box with plastic air pillows before sealing up the boxes and sending them off to the loading bay, where a constant stream of DHL lorries were reversing in and driving out.

Now, you may be wondering why all this matters. Why was I being shown all this? Who in the world would be interested in a warehouse?

Well, I can tell you, it was a profound experience. It wasn't necessarily the packing system, or the robots which selected the items, or even just the sheer size of the operation, impressive though those things were. Had Emily been showing me a similar operation for building materials or car parts, I'd have probably been stifling yawns and marvelling at the utter dreariness of the whole thing. But this wasn't dreary. This was amazing. The thing I found hard to believe was that this whole operation was geared up for *music*. It was musical instruments they were sorting and shipping. Not bags of sand or lengths of guttering pipe. It was guitars, keyboards, trumpets, drums, leads, music software and so on - things very dear to me and very close to my heart. It was intriguing and compelling. And it was *relentless*. For the entire time I was in there, the busy, bustling operation rolled continuously. Orders were selected, packed and loaded onto lorries ceaselessly, and I was left contemplating the incalculable number of people who are out there in the world making music. There must be *millions* of them!

Emily led me out of the warehouse into the snowy Treppendorf street. Treppendorf is a very quiet, very small village, and it seems a bit incongruous for it to accommodate the largest music retail operation in Europe. In fact, the only other retail outlet I could spot in the village was a small pizza restaurant just opposite the main entrance to the Thomann music shop. Emily and I walked into the restaurant, stamping the snow off our boots as we entered.

Inside the small, warm, (and deliciously aromatic) restaurant a few Thomann employees sat at tables chatting and tucking into pasta and pizzas. We joined a couple of them at their table and Emily introduced me to more of her friends and colleagues. We spoke about my trip, my impressions of the Thomann organisation so far, and about the boss of the whole thing, Hans Thomann himself. The staff of Thomann spoke about him in glowing terms, with a certain degree of reverence and fondness. They told me he was a down-to earth guy, easy to speak to and who cared a lot about the welfare of his employees, and who had a lifelong passion for music. I was to find out for myself soon enough...

Anyway, one pizza later and Emily and I were back out in the snow, walking towards the Thomann music shop. Thomann occupies several buildings in Treppendorf - the warehousing operation takes up at least two if I remember rightly, and there is the office building, the loading and delivery area, and of course, the shop. Emily introduced me to Jonas who was to be my guide around the shop while Emily went back to her office for the afternoon, and I was to meet up with her later. We were going to return to the studio for more recording of my song in a couple of hours' time.

A couple of hours.

A couple of hours?

I can tell you now, a couple of hours is nowhere near enough time to take in the Thomann shop. A couple of *days* would be more appropriate. If you ever intend to go to the Thomann shop, plan *nothing else* for the day you are there. Your time will be entirely, speedily and deliciously swallowed up by this stunning, amazing place.

Jonas is one of the most cheery, charming people it has ever been my good fortune to meet. He has an engaging manner and sense of humour, and a real enthusiasm for music, and he was my perfect guide for my tour of the Thomann shop.

The shop is beautifully modern and stylish, its polished wooden floors and large windows giving the whole place a refreshing and airy aspect, while the pictures on the wall and the backlit cabinets remind you in no uncertain terms that you're here because you love music. It gave me the impression of being the sort of shop that I'd love to be in but couldn't afford to buy from - rather like the BMW dealers you see beside the Park Lane hotels in London. But hey - this is Thomann. Here you get the style *without* the associated price tag!

We started in the PA department, which gave me the first real notion of what the Thomann shop is about. It's not really a shop in the traditional sense - it's a showroom. You can try out and do comparative tests on just about everything they sell. It's a music shop where they actually *want* you to have a go on things! For example, Jonas showed me the microphone testing suite, which is a small room within the PA department. In here a row of short mic stands protrudes from a shelf all the way along one wall, and each stand holds one mic with a blue button beside it. You select the mic you wish to audition by pressing the blue button, then saying or singing something into it. Then of course you can audition another mic and make comparisons. Now I could see immediately that this would be *really* helpful. Jonas thrust a mic into my hand.

"Try that," he said.

"Why? What is it?" I asked.

"It's just a well-known vocal mic," he said. I looked at the mic in my hand and instantly recognised it. It was indeed a very famous, very well-known and popular microphone, costing about 120 Euros. I dutifully took the mic and said the obligatory "check one two." into it. It seemed fine. Then Jonas selected another mic and asked me to compare.

"OK, what's this one?" I asked.

"It's a Thomann's own brand vocal mic," he said. "The MB85. It costs twenty five Euros"

"That's pretty cheap," I said, raising the mic to my mouth. "Check one... *bloody hell!*" I said into the mic, in utter astonishment. I gazed at Jonas, my mouth open in gormless disbelief. The sound quality was easily as good as, if not better than, the previous mic I'd tested. Jonas stood there smiling. "Good, isn't it?" he said.

And this brought home to me another notion about Thomann. Their own-brand stuff - it may be cheap, but it sure isn't rubbish. Far from it. Don't let the fantastically competitive prices of Thomann's own-brand things put you off - this is really good stuff.

We walked into the loudspeaker-testing suite. Again, the speakers are arrayed in front of you, and through an ingenious system of switches you can audition the various different ones by playing a CD or talking or singing into a mic, and selecting which speakers you want to listen to. Jonas and I had great fun testing out all the different sizes of cabinet, playing the CD of the acoustic version of "Hotel California" through them. It was fascinating. I could have spent hours there, testing and comparing speakers, reverb units, transient designers and mixers, mixers, mixers (hundreds of them), but time was rolling on and there was the entire remainder of the shop to get round. On we went...

The shop is on several floors, each floor having one or two sections, and each section devoted to one specific type of instrument or musical hardware, such as drums, guitars, pianos, recording etc. A specifically beautiful department is the brass department - understandably so, as Herr Thomann senior, who started the whole company back in the 1950s, was a brass instrument technician and a trumpet player. In the brass department, there were rows and rows of beautifully arranged trumpets and trombones, glittering in the winter sunshine which was now streaming through the windows, lighting up the whole room with a seeming reverence for music. It was wonderfully appropriate. I perused the brass instruments and wished I could play them, and I'm sure I'd have been permitted to, but realistically I knew I couldn't and I'd only end up embarrassing myself. The last time I tried to play a brass instrument I sounded like a cross between a chainsaw and a cow, so I contented myself to admire these beautiful instruments from a discreet distance. And then I noticed the tuba. A beautiful brass instrument, lovingly crafted, stood shining before me, impressive in its size and design. Engraved in elegant writing on the side of the tuba was the word "Thomann". I asked Jonas, "Is that an own-brand tuba?" He told me it was. I was amazed. I mean, come on, what company sells an own-brand *tuba*? It could only be a company that really likes music. See? I told you Thomann's own-brand stuff was good, didn't I?

Jonas led me out of the brass department. Did I wish to go and view the drums department? Jonas, honestly... is the Pope a Catholic? I am a *drummer!* I *play the drums!* Of course I wanted to go and see the drums department! We walked in...

It was like a forest. Drum kits in all sizes and colours sprouted from every available piece of floor space or riser. Cymbals hung like leaves from stands and displays. Congas and djembes grew like mushrooms inbetween. It was a joyous cacophony of sights and sounds - budget kits nestled alongside gleaming Sonor jewels; display cases housed work of art snare drums, and everywhere were percussion instruments just begging to be played.

"You told me you were thinking of buying a snare drum...?" Jonas said. This was true. I had been thinking of what I might spend my €500 prize money on, and a new snare drum was a very attractive proposition. Jonas introduced me to Torsten, the head of the drums department. He led Jonas and me to a glass-fronted cabinet which housed a beautiful Yamaha Tour Custom snare drum. We removed the drum from the cabinet and placed it on a nearby drum kit, and I happily rolled and flammed away on it for a couple of minutes. It certainly sounded nice. Then Torsten said to us, "Hang on a minute. Have you tried this one?" He produced a Thomann own-brand snare drum, costing considerably less than the one I'd just been playing. I dutifully placed it on the kit and put it through its audition. I looked up at Jonas and Torsten in surprise. This snare drum was *not bad at all!* It produced a lovely sound, was responsive and comfortable to play (and for all you non-drummers out there, please remember that there is more than one way to strike a snare drum!) and more than held its own against its more expensive competitor. Jonas looked at me.

"Quite good, isn't it?" I asked.

"Very nice," he said. "In fact, my band has a session in the studio coming up, and we were thinking of a new snare drum sound for the recording. Think I'll buy that drum..."

Well, I suppose there is something more than pure irony in this - a customer managing to sell an item to a member of staff! But at least it means Thomann staff have faith in the products they sell.

Jonas led me further into the shop. We viewed the sheet music department (which also, incidentally, housed a splendid array of Thomann T-shirts), the orchestral percussion department (my God those things look LOUD!), the DJ department (a world apart from me, I must admit, but hugely impressive pieces of hardware nonetheless), the saxophones and woodwind (beautiful and glittery, just like the brass department), the orchestral strings...

I realise I'm moving on apace here. I'm skimming over much of the detail of all these magnificent departments with their splendid collections of instruments, all exquisitely laid out and tended to by experts. But the shop is so large, and all departments *without exception* are so beautiful and impressive, that to describe every aspect of every department would be an imposing and very lengthy task. Suffice it to say that every single department engendered feelings of utter delight in me. Each department confirmed to me, stronger and stronger, that Thomann, as both an organisation and a concept, *loves* music. Believe me, they really, really do.

As I stopped to draw breath and contemplate all the amazing things I'd seen and friendly people I'd spoken to, Jonas asked me where I'd like to go next. "There's *more*?" I asked him. Oh yes, there was more. He led me into the department which made my heart skip beats - the studio department. It seems almost preposterous to think that things could get any better for me, but the thing is, the studio department really does talk my language. I've been running a recording studio for more than twenty years now, and if there's one thing that really heightens my senses, it's studio gear. And Thomann, as you'd by now be expecting, has it in spades.

I was introduced to Martin, the manager of the studio division, and commenced like a kid in a sweetshop my tour of his department. It is a beautifully appointed series of showrooms, with polished wooden floors and elegant lighting. It initially gives the air of a place you can't afford - style and sheer class - but then a quick look at the price tags on the gear confirms otherwise; as in all Thomann departments the prices are extraordinarily competitive. Martin and I discussed all manner of studio equipment and techniques at length (he even managed to explain to me what "Ableton Live" does!) as I wandered dreamily around looking at beautiful hardware and classy computer screens. Arcane looking keyboards invited me to play and twiddle, and patchbays festooned with wires added a colourful wallpaper to the view. The place was amazing. Martin led me into a series of different rooms, each one teeming with racks of divinely glitzy equipment available to audition - or simply gawp at. One of the rooms was laid out like a beautiful professional studio, complete with a huge Apple Mac cinema-style screen and a sophisticated tactile control surface. Another room featured an impressive array of studio monitors, with a similar auditioning process to the one in the PA department whereby you can play your CD, and via a series of switches choose which speakers you wish to listen to; in doing so you can make direct comparisons between different brands and models of studio monitors. Brilliant!

In the same room, opposite the studio monitors, nestled the huge array of large-diaphragm studio microphones arranged in a crescent. They beckoned like ice-creams on a summer's day. In front of each was a blue button, and just like in the PA department, you can choose to listen to any mic in the array by simply pressing the button in front of it and singing away. The Thomann own-brand mics sat comfortably alongside the Neumanns and AKGs. I just didn't dare audition the Thomann ones - a few years ago I'd spent the best part of €1500 on a Neumann and emphatically did *not* want to regret that decision. But just staring at those beautiful mics, arranged so tastefully, was a worthwhile experience in itself. All the manufacturers

owe a debt of gratitude to Thomann for presenting their products in such an attractive way. I'd have bought the lot.

We wandered back through the main part of the studio showroom, still discussing studio equipment and techniques - Martin really does know his stuff. One of the most disarming and engaging things about Martin - and presumably all the staff in the studio department - is the lack of *prejudice*. Although it turns out he and I work in the recording environment in largely the same way (recording entire songs using real instruments like guitars and drums), he has no wish to look down on other studio operating methods. As we looked at and discussed all the various software and hardware used for phrase and loop sampling, which was (as ever) beautifully laid out and impressive looking, I waited for him to confide in me that actually it was all a bit naff, and it was just for the kids and the rappers (who didn't understand proper music anyway) and Thomann only sold it because they had to. But no. Not even a hint of it. Martin just freely acknowledged that it was simply "another way of making music" and was no better or worse than any other way of recording. After more discussion about what this stuff actually did and how it needed to be worked, I had to admit to myself that I certainly couldn't really operate it effectively, and I'd definitely be no expert when it came to making music of such a nature. So after a brief moment of mental self-discipline, I looked at the hardware with fresh eyes and acknowledged that it too was excellent - which indeed it was.

And then, as if right on cue, out of the corner of my eye I spotted something to remind me even further that Thomann has no musical prejudice. There in the middle of the floor stood a beautiful Hammond Organ - a B3 replica, complete with a real Leslie speaker.

"Oh wow, Martin!" I said. "Can I have a go on that?"

"Sure," he said, powering the thing up and twisting the volume control. "You play organ?" I looked at him a bit sheepishly.

"Well, I do today," I said with a shrug. And then the next five minutes were spent with me happily embarrassing myself as I tried to imitate Joey de Francesco on the Hammond. It was probably woeful, but I was having such a great time flicking switches and twiddling knobs while I glissed like Jon Lord (well, perhaps not *quite* like Jon Lord) and growled like Jimmy Smith. The Leslie spun like a helicopter while I pulled and pushed at the drawbars, realising as I went that my left hand chord playing perhaps isn't quite all it should be. Never mind. I love the Hammond organ, and I was rapidly falling in love with this particular one.

Jonas re-appeared at Martin's shoulder. "Hey, Gordon! You play keyboards too?" he said.

"Well, after a fashion," I replied, as I tried to scream a dominant ninth on the Hammond.

"Come with me..." he said. "You might like this."

I got up from the Hammond and thanked Martin profusely for all his time and attention, and reluctantly said goodbye to my Aladdin's Cave. I dutifully followed Jonas out of the studio department and down the stairs.

He pushed open a glass door. "Pianos..." he said, as he casually walked in.

"Jeez!" I breathed in response. "Look at all this stuff!"

There were pianos of all descriptions arranged in neat rows, almost as far as the eye could see. The sheen of their deep black French polish was glittering in the sunlight, and each one I walked past was just pleading with me to play it.

"My God, Jonas. This is incredible!" I said. "I thought all the pianos were up in the studio department."

"No, they were the *stage* and *studio* pianos," he said. "Here we have the real things."

I sat down at a Yamaha grand and gingerly strummed a G minor. The sound was beautiful. I was truly stunned at the quantity and variety of pianos that were there, and realised that this was a *perfect* place

to come for anyone contemplating the purchase of a new piano. You could audition and compare all the different makes and models, and find out which sounds and feels you prefer, and then make your decision accordingly.

I moved to another piano and with ill-deserved confidence fingered a blues scale. The sound was different - warmer, softer and more mellow than the Yamaha. The purpose and value of this piano showroom became immediately clear to me. As well as amusing myself for potentially hours in here, I could also *learn* something. Something about pianos - why certain players prefer certain makes, and how, for example, one piano might suit a jazz player and another might suit a concert pianist.

Jonas and I strolled down the aisles between the myriad pianos like vintners inspecting grapes. There were acoustic pianos, electronic pianos, grand pianos, baby grands, uprights... something caught my eye. A white upright piano demanded my attention. "Just a sec, Jonas," I said. "What's this?" The piano looked fairly ordinary, but the fact that the wooden cabinet was white had drawn my gaze.

"Have a go..." he said as he walked round to the back of the instrument. The piano keyboard's lid was closed, but on opening it and trying to play a chord I was greeted with silence.

"Huh?" I said, confused. Jonas twirled a mains lead with a 220V plug on the end of it.

"Not plugged in," he said, smiling. I had been completely fooled. It was an electronic piano, housed in a genuine upright piano wooden housing, no doubt designed as a piece of home furniture. I laughed.

"Who makes this?" I asked, scanning the piano for a brand name.

"We do," said Jonas, and sure enough, as he spoke, I spotted the Thomann logo on the cabinet. As Sting would say, 'I hung my head'. "You guys think of everything," I said, with a resigned sigh.

As we walked past yet more pianos, towards the reception desk where Jonas introduced me to Oliver, the head of the piano department, I spotted a glass door just to one side. I could make out some other instruments inside, but couldn't quite ascertain what they were.

"I am allowed in there?" I asked.

"Sure," chorused Jonas and Oliver, and they led me into the small annexe of the piano department. Here I found what was unquestionably the most striking and profound experience of my entire Thomann visit. There in front of me, in all its hallowed glory, was a stunningly beautiful pipe organ.

"Oh my God!" I breathed, without a hint of irony. "Look at *this!*" I stared in wide-eyed wonderment at this amazing musical instrument. The organ console itself comprised a huge wooden cabinet about the size of a van, peppered with exquisite looking stop knobs, each illuminated with the name of the rank of pipes (I mistakenly assumed) it controlled - names like "flute", "diapason" and "posaune". The keyboards nestled dead centre of the edifice, and a concave, two-octave pedalboard sat beneath the wooden organ bench. Above the keyboards a rank of pipes of varying diameter ascended heavenward. It was utterly breathtaking.

"Can I play on it, please?" I asked, expecting to be told that this instrument was reserved for special visitors like perhaps the organist from Bamberg Cathedral.

"Sure," chorused my two hosts once again, somewhat to my surprise. I ascended onto the organ bench as if I were climbing aboard a ship, and sat nervously in front of the two keyboards. I looked up at the pipes above me, and almost felt like saying a prayer. The imposing nature of the instrument became seriously apparent as I realised my own diminutive size in comparison - you didn't so much play it as *drive* it. Some kind-hearted soul had left a copy of one of Bach's organ pieces on the music stand. *Thanks*. I pulled out a stop as my left foot stumbled on a B-flat on the pedalboard and I began to play the music. The sound was amazing - as if I had just entered the organ loft in St Paul's Cathedral or something - but my sight reading skills (especially of three-stave organ music) are not great. After a bar or two of faltering semiquavers and horrendous wrong notes on the pedals, I thought it best to pack it in.

I looked up at Jonas, who was smiling at me partly with admiration for trying, but mostly with utter mirth for producing those results, and said to him, "You want a go?"

"Ooh, no," he replied. "I couldn't play *that!*" As I shruggingly acknowledged his pretty wise reply, I noticed something which struck me as rather odd. There were *two* price tags on the organ. One, for about €10,000, was attached to the main console of the organ, and the other for about €5,000 was attached to the pipes above.

"Oliver," I said, "how come this? Why are there two price tags?"

"Well, you don't have to buy both," he said. "You can buy just the organ, or you can buy the organ *plus* the pipes."

"Huh? I don't understand. Why would you buy the organ without the pipes?" I asked, a bit bemused. "How in the world would it make any noise?"

"Oh, these pipes are just here for decoration," he said. They don't make any noise; there's no *air* flowing through them. Behind this rank of pipes there's a loudspeaker system which disperses the sound in all directions - just like a church organ which would have pipes all around the church. But you don't have to have the loudspeaker system if you don't want it. You can just have the internal speakers in the organ if you'd prefer."

"You mean this organ is a *synthesiser*?" I said, utterly astonished. "I haven't been playing those pipes?"

"No, you haven't," he said. "Those are the internal sounds of the onboard processor."

I was learning so fast my head was almost spinning. I had *no idea* that such instruments existed. This thing was beautiful - an unequivocal work of art - and yet it housed state-of-the-art audio generating hardware and software; it was rather like an internet server encased in an antique sideboard. Except that the organ cabinet wasn't an antique. It was a beautiful, modern piece of woodworking expertise; pale oak in colour and finished to an exquisite but not ostentatious degree. A beautiful and delightful example of the power of understatement. I felt truly humbled at the excellence of musical instrument manufacturers.

I sighed. There is so much about music I don't know, but today I'd learned just a little bit more. I got down from the organ bench, and Jonas and I walked around the rest of the annexe. There were about twenty other organs there - all impressive, but none quite as breathtaking as the one I'd just played. There were single, double and even triple keyboard organs, with one- or two-octave pedalboards and all manner of stop knobs with arcane numbers on them. Trying, but probably failing, to appear nonchalant, I played a few chords on a couple of them, and marvelled at their beauty and power. Astonishing. Absolutely astonishing.

Jonas's phone rang somewhat spikily. He held a brief phone conversation in German, which I didn't understand, and then turned and nodded to me.

"Emily?" I asked him.

"Yes. She's waiting by the main door for us," he replied as he stuffed his phone back into his pocket. My two hours was up. We said goodbye to Oliver and walked back to the entrance; Emily was waiting for us in the snowy porch.

"Good time?" she asked. I laughed.

"Where do you want me to start...?" I said. "This place is *stupendous!*"

"Glad you like it," she said. "Well, we've got to be in the studio for the rest of the recording in about an hour, so I thought maybe we could get a coffee and then wander over there." That suited me fine, so I shook Jonas by the hand and thanked him for his superb helpfulness and congeniality, and followed Emily out into the snow. I trotted behind her, casually re-living some of my profound Thomann experiences in my mind, when Emily suddenly turned to me with a look of abject alarm.

"*Guitars!*" she howled, looking at her watch in panic.

"What?" I said, a bit bemused.

"Guitars! You haven't seen our guitar department, have you?"

"Well, er... no I don't think I have," I said. "Do I need to?"

"Of *course* you need to see our guitar department!" she said. "It's our biggest and best department!"

She grabbed me by the hand and frogmarched me back into the main Thomann building, muttering something about how could she be so stupid forgetting to show me the guitars and such an idiot and what is the world coming to and so on, and a moment later she steered me into a cavernous, wood panelled hall the size of an indoor arena.

I stopped to gaze in awe. It was like a guitar theme park. Guitars hung like dewdrops from every available perch. They were arrayed along walls like shirts in a wardrobe; they were housed beautifully in glass cases; they rested on stands; they coated the entire interior - floor to ceiling - like wallpaper. Guitars left, right and centre, filling every inch of my vision. The place was huge; it was on two levels with a large wooden staircase connecting the lower and upper floors; the upper level appeared like a balcony looking down on me.

"This is Robin," said Emily, introducing me to one of the guitar department staff. Robin had an air of the rocker about him - I could tell he'd played more than a few gigs.

"Hello Gordon," said Robin. "What would you like to see?"

"Well, I guess you could show me some guitars..." I said, rather pathetically. This was all the cue Robin needed - he whisked Emily and me deep into the guitar department, and eagerly began showing me some of his favourite items of stock.

We viewed all manner of guitars - acoustic, electric, cheap, expensive, signature models, production line models, nylon-string models, steel-string models, small ones, large ones, funny-shaped ones... everything you could think of in the realm of guitars. I noticed some rather classy acoustic guitars nestling against some beautiful-looking mandolins in a glass cabinet. "These look nice, Robin," I said, indicating the guitars behind the glass.

"Have a go if you like," he replied, producing a key from his pocket. He unlocked the glass cabinet and reached down a sensational-looking Gibson acoustic guitar. I cautiously took it from him - I could tell this one was expensive and I didn't want to do anything silly with it.

"Er... how much does this one cost?" I asked, cradling it like an unexploded bomb.

"About four and a half thousand..." said Robin. Oh my God... four and a half *thousand*? Emily pulled up a bar stool for me to sit on, and I placed the guitar across my lap and strummed a G-chord.

I *melted*. The sound was *beautiful*. Deep, sonorous lows resonated through my body while shimmering highs glittered in my ears. I wanted this thing. It was wonderful. I strummed a few more chords and bitterly regretted the fact that I am an utterly useless guitarist. I sighed and handed the treasure back to Robin. He looked a bit confused.

"Don't you like it?" he asked.

"It's gorgeous," I said dejectedly. "I just wish I had a use for it..." Robin placed the guitar back in the glass cabinet.

"Oh I see. Well... fancy seeing some electrics?" he said.

"Yeah, brilliant," I replied, perking up a bit. Robin led us through some glass doors into a small room, which was festooned with yet more guitars. One blue one rested on a stand right in the middle of my line of vision.

"Hey Robin. That one doesn't look quite the ticket, does it?" I said, indicating the guitar. It was a Fender Telecaster, but it looked about fifty years old. The paintwork was bashed and chipped, there were scars and scratches all over it and the bridge saddles looked, well, *rusty*. "Could do with a lick of paint, that one," I said.

What do you mean?" Robin said.

"This guitar. Been run over by the band's van?" I asked flippantly. "I didn't realise Thomann dealt in second-hand goods."

"We don't," said Robin. "It's brand new."

"What?" I said in surprise. "I can't be. It's in a dreadful state."

"Oh no," he replied. "That's a beauty, that one. Brand new, straight from the factory. They get delivered to us looking like that. They play fantastically. And they cost two and a half grand." My eyes grew wide in astonishment. It seemed so incongruous - two and a half grand for something that looks like it's been dragged through a hedge? I exhaled deeply. There's obviously a lot about guitars I don't know.

I looked around the room at more guitars, and casually wondered who it is at the Fender factory who has the job of getting their guitars to look like that. And how do they do it? Do they take a brand new Telecaster off the production line and go at it with scouring pads? Or even a hammer? Food for thought, certainly...

I pointed out a very attractive Gibson Les Paul in the corner. "Glen Frey custom model," said Robin. "Really nice. Fancy a go?"

"Well, OK," I said. I wasn't utterly convinced that my guitar playing had improved much in the preceding three minutes, but I'd just figured out a way of restoring my dignity. I took the guitar and plugged its lead into a nearby amp, and ratcheted up the volume and the distortion.

'*KADUUUUNG...*' went the guitar as I played an E-chord, pinning Emily and Robin to the back wall. I may not be a great guitarist, but I know how to do *that*. I beamed contentedly at Emily, who was looking at me in utter bewilderment. "I like this one," I said.

"So I hear," she said. Robin, of course, was taking it all in his stride. He'd no doubt heard this sort of thing a million times before.

"Good guitar, isn't it?" said Robin, reaching to take the thing from me, rather like a responsible bartender might swipe a drunkard's last beer.

"No, no. Wait, Robin. I want to try something," I said. I'd heard this thing many times before, but somehow had never found the opportunity to do it. I wanted to try the "on-off" trick that David Bowie did at the end of "John, I'm Only Dancing". I turned down the volume control of one pickup on the guitar, and turned up the other. Robin was eyeing me cautiously - he could see what I was doing and must have guessed what was coming. He braced himself.

'*KADUUUUNG...*' went the guitar again. Emily winced. But as the chord rang on, I grabbed the pickup selector switch and pumped it up and down, jumping between the two pickups - one pickup at full volume and the other silent. "*MEEP, MEEP, MEEP...*" The sound pulsated out of the speaker in square waves. On, off, on, off, on off... it sounded great. Well, it sounded great to me, at any rate. I smiled enquiringly at Emily, seeking her approval. She cleared her throat and looked at her watch.

"Well, it must be just about time for us to go to the studio now," she said, putting on her coat...

It was pitch dark and snowing heavily as we walked up to Stefan's studio. An icy wind was whipping the snowflakes into my face, and the temperature must have been well below zero. I shivered as we walked, my cold feet playing short drum rolls in the snow with every step, and I wondered in dismay how, in the space of

twenty four hours, Stefan had managed to move his studio eight miles further away. Emily was wrapped up in what looked like deliciously warm woollen winter clothes. Her scarf and hat obscured almost every inch of skin on her face, and her thick coat and multi-coloured gloves were laughing at the snow. I must have looked a right misery in my flimsy jacket.

"You're a typical Englishman, aren't you?" she hollered as the wind whistled in my ears.

"A typical *what?*" I shouted back.

"Typical *Englishman*," she shouted. "Never come prepared for the weather."

"Well, I didn't know it would be like *this*, did I?" I protested, feeling more than a little sorry for myself.

"Yes you did," she said. "I told you in my last email that we'd had some snow."

"Yeah, *some* snow," I bellowed against the gale. "You didn't tell me Thomann had moved to the Arctic, did you? Are you nice and warm there?"

"Like toast," she said, smiling smugly. We arrived at the doorstep of Stefan's studio, and rang on the bell. "I told all the guys to meet us here," she said. "They must have arrived already. Listen..."

Against the wind we could just make out the faint strains of my song coming from inside. No one came to the door. I was so cold my skull hurt. "Can they hear the doorbell?" I asked.

"Obviously not," said Emily. "Let's try again." She pressed the doorbell. Still no one opened the door. My song carried on in the distance, as snowflakes stung my face like miniature bullets. I winced in the cold, and tried stamping my feet in a forlorn attempt to keep warm.

"Wait for the music to stop," I said, hunched and shivering. "They obviously can't hear us while it's playing." Emily obediently waited for a hiatus in the music and then pummelled the doorbell. There was a brief silence (save for the howling gale) as we anticipated the door swinging wide open, but the door remained firmly shut... then my song started up again.

"Oh, let us in *please!*" I wailed.

"Let's knock on the door," suggested Emily. We waited for the next pause in the music while I casually noticed that I could no longer feel my ears. As soon as we heard the song stop we thrashed on the door like boxers going for the knockout blow. After a few seconds the door swung wide open, and we were greeted by an ebullient Stefan.

"Hello," he chuckled as I stumbled ecstatically in to the warmth. "How long have you been there?"

"Thirty years," I said. Emily tutted. A second guy appeared in the hallway.

"Oh, this is Daniel," said Emily. "I've asked him to take some photos."

"Yes, hello," Daniel said. "Could you smile for the camera please? We need a photo of you for the website."

"What, *now?*" I asked despondently.

"If you wouldn't mind," he said as he pointed the camera directly at me.

"But I don't really think I'm ready for a photo just yet," I said, removing my jacket and shaking the snow from it.

"Oh, don't worry. It'll be fine," he said. "Go on, smile..." From the depths of my marrow-chilled soul, I somehow dredged up a fake smile which remained - almost literally - frozen on my face until the flash went off.

So... if anyone is wondering why my picture on the website appears as it does - with my face looking a little red and flushed and my expression looking a tiny bit pained... well you now know. It's not because I'd been hitting the Jagermeister. It's because I'd just stepped indoors from an Arctic blizzard. All I need to do these days is take one look at that picture and my bones begin to shudder with cold.

The session went well. Lots of cheery, festive Thomann people sang their hearts out while wearing daft Santa hats and fake reindeer horns. Stefan seemed pleased with the results, and promised to begin mixing the following day. He, Emily and another member of Thomann staff called Bianca chatted briefly at the end of the session, as I sat on a sofa mindlessly strumming a guitar, and soaking up the delectable warmth.

“Are you ready then?” Emily asked me a moment later.

“Sure,” I said. “What are we up to?”

“It’s glühwein time,” she said. “You can’t come to Germany at this time of year and not have some glühwein.”

A few minutes later, Emily, Bianca and I were in Emily’s car, driving gingerly through the snowy night into Bamberg town centre. The blizzard had eased a bit by now, and large, picturesque snowflakes were falling gently through the air. We parked in the main market square and walked through the brightly lit Bamberg streets to an outdoor glühwein stall. Cheerful bartenders dispensed ladlefuls of the liquid into large mugs, and the stall was festooned with tiny, glittering Christmas lights. A throng of people were laughing and chatting in the cold night air as they quaffed their glühwein, and Emily furnished the three of us with steaming hot mugs of the delicious drink. Somewhere in the distance someone was playing some Christmas music. We stood chatting in the street in amongst the other people, all of them wrapped up in woolly winter clothes, as the snowflakes drifted around us and we drank our drink. It was *beautiful*. It was just like a Christmas card; I don’t think I’ve ever felt so festive or so convivial, and it was the perfect scenario to get the Christmas season off to a good start.

We finished our drinks, then Emily and Bianca led me off into the Bamberg night. We wandered over some of the many bridges that criss-cross the rivers in Bamberg, viewing on our way the picturesque collection of riverside buildings known locally as “Little Venice”, and then clambered carefully up some snow-covered stone steps to the cathedral. In all its floodlight glory, especially with its snow-covered spires, it was a truly breathtaking sight. According to Emily, Orlando Bloom had just finished filming part of “The Three Musketeers” there.

We walked back down the stone steps and into a gorgeously warm tavern, where we commandeered a table and surveyed the list of local beers. Emily knew precisely which ones to recommend, so after several of her recommendations and some deep conversation about the world of music, we took a brisk, if not terribly straight, stroll back to my hotel. “What would you like to do tomorrow?” asked Emily as we arrived in the hotel reception. “It’ll be your last day here - we have to leave for the airport at three o’clock in the afternoon.”

“What are my choices?” I asked.

“Well, you’re scheduled to meet Hans Thomann at noon, but before that you could either spend some more time in the Thomann shop, or you could do some sightseeing around Bamberg.” I paused for thought. The small amounts of Bamberg I’d seen had been really lovely - amazing buildings and beautiful streets lined with attractive looking shops. I’d passed a delightful looking church which appeared well worth a visit, and the Christmas market could be very interesting indeed. I looked out of the hotel door at the well-lit Bamberg street with its fetching covering of snow. Hmmm... Bamberg was definitely a town which demanded some of my time and attention.

“I’ll go back to the Thomann shop, please...” I said.

I’d heard on the Thomann grapevine that Hans Thomann was in a particularly good mood that day. Apparently he’d just placed an order for some guitars - one million Euros’ worth - so presumably for him it wasn’t *quite* just another day at the office.

Emily escorted me into the Thomann administration building. It's a small office block, close to but separate from the main warehouse. It's very, very smart. Shiny marbled floors stretch the short distance from the entrance to the central staircase, whose gleaming chromed handrails guide you up to a landing where the heady aroma of fresh coffee wafts through the air. Beautiful works of not quite abstract art hang on the walls, depicting impressionistic guitars and trumpets. The place just exudes class.

We walked past the open door of a small office. Two guys sat inside at a table, peering into their laptops and talking animatedly in German. "Ralph," said Emily. "How are you doing?"

"Emily!" said one of the guys. "We're fine thank you. What brings you over here?"

"Gordon's come to meet Hans," she said. "Gordon, this is Ralph and Hamsi. These guys are in charge of our online activities. And guys, Gordon is the winner of our Christmas song competition." At this, Ralph's eyes lit up. He could obviously sense some online content hurtling towards the conversation.

"Great!" he said, enthusiastically. "We can interview you for the website..." I wasn't sure if this was a question or a statement of fact. It was said in such a way that I sensed it was the kind of offer you just can't - or had better not - refuse. I looked at Emily for guidance. She nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Er... yes of course you can," I replied, quickly trying to think of something worthwhile to say in the interview.

"See you later guys," said Emily as she led me out of the room and across to the coffee machine.

We sat in the meeting room, sipping our coffee and talking as we waited for Hans. I couldn't help but feel a little nervous. "This guy Hans," I said to Emily, "is he OK?" I was really unsure as to what to expect. It felt like I was waiting for a job interview.

"He's fine," she said. "You'll get on really well with him." I still wasn't convinced. And then the door opened - an aura entered the room, followed shortly after by Hans himself. Emily introduced me to him, and we shook hands before sitting down round a table and commencing our talk.

The Thomann staff who'd spoken to me about Hans Thomann were, of course, absolutely right. He is friendly, down-to-earth and very agreeable. But in addition to that, he has the aura. Running a huge company like that presumably can't be done without being able to achieve some sort of respect and attention - and Hans has the ability to get that without demanding it. He is a powerful person, and I think in a very subtle way, he knows it.

We spoke for what seemed like a very long time. Hans told me all sorts of detail about the company - it's bigger than I'd even imagined. Their turnover is in the hundreds of millions, their reach is absolutely worldwide, and their presence on the internet is huge. They have websites all over the place - music discussion forums, instrument review sites, gig lists... Hans fired up a large screen which was hanging on one wall of the room and guided us through some of them. If you are looking at a German language music site there's a good chance it'll be a Thomann one. It felt something of a privilege to be associated - even in the very small way that I was - with such a success story. You see, despite all this - all the huge amounts of money, the big buildings, the latest internet technology, the vast tonnage of stock and the millions of customers - Hans simply sat across the table from me pouring my coffee, telling me anecdotes and asking for advice on how to improve his drumming technique. Was it incongruous? Was it inappropriate? No... he still had the aura.

We finished our coffee and Hans rose to his feet. Emily and I did likewise. Hans shook me by the hand once again, and congratulated me on winning the competition. As he made to leave he turned and said, "Oh, and would you like to come back? I'd like to invite you back here for the Thomann Summer Music Festival. Emily will let you know the details." And with that, Hans left the room and presumably went back to

work. I hadn't answered him. I hadn't responded to his invitation. And then it occurred to me that I didn't need to. Both he and I knew that I'd be back.

The pizza restaurant was just as warm and aromatic as it had been the previous day. Emily and I sat at the table and placed our orders, and just as our drinks arrived Ralph and Hamsi burst through the door, accompanied by a stream of ice-cold air.

"Hello again," said Ralph as he placed his open notebook on the table and sat down. "So what do you think of Thomann then...?"

We spent the next hour chomping pizzas and talking enthusiastically about my experience. Ralph asked me all sorts of questions about my song, my history, my studio (and *boy* - does he know his technical stuff?) and my time at Thomann. He jotted down notes as I spoke and told me that all this was going up on the site - a timely reminder to remain diplomatic and professional, I suppose! But the truth was, I didn't have a single bad word to say about anyone. As my brief but tremendously edifying experience was drawing to a close, I took the opportunity to pay tribute to Emily and Martin and Jonas, to Stefan and Bianca, to Hans himself, of course, and indeed to all the Thomann staff who'd made me feel so welcome and taught me so much.

We finished our lunch and rose to leave. Ralph and Hamsi said goodbye and tumbled out of the restaurant into the snow. Emily looked at her watch. "Well, we have to leave at three" she said. "You've got about three quarters of an hour. Would you like to go back into the shop?" I nodded vigorously. "Which department would you like to re-visit?" she asked.

I thought for a moment. Which department? Should it be the massive guitar department with its amazing guitar collection? Or the piano department with those beautiful Bechsteins and Yamahas? What about those stunning church organs? Should I go and have another look at those? Should I go back to the glittering brass department? I remember seeing that own-brand tuba. Oh but hang on... that PA department was really interesting wasn't it? Back there maybe...? Actually I could do with another look around the sheet music department. And the orchestral strings department would make a lovely photo. But thinking about it, my home turf would really be the drums department wouldn't it?

Emily looked at me quizzically. "You OK?" she said. I thumped back down to Earth.

"The studio department," I said. It was one of the most difficult decisions I can remember making. It felt like I was betraying all the other departments. But with only forty five minutes to spend, someone had to come top of the list, and thinking back to the previous day's experience, although every department had won me over, the studio department was definitely calling out to me the loudest.

We walked across the snow-covered road to the main entrance of the shop. Emily showed me into the studio department where I re-acquainted myself with Martin. "Forty five minutes..." she said firmly, as she disappeared out of the door. Forty five minutes was nowhere near enough, but I tried to soak up as much of the place as I could in the available time. Martin showed me more things, enlightening me further and making my credit card twitch uncomfortably in my pocket. I was in love with this department. It was like walking through a catalogue.

My forty five was over in a twinkling. Emily was at the door, beckoning me over. I reluctantly said goodbye to Martin and told him - no, *warned* him - that I'd be back. He smiled and waved goodbye.

Emily and I walked over to the office building where I collected my things, and said my final goodbyes to the staff. I really, really didn't want to go, but Emily had already checked on the Lufthansa website, and my flight was scheduled to be on time. I put my coat on and slung my bag over my shoulder.

Emily's car was lovely and warm as we sped through the white countryside. We chatted cheerily as the airport got closer and closer, and I realised as we went that my trip to Thomann hadn't just been a prize, it had been an *event*. A life event - one of those moments when you realise that a corner has been turned or a revelation has occurred. I had learnt so much. There'd been so much I didn't know about music and musical instruments, and people and places, and musical passion. And the previous couple of days had at least scratched the surface for me. I'm clearly not the only one in this world who loves music.

We swung into the car park at the airport and Emily accompanied me into the departures hall. The display boards had my flight number up there - flight on time. "Oh, and this is for you," said Emily, handing me a Thomann carrier bag.

"Really?" I said, opening the bag and peering in. Inside there was a Thomann drummer's T-shirt, replete with a picture of some drumsticks on the front, and some indecipherable German text on the back. I laughed. "Thanks," I said. "I'll wear it on the plane." She smiled, not quite able to work out if I meant it or not.

"Think your gate is up those steps," she said, indicating a large staircase behind me.

"Yes, I think you're right," I said. I gave Emily a huge hug, and thanked her for all her amazing attention and hospitality.

"Have a safe trip back," she said. I nodded, and turned to walk up the steps. It was just something in my eye, that's all.