

Martin's Return To Markneukirchen

After 172 Years, An Emigrated Son Is Reunited With His Homeland

In 1833, the guitarmaker Christian Frederick Martin left his hometown in Markneukirchen, Germany and began his journey to America. At that time, nobody even remotely suspected that this decision would lead to the foundation of the world's most respected maker of acoustic instruments. Today not many know of the 30-year dispute that prompted his departure, a dispute that had not been addressed or rectified until now.

On October 11, 2005 the exhibition "Christian Friedrich Martin and the Guitar Making in the Vogtland in 1800-1833" opened, documenting the art of guitarmaking in Saxony and the conflict between Martin and the Violin Maker's Guild. The exhibition reunites the legacy of C. F. Martin with his homeland after more than 170 years.

In collaboration with the faculty of "Making of Musical Instruments" at the West Saxony College at Zwickau and C. F. Martin & Co. in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, displays for the first time in Germany, the roots and career of the young guitarmaker and later founder of the Martin Guitar Company in one coherent presentation. The exhibit shows a number of historic guitars that represent the traditions of guitarmaking in Saxony at the beginning of the 19th century as well as a variety of historic and current designs of Martin's instrument making tradition.

In addition, the opening of the exhibition was accompanied by a presentation and thorough investigation of the historic dispute between Markneukirchen's cabinet makers and the Violin Maker's Guild. Katherina Muck of AMI in Munich – the Martin distributor for Germany – gave an in-depth talk about C. F. Martin, Sr.'s transition from Germany to America followed by a general overview of Martin's many contributions to music and American culture.

Other presenters addressed the circumstances and conditions of guitarmaking in the region at that time. The Grand Opening concluded with a musical concert and celebration by the German American Song Festival known in Germany as the Deutsch Amerikanisches Volksänger Treffen on Tour (DAFT). Performers included Annie Wenz, Rik Palieri, Lowry Hamner and Frank Matheis of the USA with Robert Williams, Martina Höfer and Wilfried Mengs of Germany.

This initiative was inspired by a DAFT Tour concert in June of 2003 held in the courtyard of the Musical Instrument Museum in Markneukirchen.

In cooperation with WorldStrings Promotion in Phoenix, Arizona, and Laura Records in Eisenberg, Thuringia, a group of folk singers from both Germany and the United States came together for a concert tour throughout various German states. Sounding Board Volume 17 featured an article about this special event.

Among the goals of the exhibit coordinators, Professor Andreas Michel and Bernd Häber, was to restore an appreciation for Martin in Markneukirchen and to open a new chapter in the book of German-American relationships. It has long been their desire to establish Markneukirchen as an attraction for musicians and lovers of guitarmaking from all over the world. The exhibition has drawn fans of Martin guitars to the birthplace of C. F. Martin, Sr. and has educated visitors about the great diversity of traditional musical instrument making in Saxony today.

Martin is especially thankful to the town of Markneukirchen and to the exhibit organizers for the great honor.

For everyone in Nazareth, the Markneukirchen heritage is viewed with great reverence. Finally their emigrated son has returned with honor to his beloved homeland. ❖



Top: A view of the Musical Instrument Museum in Markneukirchen. Middle: Exhibit coordinators Bernd Häber (left) and Professor Andreas Michel with Katherina Muck of AMI in Munich, the Martin distributor for Germany. Bottom: One area of the extensive display of instruments and photo panels at the museum.