

Paris Journal 2010

Wednesday, February 3 – a visit to Cité de la Musique



The Cité de la Musique is another grand French monument, in this case, to music. It is located in the Parc de la Villette, where the Cité des Sciences et l'Industrie, their grand hands-on science museum is located. Both are located on the site of a previous livestock area where the Grande Halle is still standing.

This is what Wikipedia says about it: The **Cité de la Musique** (French: *City of Music*) is a group of institutions dedicated to music and situated in the La Villette quarter, 19th arrondissement, Paris, France. It was designed by the architect Christian de Portzamparc and opened in 1995. It consists of an amphitheater; a concert hall that can accommodate an audience of 800-1,000; a museum of music, containing an important collection of classical music instruments dating mainly from the fifteenth- to twentieth-century; and exhibition halls, workshops and archives. Part of François Mitterrand's *Grands Projets* along with the Parc de la Villette, the Cité de la Musique reinvented La Villette - the former slaughterhouse district. Its official address is 221, Avenue Jean Jaurès, 75019 Paris.

Here is a photo to illustrate the type of previous use of the area where the science museum and this Cité de la Musique now stand.



The Cité is more than a museum of music, although it houses a museum of ancient instruments that follow the development of musical instruments and displays them beautifully.

Ernie commented, “the Musée de la Musique, has the most fabulous collection of instruments I've ever seen -- and continuous live performances (every day included in the ticket price) to enhance the experience.

I saw this collection (or portions thereof) of instruments many years ago when it was housed in an old building in downtown Paris. But now they've created this architectural masterpiece to house it.”

Following are a few photos of the museum.



In the Musée de la Musique are 5 floors of displays like this one.

The following photo is of a highly ornate harpsichord and I include it even though it is blurred, because it shows the design of the building. [blurred because “flash” is not permitted in the museum so the shutter stays open longer]. The curved slash behind the instrument is a window. As in so many other buildings we have visited in Paris, the vision for the buildings is grand beyond belief.

The collection includes experimental instruments and examples of early musical instruments, some with really bizarre arrangements of strings or valves. For example, we saw bassoons and oboes and other wind instruments shaped like serpents with open mouths. There were stringed instruments with 6 or 8 strings and the same number of sympathetic strings arrayed in a very graceful manner. There were also instruments from different parts of the world.

The impression I got was of the development of instruments with experimentation gradually leading to the current manifestation of instruments. There were probably 20-30 different forms of harpsichords and pianos of different shapes and of course, different ornamentation. Maybe more. But inside they were slightly different. I’m sure I would have learned more had we taken the audio cassette and listened to the explanation. They were keyed to various kiosks where there were videos of people doing things – making instruments, dancing to Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring, singing an opera, or a chorus performing.

I’m sure we could go back and get much more out of it. It was amazing and magnificent.



In addition to their permanent collection, there are several auditoriums for performances – symphony orchestras, jazz bands, rock and roll, folk, ethnic, you name it.

There are field trips of students of various ages who come and listen to music, walk through the collection with an audiocassette tour linked to screens and audio sites. I watched a couple of short videos on an artisan making the bell for a trombone, and another of a middle eastern man in a crude workshop making a lute-like instrument from a gourd. There are studios where the students can play various instruments with the idea of exploring. I think there is a studio where they make various instruments.

What we saw happening is a demonstration by a particular artist playing an instrument. It is a small space with a stage, grand pianos and seating around the stage for at most 30 people, very intimate. The audience is a few feet away from the performer providing the opportunity to interact with the musician. The performers bring show and tell articles and talk about their instrument, how they came to play it, how they use it. They play short pieces to demonstrate various capabilities of the instrument.

When we were touring the museum we heard the mellow sounds of a beautifully played saxophone but we didn't stop to sit and listen and interact. At that point we didn't understand how that space was used.

By the time we came back to that site, a young woman was playing a cello. We sat down with about 4 other people and listened to her talk and play. Her name was Laura Carnolli or something like that. She is from Argentina, the northwest part of it where the pampas are. She explained that they still use carts for transportation there and that their traditional music often uses the rhythm of the wheels turning. She played some traditional songs and then started singing along.

She plucked the strings; she beat the body of the cello in different places with her fingers and heel of her hand to create sounds of percussion as she sang. She played and sang us compositions of her own, some

of which had the rhythm of the tango and others with the rhythm of the wheel. All were mournful and she explained that in Argentina, the music is usually tragic in nature. She sang in Spanish.

The sounds she got from the cello were unlike what I expected. It was charming. She used the cello as a means of expressing her feelings. It was inspiring to see the cello used as a tool, of everyday use. It was like watching a folk singer playing a guitar and performing original pieces.

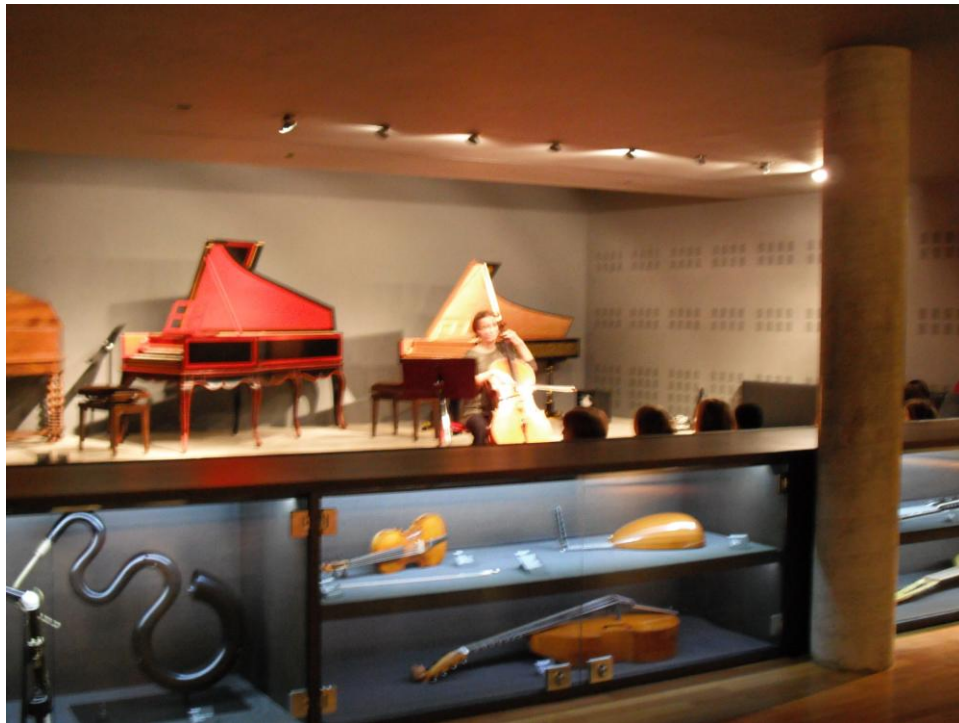
After we left two groups of students came in. One group was a group of kindergartners and another was a group of middle school students. The groups were about 10 in number each. Both listened with rapt attention. It was really interesting and I could imagine that many of those listeners would be inspired to take up music, if not the cello.

What she brought were sets of horsehair that are used to string the bow. She handed them out and encouraged us to comb them out and handle them.

We ran into the group of kindergartners in the center of Paris where we got onto the Metro. I was horrified at the thought of stewarding a group of little 5-year-olds through the Metro system. They had 2 women chaperoning them and they were very cooperative little children walking in twos holding hands. We wondered if they might also be going to La Villette and sure enough, they showed up at the Musée de la Musique. They too, listened attentively.

Here are two photos of the little listening space. Too bad they are blurred but I include them to show the space and how it is used. The first one shows the kindergartners. See how attentive they are.





We had just missed a major exhibition on Miles Davis but there was still a display on the wall, a chronology of Jazz progress since the 1940s, I think, with lists of names of artists who were working during each decade. On the left there were designations: conductor, composer, pianist, trumpeter, etc., so it contained a lot of information. Some of the names were autographed with something about Miles.

Here is a photo of the foyer. It was built to hold huge crowds. The posters on the wall are of past performances and exhibitions. Of course, there is a book and gift store.



The building does not house a restaurant but across the walk, there is a Café de la Musique where we had lunch following our 3-hour visit. It is in the opposite direction than Ernie is walking. It was raining so we ran across the walkway which was not covered.



We left and decided to try the bus system instead of going down into the Metro, even though there is a Metro stop right across the street. I wanted to see more of the area around La Villette to see if it is different in nature from other parts of Paris we have seen.

We weren't easily able to find the bus stop we were looking for so we opted to walk a ways along Avenue de Jean Jaurès. Jaurès must have been a famous person as many things, a hospital, all the shops, were named after him. There were more empty shop spaces than in the 5th where we have been spending most of our time. Here is picture of one corner of Av. Jaurès. No cars parked on the sidewalk.



We walked a mile or two and then took the Metro when we came to one near the peripherique, the freeway that circles Paris.

We ended up having an adventure after getting on the Metro. It was about 4:10 p.m. by the time we got on the Metro. We rode along normally until we got near the center and then at a stop there was an announcement. The one phrase I understood was “un moment.” OK, we were being told we would stay at this stop for a moment. Then we went on. At the next stop, there were more announcements. This time I understood “have patience.” I also heard angry shouting in the background of the announcement.

Eventually, at a stop that is a major correspondence with other rail lines, we waited for as much as 10 minutes with announcements every few minutes. I heard the shouting in the background and we began to worry. Out the window on the other side of the quai the people were pouring onto the platform. Since no trains were coming by every few minutes to pick up passengers, the crowd just continued to grow. There were probably a couple of hundred people waiting by the time a train came. But it was nearly full to bursting so it only picked up a few people.

The other passengers stayed on the train but listened carefully to the announcements. We figured we should stay on as long as the other passengers didn't get off. Then the train started and we went on for a couple of stops before stopping again. This time, people began to get off so we did too. By this time we were in the heart of Paris not out in the sticks and knew, that if necessary, we could walk to our apartment. This is where we got off. By now it was about 5:30 p.m. sundown.



We followed the Seine in the direction of the lighted building, which is the bar restaurant Depart – St. Germain, hoping some of the riverside vendors might be open. We are looking for low-cost posters with bright colors to dress up the walls of our apartment. Only a few book vendors were open. We were happy it wasn't raining.

Next door to the Depart – St. Germaine is a huge, old bookstore the Gibert Jeune Librairie, where we stopped and spent a happy hour browsing and picking books in French to read. We came away with enough reading material to keep us in books for months. Then we walked home. We know the way from there and watched the lights come on as we walked with the rest of the rush hour people going home. There might have been more people on the street than usual because of the work slowdown happening below us in the Metro.

We listened to the 10:00 news hoping to learn about it but there was just a mention of it. Ernie looked on line but with no more information than that it happened.