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travel

Dresden

CAN A CITY REBUILD ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE? DRESDEN IS GIVING IT A SHOT AND, SAYS ALBERT EHRNROOTH, THEY JUST MIGHT SUCCEED

Before World War II Dresden was considered to be Germany's most elegant city. The Baroque architecture was curvaceous without displaying too much pomposity. The old masters gallery and the porcelain museum had collections that were in many respects unsurpassed. Dresden had one of the world's oldest orchestras and a boys' choir with an even more ancient lineage.

The Semperoper was one of the top companies in the world, largely down to the fact that they had conductors like Fritz Reiner, Fritz Busch and Karl Böhm at the helm. Richard Strauss considered the Semper to be an El Dorado for first nights. Nine out of his 15 operas were premiered at the imposing opera house.

Just before World War I the expressionistic group Die Brücke was based here while Otto Dix and Oskar Kokoschka made it their home for long spells. Everyone knows that European porcelain was invented in Dresden and then manufactured in the neighbouring town of Meissen. Much less known is the fact that more essential products like toothpaste, the teabag, the coffee filter and even the mighty bra also were developed in Dresden.

I find it ironic that Friedrich Schiller was inspired to write *Ode to Joy* during a prolonged stay just outside Dresden. Maybe this explains why Wagner became so fascinated by Beethoven's Ninth Symphony during his tenure in Dresden?

The father of Dresden is Elector Frederick Augustus I (1670-1733), nicknamed 'the Strong' because he could straighten horseshoes with his bare hands. Together with his favourite architect Matthäus Daniel Pöppelmann he set out to build a Florence on the Elbe. Their masterpiece is without a doubt the Zwinger Palace with its large courtyard intended for tournaments, parades and musical events. The massive royal crown on the Kronentor is Polish and reminds visitors that Augustus was also, off and on, King of Poland. The pavilions and one-storied galleries contain art collections that beggar belief, and mostly they were put together in less than a century. The Porzellansammlung not only houses the greatest collection of Meissen porcelain in the world, its Chinese and Japanese objects are also out of this world.

Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister can in terms of quality easily compete with the Louvre and the National Gallery in London. Highlights are Giorgione's Sleeping Venus, a couple of Rembrandts, Vermeers, a Dürer and Raphael's Sistine Madonna.

Augustus the Strong's only legitimate son, Frederick Augustus II showed very little interest in hard politics, but did inherit his father's artistic bent. He loved opera and his general appreciation of music made JS Bach present him with the unsolicited Mass for the Dresden court (Missa BWV 232) in honour of his father. Bach wanted to obtain the title of



TRAVEL INFO

Average Temperatures:
 Winter: 3°C – Summer: 23°C
Currency: Euro (AUS 1 = EURO 0.68)
Best time to visit: Any time of year is pleasant although it gets cold in winter. Cultural events take place throughout the year but the Music Festival in May/June is rather special.

TOURIST INFORMATION

www.dresden.de

Dresden's famous Frauenkirche

'Electoral Saxon Court Composer', which was eventually granted to him.

A fairly healthy musical climate had already been established during the Renaissance, helped by the founding in 1548 of the Dresden Staatskapelle (yes, the orchestra has undergone many name changes). The composer Heinrich Schütz conducted this band for 60 years, until 1672. Almost 150 years later Carl Maria von Weber was put in charge of the Königlich-sächsische musikalische Kapelle, as the orchestra was called then. Some of Weber's best loved works were composed in an old vintner's house near the charming Schloss Pillnitz, on the outskirts of Dresden. The Weber museum is rather tedious but, as a compensation, they often organise wine tastings.

Richard Wagner was a huge fan of Weber's operas. For the reinterment of Weber in Dresden in 1844 he composed the choral



Zwingerhof, the Wallpavillon

Dresden Music Festival

"We have 25 different venues, as opposed to some other cities that organise prestigious festivals with just one or a couple of concert halls," says Jan Vogler, the famous cellist and director of the Dresdner Musikfestspiele (May 13-June 7). Dresden's grandest palaces, churches and museums will once more double up as music venues and with visits by top orchestras like Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Philadelphia Orchestra, the Helsinki and Venice Baroque Orchestras and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra there is no lack of quality. The festival also provides an ideal opportunity to see the famous local orchestras, choirs and the Semperoper. This year's theme is Fire and Ice and hopefully the contrasts and diversity of North and South Europe will come to the fore in the music.



work *An Webers Grabe* and gave a graveside speech. Dresden also played an important part during Wagner's formative years. As a child he attended the Kreuzschule, which is closely associated with the 700-year-old Kreuzchor. This world famous boys' choir continues to perform regularly in the restored Kreuzkirche. It was in Dresden that Wagner received his breakthrough as a composer with *Rienzi* (1842), his opera in the grand French manner. The huge success led to his being offered the life-long post as Court Conductor at the Hoftheater (Semper's first opera house). The Dresden audiences weren't quite ready for the musical progress he made with *The Flying Dutchman* (1843) and *Tannhäuser* was way beyond them.

Wagner conducted the Staatskapelle orchestra regularly at the Hoftheater, which Gottfried Semper had modelled on the Colosseum. That opera house burnt down in 1869 and Semper was commissioned to come up with a new design for the large open Theaterplatz, next to the Zwinger. He still hadn't been pardoned, so his eldest son oversaw the work which was finished in 1878.

All this artistic creativity ceased abruptly 70 years ago when the British and American air forces tried their hardest to wipe Dresden off the map in four air raids. During the GDR period the ruined Frauenkirche was designated as a war memorial. Many locals found this unacceptable and after the reunification they campaigned hard for the reconstruction of Germany's largest protestant church. In the end they won, but the costly project was mainly paid for

by American and British donations. The stunning interior paintings and decorations are a reminder of how subtly persuasive Baroque art can be. The Frauenkirche is now a truly moving symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation and a real crowd-puller. For 60 years the church's distinctive cupola lay smashed to bits in the ruins. Now it again dominates the Dresden skyline.

“THE FRAUENKIRCHE IS A MOVING SYMBOL OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION”

The Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden is both the opera and concert band and has since 2012-13 been led by Christian Thielemann – probably Germany's most in-demand conductor. The Dresden Philharmonic also deserves to be heard. Their major problem is that they have no place of their own until 2017 when the completely renovated Kulturpalast, an architectural reminder of the communist era, is due to reopen.

But the best way to experience this reborn cultural metropolis is to attend the Dresden Music Festival. It is held at an ideal time of year (May 13-June 7, 2015) when the tourists have not yet arrived *en masse* and the weather is pleasantly warm. The concerts are organised in 24 different venues which gives you an unique chance to see – and hear – this historic place come alive. ●