

Welcome to the 84. Bachfest in Mühlhausen / Thür.

(07. - 16.08.2009)



Johann Sebastian Bach and Mühlhausen

In olden days, Mühlhausen was a free city of the Holy Roman Empire, and it enjoyed its medieval heyday between the 13th and 15th centuries. The inner city wall remains almost complete to this day. It, together with the Frauentor (Women's Gate), the town hall with its free-city archive, and eleven Gothic churches are eye-catching reminders of those times. Merchants' houses from the Baroque period and the urban renewal, which has been going on since the 1990s, convey the impression of a town that has always been bustling with activity.

The activities of Thomas Müntzer, the radical Reformer and preacher in the Marienkirche (Church of Our Lady), led to Mühlhausen becoming a centre of the early Reformation and the Peasants' War. After the Peace of Augsburg had been finally settled, this free city became renowned for its cultivation of Protestant church music. Mühlhausen gained this reputation through the work of such illustrious lyricists and musicians as Ludwig Helmbold, Joachim a Burgk, Georg Neumark, Johannes Eccard, Johann Rudolf and Johann Georg Ahle.

However, the high point of Mühlhausen's musical history is, of course, the work of Johann Sebastian Bach, who was the organist in St Blaise's Church in 1707-1708. His plans for a new organ were turned into reality by Wender, the Mühlhausen organ builder, and Bach himself gave the first recital in 1709 - exactly 300 years ago. With the support of Albert Schweitzer, a new organ was built to Bach's original design in 1959 by Schuke, an organ-building company. This organ's fiftieth "birthday" will be the centre point of the 84th Bach Festival. The festival program will include organ recitals, exhibitions and excursions. Tribute will also be paid to the 200th anniversary of the birth of Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and the 250th anniversary of the death of Händel. Händel's Water Music and Firework Music (naturally with fireworks) will be played, the latter in a very special arrangement for eight trumpets, timpani and organ.

"Bach has already been here! When are you coming?"

1707-1708, Johann Sebastian Bach's year in Mühlhausen, is the undisputed high point of Mühlhausen's rich musical history. The year Johann Sebastian Bach spent in Mühlhausen can undoubtedly be assigned to his "early period of mastery", although not all his works of this period can be assigned with certainty to specific locations. The cantatas he wrote in Mühlhausen probably include "Christ lag in Todesbanden" (Bach Catalogue BWV 4), "Aus der Tiefe rufe ich, Herr, zu dir" (BWV 131) and "Actus tragicus" (BWV 106). His best known Mühlhausen cantata, "Gott ist mein König" (BWV 71), written to celebrate the inauguration of the town council, was printed at the instigation of the Mühlhausen Town Council, which was most unusual for that time. Bills in the city archive also confirm the composition of the cantatas to celebrate the inaugurations of the town council in 1709 and 1710, but neither of them have survived, although the 1709 cantata was printed.

Johann Sebastian Bach left behind plans for an organ after his second appointment as organist at the St Blaise's Church, Mühlhausen in 1707-1708. The organ rebuilt in 1709 by Johann Friedrich Wender according to Bach's plans was replaced in 1821-1823 by a new organ built by Johann Friedrich Schulze from Paulinzella. This organ finally became unusable during the years after the Second World War. Heinz Sawade, who became the organist at St Blaise's Church in 1948, put a lot of work into preserving the musical heritage of Johann Sebastian Bach, and was one of the leading campaigners for the building of a new organ. Discussions with Albert Schweitzer led to the idea of building this new organ on the basis of Bach's plans. Alexander Schuke, a Potsdam company, carried out the work in 1956-1959. Five registers were added to Bach's original design of the organ work to enable the organ to play modern organ music. This new organ was used for the first time on 24 May 1959, and was the motive for holding the 36th German Bach Festival of the New Bach Society in Mühlhausen on 1-5 July 1959. In 2009, 300 years will have passed since the opening ceremony was held for the Bach Organ, and fifty years since the new organ was completed, thus making it a fitting time for the Bach Festival of the New Bach Society to return to Mühlhausen for its 84th celebration.

The 2009 Bach Festival will be held from 7 to 16 August. Visitors will not only be able to attend organ recitals and organ services, exhibitions and go on excursions, but also hear performances of the Bach Cantatas from his Mühlhausen Period and organ compositions by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy to celebrate the 200th anniversary of his birth. To commemorate the 250th anniversary of the death of Georg Friedrich Händel there will be a performance of his Water Music, and a very special arrangement of his Firework Music for eight trumpets, tympani and organ - complete with a firework display.

Locations of events

St Blaise's Church

St Blaise's Parish Church, in the medieval town centre of Mühlhausen, was the first Gothic church built by the Teutonic Order in Central Germany. The greatest treasures of its medieval heritage are the choir windows and the Sunday and feast day bell. Renowned composers and organists have made St Blaise's Church and Mühlhausen places which have nurtured Protestant church music. Here again, Johann Sebastian Bach and his activities in 1707-08 deserve special mention. The new Schuke organ was built in 1959 on the basis of Bach's 1708 design.

The Marienkirche (Church of Our Lady)

This five-aisled Gothic church is the largest church in Thuringia, apart from Erfurt Cathedral. It was the parish church for the Teutonic Order in the new town. The illustration of Judgment Day from the Parler School on the south transept facade is of great symbolic power and artistic quality. The town council inauguration ceremonies were held in this church every year, and J. S. Bach composed cantatas for the years of 1708, 1709, and probably 1710. The Sauer organ built in 1891 makes a major contribution to the rich diversity of organ timbres to be heard in Mühlhausen.

The Town Hall

The oldest Gothic part of Mühlhausen Town Hall dates from around 1300. The hall itself and the Great Council Chamber bear witness to this day of Mühlhausen's determination to demonstrate its prestige and political independence as a free city of the Holy Roman Empire. The free-city archive was founded in 1615. It stores and displays documents from eight centuries, including those concerning the activities of J. S. Bach in Mühlhausen.

The Barfüßerkirche (Franciscan Church)

This 13th century mendicant order monastery church at the Kornmarkt (Corn Market) is an impressive counterpart to the churches of St Blaise and St. Marien (Church of Our Lady). After the closure of the monastery in 1542, this church was rarely used for religious purposes, and served as a grain warehouse from 1802. It was restored in 1973-1975 to house the Peasants' War Museum, and can now be experienced as an ecclesiastical building once again.

The Museum at Lindenbühl

Today's regional museum building was originally built as a grammar school in the Italian High Renaissance style between 1868 and 1871. It has been used as museum since 1928, except for an interruption during the fascist period.

Information and Bookings

Mühlhausen, the historic free Imperial and Hanseatic City, offers you a choice of comfortable hotels, family-run guest houses, and modern holiday apartments and houses. There are a variety of restaurants, serving local and international cuisine, and small cafés which will be pleased to look after your creature comforts during the Bach Festival. The staff in the Tourist Information Office will be glad to give you information and assistance, and also book your accommodation, restaurant tables, excursions and tickets.

The Festival Program

This will also include presentations and talks on Bach's Mühlhausen period and the range of organs to be found in West Thuringia. Daily organ services in Bach's St Blaise's Church will feature works by Johann Sebastian Bach and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy.

The right is reserved to make changes.



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