



**Left:** The Richard-Wagner Festival takes place in Bayreuth's Festspielhaus. Courtesy Stadt Bayreuth. **Below:** Bayreuth's Fantaisie Palace. Courtesy GNTO/Ernst Wrba. **Opposite top:** The Hermitage, presented by Margrave Friedrich to his wife Wilhelmine in 1735. Courtesy Zac Steger. **Opposite bottom:** Wilhelmine von Preussen, the Margravine, turned a royal backwater into a cultural paradise in northern Bavaria. Courtesy Wikipedia.





Though the town is irrevocably associated with Richard Wagner, the Margravine Wilhelmine is the woman responsible for creating this masterpiece.



# Wilhelmine's Bayreuth

BY ZAC STEGER

Each summer thousands of classical music lovers descend on the Franconian city of Bayreuth for the music festival named in honor of the city's greatest composer, Richard Wagner. Though his importance to the city cannot be denied, he would never have considered moving to the city were it not for Wilhelmine von Preussen, the Margravine who turned a royal backwater into a cultural paradise in what is now northern Bavaria.

Bayreuth recently celebrated a double anniversary in Wilhelmine's honor. October 14, 2008, marked the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of her death and July 3, 2009, marked three hundred years since her birth. Born to the "Soldier King" Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia and Sophia Dorothea of Hannover in 1709, it is safe to say Wilhelmine's childhood was not a happy one. She and her siblings suffered much abuse at the hands of her tyrannical father and by all accounts her ice queen mother offered little comfort. During this time she developed a strong bond with her brother, Friedrich II, more commonly known as Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, which would last until her death.



In 1731 she was married to Margrave Friedrich von Brandenburg-Bayreuth, a concession made by Wilhelmine to protect her brother from her father's cruel hand. When her husband came into his inheritance, the pair proceeded to make Bayreuth a miniature Versailles, just as her brother did in Potsdam. From the creation of the gardens and summer palace at the Ermitage (Hermitage), to the reconstruction of the Neues Schloss (New Castle) and the building of the opera house, Wilhelmine did what very few women did during this point in history.

Not far from Bayreuth's typically Bavarian Marktplatz, the wide opening at the end of Maximilianstrasse is the rebuilt Altes Schloss. The first stop on a tour of Wilhelmine's Bayreuth is with her death. Wilhelmine, Friedrich, and their daughter Elisabeth Friederike Sophie all are entombed in a vault in the chapel of the Schlosskirche. Designed by Joseph Saint-Pierre with a beautifully designed Rococo ceiling by Giovanni Battista Pedrozzi, it is certainly the most beautiful church in Bayreuth.

One of Wilhelmine's first major undertakings in Bayreuth was the Markgräfliches Opernhaus (Margravian Opera House), arguably the most beautiful opera house in Europe. The official occasion for building the opera





**Top left:** Statue of King Ludwig II of Bavaria in front of Wahnfried, Richard Wagner's home in Bayreuth. Courtesy Zac Steger. **Bottom left:** Stage of the ruined "Roman" theater at Sanspareil Rock Garden. Courtesy Zac Steger. **Above:** The spectacular interior of Bayreuth's opera house, thought to be one of Europe's finest. Courtesy GNT0.



house was the engagement of her daughter Elisabeth Friederike Sophie (then only twelve years old!) to Duke Karl Eugen von Württemberg in 1744. In truth, the couple would have likely built the opera house regardless, as they considered the existing theaters in Bayreuth inadequate for their tastes.

Court architect Joseph Saint-Pierre designed the building, while Guisse Galli Bibiena and his son Carlo created the festive Italian Baroque interior. Entering through a narrow portal in the back, visitors are instantly in awe when they step into the opera house, transported to both another time in history and a world of fantasy. A light show helps tell the story of Wilhelmine, who not only influenced the design, but also wrote and performed pieces on this very stage.

Following the destruction of the Altes Schloss (Old Castle) by fire in 1753, the couple decided to build the Neues Schloss, designed by French court architect Saint-Pierre. However, Wilhelmine was instrumental in the design of the new castle and her influence can be seen in several of the most important rooms, including the Spiegelscherbenkabinett (Mirror Pieces Room) and her Muzikzimmer (music room). The famous "Bayreuth Rokoko" style can also be seen in the Palmenzimmer, featuring carved gilt palm trees, a treat for guests who would have attended banquets in the hall.





Today the Neues Schloss is also home to the Staatsgalerie (State Gallery), or Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen. The exhibition focuses on Late Baroque paintings from the Dutch school.

A stroll to the Hofgarten (Royal Gardens) is another reminder of Wilhelmine's influence. From here, visitors can briefly detour from Wilhelmine's Bayreuth and visit the homes of two of the greatest composers the world has known. Passing by the Freimauer Museum (Freemason's Museum), you casually stroll into the backyard of Bayreuth's most famous (or infamous) resident, Richard Wagner.

Richard Wagner came to Bayreuth in 1872 as his dream of the perfect opera house was coming to life in the form of the Festspielhaus, known not only as one of the largest opera houses in Europe, but also acoustically perfect for Wagner's work. Adapted from designs by Gottfried Semper, the opera house is considered especially unique for the orchestra pit, which is totally hidden from the audience.

Each summer in late July to early August, the annual Bayreuther-Festspiel brings

**Top Left:** Schlosskirche, the final resting place of Wilhelmine, Friedrich, and their daughter Friederike. Courtesy Zac Steger. **Top Right:** The Sun Temple of the New Palace at the Hermitage. Courtesy Zac Steger. **Right:** Germany's first garden museum is found at Schloss Fantaisie in Donndorf/Eckersdorf, just outside Bayreuth. Courtesy Zac Steger.





thousands of classical music lovers to the venue to see performances of his work. The year 2008 marked the last year the festival would be overseen by Wagner's grandson, Wolfgang Wagner, and it appears, despite claims from her cousins, that his daughter Katharina Wagner will take over.

The construction of Wahnfried, Richard Wagner's Villa in Bayreuth, began that same year, thanks to a large contribution from one of his greatest admirers, King Ludwig II of Bavaria. He lived there less than ten years, up until his 1883 death in Venice, and is buried along with his wife Cosima in the garden.

Following their deaths, Wagner's son, Siegfried, who was a composer of only mild success, owned the home. It then was passed to Siegfried's widow, Winifried, who used it to provide a retreat for Adolf Hitler, of whom she was a great admirer. A large portion of the home was destroyed by a bomb during World War II and was rebuilt shortly after.

The house stayed in the family until the early 1970s when it was donated to the town of Bayreuth. Following restoration, it was opened as the Richard-Wagner-Museum in 1976 in time for the centennial of the Bayreuth Festival. The museum documents the life and work of Richard Wagner, as well as the history of Wahnfried.

Just a short walk away is the home of his father-in-law, composer Franz Liszt. Liszt lived here at the time of his death in 1886. It was opened as the Franz Liszt Museum in 1993, documenting his life and work.

Another famous resident of Bayreuth was Jean Paul. Born Johann Paul Friedrich Richter in 1763, he was best known for his humorous novels. He was unusual for his time in that, while his contemporaries held other occupations in addition to writing, Jean Paul worked exclusively as a writer. The Jean Paul Museum presents the life and works of one of Germany's lesser-known authors.

In 1715, Margrave Georg Wilhelm began construction of the Old Palace in a forested area east of Bayreuth. Here within a bend in the Roter Main River, he created the Ermitage (Hermitage) as a retreat from court life.

**Top left:** The "Markgräfliches Opernhaus" is a popular place for concerts. Courtesy Stadt Bayreuth. **Left:** The Neues Schloss erected by Margravine Wilhelmine. Courtesy Stadt Bayreuth.



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Shortly after Margrave Friedrich took over, he presented the property to Wilhelmine as a birthday gift on July 3, 1735. Almost immediately she began to redesign the complex, adding the Orangerie and the New Palace, with the Sun Temple, crowned by Apollo. With the free arrangement of the garden areas, along with artificial Roman ruins, the Hermitage was quite unique for the period. The park was badly neglected after the margraviate came to an end as the nineteenth century drew near.

In 1761, just a few years after the death of Wilhelmine, Margrave Friedrich began construction of what would be known as Schloss Fantasie. Located just west of Bayreuth in Donndorf/Eckersdorf, the palace was expanded by their daughter, Elisabeth Friedrike Sophie, after her father's death. Following extensive renovations in the 1990s, the Fantasie Palace Garden Museum opened in July 2000 and was the first museum devoted exclusively to garden design in Germany. The museum's focus is on gardening in the region from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

From here it is only a short drive further to the final stop on Wilhelmine's Bayreuth, Sanspareil. The unique formations at the Felsengarten (Rock Garden) at Sanspareil were another example of how Friedrich and Wilhelmine were ahead of their time. Located near the medieval Zwernitz Castle, the area had long been used for hunting by the margraves. Between 1744 and 1748, the landscape had been turned into a natural museum, complete with an open-air theater molded from the rock. Upon seeing it, a lady at the court exclaimed "C'est sans pareil!" (It is without equal); a statement that rings true over all of Bayreuth thanks to Wilhelmine. **GL**

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**Above:** Altes Schloss at the Hermitage. Courtesy Zac Steger. **Below:** Stadtkirche. Courtesy Zac Steger.

