

BY ZAC STEGER

Many travelers end up in Köthen, as I first did, at the train station waiting for a connection to someplace else. After all, there are not any obvious attractions that would draw tourists here. However, classical music fans know that Köthen was once home to Johann Sebastian Bach, one of Germany's greatest composers, who spent several years as *Kapellmeister* here. Though the city may fall below the radar when it comes to major sights, a closer look finds a charming town with several notable past residents.

Köthen is the capital of the Anhalt-Bitterfeld Landkreis in Sachsen-Anhalt, a short trip from more popular destinations such as Dessau, an UNESCO World Heritage Site, and Leipzig. The city was first documented as "Cothene" in 1115 when Otto von Ballenstadt was driving the Slavs out of the area. His royal house of Askanier (Ascania) would shape much of the history of Köthen. It received its town charter in 1313 and for many years it was the seat of the Principality of Anhalt from 1396 to 1561 and Duchy from 1603 to 1853, when Herzog Heinrich died without an heir and the Duchy became part of the Anhalt-Bernburg line.



A bust of Bach near one of his former residences (Sachsen-Anhalt-Tourismus)

# Bachstadt Köthen



Occupied since prehistoric times, today Köthen touts its connection to J.S. Bach.





The young Ascanian Prince Leopold von Anhalt-Köthen is believed to have first met Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 to 1750) at his sister's wedding while the composer was in service of the house of Saxe-Weimar. Cultural pursuits were of great importance to the young prince and he offered Bach a place in his court.

Bach was appointed *Kapellmeister* at Köthen in 1717, a position he would hold until 1723. He produced some of his most famous secular works during this fruitful period, including the famous Brandenburg Concertos.

He enjoyed a friendly relationship with the prince, who himself was also musically inclined. Bach traveled with him on several occasions and the prince occasionally performed in Bach's ensembles. While it was generally a very happy period, Bach's time in Köthen was not without sorrows. His infant son Leopold Augustus, named after the prince, died in September 1719, and the death of his wife, Maria Barbara, followed in July 1720.

In December 1721, Bach married Anna Magdalena Wilcke, a singer who had worked with Bach for some time. The prince married as well and, with devoting so much of his time to his new wife, it is believed that Bach felt neglected. In 1723, he took up the position as Choirmaster and Organist at the Church of St. Thomas in Leipzig, the city in which he remained until his death. He did make several visits to Köthen after his departure, including a visit to perform at the funeral of Prince Leopold, who, in 1728, died of smallpox at just thirty-two years old.

While the ensemble of buildings that make up Köthen's

restored palace may lack the dramatic appearance of other more notable castles, it is no less interesting and the interior hosts an excellent selection of museums. You will find just about everything you need to know about the town and its history, from prehistoric times through Bach and beyond, as well as pleasant park.

Just outside the main complex is the late-Baroque *Prinzessinhaus* (Princess's House), named after the last resident, Prinzessin von Schöneich-Carolath. Visitors pass through the eighteenth-century Rococo *Marstall* (Horse stables) into the first horseshoe shaped courtyard where the *Reithall* (Riding Hall) stands. The building was destroyed by fire in 1940, but renovated and reopened in 2008 as a conference and concert hall.

The castle is home to the *Naumann-Museum*, containing numerous species of birds and images from famed ornithologist Johann Friedrich Neumann (1780 to 1857). His twelve-volume series *Naturgeschichte der Vögel Deutschlands* laid the foundations of ornithology by describing and organizing the known bird species in the region and beyond.

The region has been rich in archaeological finds from Köthen's earliest inhabitants. Evidence going back as far as the Stone Age, such as tools of paleolithic hunters, have been recovered and are on display at the *Prähistorische Sammlung* at Schloß Köthen, located in the *Ludwigsbau*. The unusually large amount of finds indicates that a relatively large settlement of people has been in the area of Köthen for thousands of years.

**Opposite left to right:** Many of Bach's compositions were first performed in the Hall of Mirrors at Schloss Köthen. (Courtesy GNTG). The Ludwigsbau contains several important museums. Courtesy Zac Steger. Köthen seems to be fascinated with dairy products. Cows like this one (with a scene from Lüneburg) can be found throughout the old town. Courtesy Zac Steger. The Church of St. James is located on the Marktplatz and is the final resting place of several Ascanian princes. It has recently undergone extensive renovations. Courtesy Zac Steger.





**Far left:** Köthen's town hall dates back to only 1900, making it a relatively new building. **Left:** South entrance to the grounds of Schloss Köthen.

Life in the court of the Ascanian princes can be explored in the *Historisches Museum*. Four rooms are devoted to a *Bachgedenkstätte* (Bach Memorial), exploring the life of Bach and his family in Köthen.

Schloß Köthen's beautiful Versailles-styled *Spiegelsaal* (Hall of Mirrors) is without a doubt the highlight of the palace, if not the entire town. Many of Bach's secular works were first performed here and still are, much to the delight of those who enjoy his music. It is particularly popular during the biannual Bach Festival, which next takes place in September 2010, when several venues hold performances of his work.

Another popular performance site is the Church of St. Agnes, where Bach worshipped. Built by Johann Bernhard Buechel from Zerbst between 1693 and 1699, it was the first Lutheran church in the city. It also features the *Last Supper* painting by Lucas Cranach the Younger.

One of Germany's best-known authors, Joseph von Eichendorff (1788 to 1857), lived in the city from 1849 to 1855. His home at Bernburgerstraße 1 can still be seen. Another famous resident, Samuel Hahnemann (1755 to 1843), was the founder of homeopathy. He practiced in Köthen from 1821 to 1834.

Two important sights are found on the small *Marktplatz*—the *Rathaus* (Town Hall) and the Church of St. James. The church was built between 1400 and 1513. Its crypt contains the sarcophagi of the Ascanian princes, including Leopold.

The yellow Neo-Renaissance town hall (with hints of *Jugendstil*) was constructed between 1896 and 1900 based on the plans of Berlin architects Reinhard and Süßenguth. Most of the town hall's forty-two rooms have been preserved in their original condition. A beautiful structure that, per-

haps in part because of its relative youth compared to other town halls in Germany, does not seem to get the recognition it deserves.

From the Marktplatz it is a short walk to the final destination on a visit to the Bachstadt Köthen. The *Bachhaus* at Wallstraße 25/26 is the second place Bach lived during his years in the city. A memorial reflects on the time one of the world's greatest composers spent here. He surely could have never imagined how his few years in the town would leave such a mark on Köthen.

### Thinking Green

Though Köthen is certainly proud of its past, it is a forward thinking city. In 2009, RGE Energy and BP Solar announced they were jointly building one of the world's largest solar energy projects in Köthen. The project is expected to provide around forty-three thousand megawatt hours each year, enough to supply eleven thousand five hundred four-person households with their yearly electricity and save roughly twenty-five thousand six hundred tons of CO2 emissions.

### Go East!

The twentieth anniversary of *Wende* is renewing interest in the former East Germany, encouraging people to explore the region's many wonderful towns instead of just passing through to get to Berlin.

Köthen makes a great day trip from better-known destinations such as Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Dessau, and Leipzig, where Bach spent his final years. Numerous small towns in the area offer a great selection of castles, churches and museums to explore. Prices for accommodation, food, and sights are typically lower here, too, making it a good value in tough economic times. **GL**

*There are several helpful sights to help plan your trip to Köthen. They are, however, mostly in German.*

[www.bachstadt-koethen.de](http://www.bachstadt-koethen.de).

[www.koethener-land.de](http://www.koethener-land.de).

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