

CURTAIN

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Berlin's lavish endowment

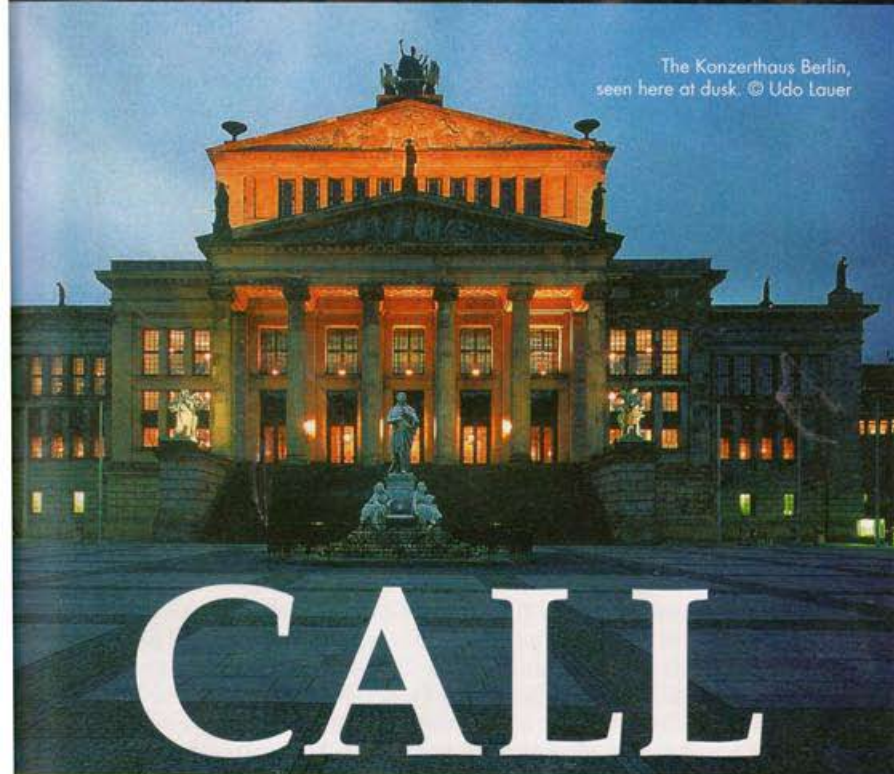
Sir Simon Rattle leads the
Berlin Philharmonic
© Monika Rittershaus



In 2004 the Staatsballett Berlin, led by
Russian Vladimir Malakhov, was formed.
© Enrico Nawrath



The Konzerthaus Berlin,
seen here at dusk. © Udo Lauer



CALL

Twenty years have passed since East and West Berlin's inhabitants started to furiously chip away the wall that had divided their city since 1961. The whole Iron Curtain was dismantled within a year of "die Wende" (the turnaround). Germany was reunified in 1991 and Berlin was made the country's capital, which in its turn set in motion an incredible cultural renaissance.

"West Berlin changed a lot when it stopped being this artificial island. Both parts of the city changed dramatically after the wall came down", says Alexander Schwartz, design director for the British architecture firm David Chipperfield, which has recently restored and reconstructed the impressive Neues Museum on the Museum Island in the centre of the city.

During the Cold War, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the West German government both made Berlin their cultural marquee. This meant that the arts sector in both East and West Berlin could count on generous subsidies. The reunification took most people and certainly the arts community by surprise. Previously the two metropolises had existed next to each other, and in many respects, were seemingly oblivious to each other. When the border dissolved it felt like the range of culture doubled overnight: seven symphony orchestras, three major opera houses, three state ballet companies, subsidised theatre ensembles galore and more museums and monuments than you can shake a stick at. There was no way Berlin's 3.5 million people could support all this cultural activity, or so the theory went.

During the inter-war years some of Europe's most exciting architecture, theatre and cabaret was produced in Berlin. Despite hyperinflation and political instability the Weimar Republic (1919-33) saw a short-lived cultural golden era. Max Reinhardt was the most influential theatre and opera director of his time, but he and many of his colleagues decided to emigrate to the United States after Hitler came to power in 1933.

Many iconic theatres and museums were heavily damaged or destroyed in World War II and quite a high proportion that survived ended up in the Soviet sector. The progressive playwright Bertolt Brecht returned from America to run the newly formed Berliner Ensemble at the glorious old Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in East Berlin. After Brecht's death in 1956 his wife Helene Weigel made sure his legacy and distinctive style of acting was perpetuated.

The Berliner Ensemble made quite an impact, particularly during their successful tours to Britain and France. In the 1920s Erwin Piscator had created many memorable socio-political productions at the Volksbühne and under communist rule it proudly presented itself as the theatre for "the common worker".

"Working in theatre was more of a privilege in the East than in the West where an artist is just part of society. In the East it was more special and theatre was a place where ▶

of arts companies has made it one of the world's cultural centres. WORDS ALBERT EHNRHOOTH



people would express criticism about society in a codified way that the audience would understand, but not so obvious that you could be prosecuted for it," says Komische Opera's general director Andreas Homoki. "In the East there is more enthusiasm for theatre."

To counter and match the success of the companies in the GDR the Schaubühne was formed in the West. Under its artistic director Peter Stein the Schaubühne created a minutely detailed style which was particularly effective in Anton Chekhov productions. In the West the massive Schiller Theater and the Freie Volksbühne for a while boasted top class ensembles with some of the best actors in the German language.

But everything changed when the wall came down.

Actors and directors had to re-orientate and theatres redefined their profile. West Berliners were curious and travelled to see shows on the eastern side. East Berliners were less adventurous and consequently theatre attendance dwindled on the West Berlin side and led to the closure of the Schiller Theater and the Freie Volksbühne. Four out of the five major ensembles that continued to receive generous public funds were from the East. Directors previously shackled by the communists, now set alight Berlin's stages with innovative productions.

At the Volksbühne, local boy Frank Castorf put the cat amongst the pigeons with his iconoclastic "adaptations" of classic novels and American plays. Claus Peymann, one of Europe's most influential post-war directors, arrived in 1999 from Vienna to revitalise the by now plodding Berliner Ensemble. He is particularly keen on Austrian dramatists and keeps Brecht's legacy up to date. (The company's production of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* directed by the well known Robert Wilson – in Australia – continues to pull in the crowds.)

The Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz is also back to their controversial best with Thomas Ostermeier at the helm. A couple of years ago, the Adelaide Festival presented Ostermeier's deconstructive and visceral take on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

The Germans, and particularly Castorf and Ostermeier, have become the masters of interdisciplinary productions combining theatre, contemporary dance, music and visual effects. Sasha Waltz is the most successful Berlin-based choreographer working in this exciting crossover field. Waltz used to be co-artistic director at the Schaubühne and recently her company Sasha Waltz & Guests visited the Melbourne International Arts Festival with two superb productions, *Körper* and *Medea*.

Berlin still has a lively alternative dance scene but gone are the days when there were three major ballet companies. In 2004 they had to merge and the Staatsballett Berlin, led by the Russian Vladimir Malakhov, was formed.

"Berlin is in a permanent state of transition, always becoming something new and never arriving," Simon Rattle said when he took up his post as principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic in 2002.

To subsidise seven full-time symphony orchestras and three opera companies appeared excessive and the State of Berlin made plans for mergers. But Staatskapelle Berlin, with its 440 years of history, and the Berliner Philharmoniker, reckoned by many to be the best orchestra on the planet, were never in any danger of being axed. The Berliner Sinfonie-Orchester was the East's answer to the famous Philharmoniker, but when dissolution was proposed, their loyal subscribers took action.



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Today they play in the splendidly restored Konzerthaus and are also re-named after the venue. The Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester in the West and the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin in the East were both originally mainly radio orchestras. Now they have adapted and reinvented themselves and made sure they can offer something out of the ordinary. Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester with its adventurous conductor Ingo Metzmacher commissions more new works than any other orchestra in Berlin.

Each of Berlin's three major opera companies also has a very individual profile. At the stylishly rebuilt Staatsoper (the Berlin State Opera) situated on the grand boulevard Unter den Linden, the Argentine-Israeli superstar conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim has wielded the baton since 1992. He has clearly raised performance standards both on stage and in the pit where the famous Staatskapelle accompanies performers.

Deutsche Oper was built after the war to provide a large enough space to stage lavish productions of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss' masterpieces. During Götz Friedrich's reign (1981-2000) Deutsche Oper established a reputation for its superb productions of the Master of Bayreuth's works. After Friedrich's death Deutsche Oper struggled and went through many crises, but things are looking up since the Scotsman Donald Runnicles, renowned for conducting Wagner, took over the helm in August.

All productions at the Komische Oper, just off Unter den Linden, are sung in German. The building reopened in 1947



and artistic director Walter Felsenstein quickly made this the most exciting opera house in Berlin. His pioneering style also demanded from singers convincing acting.

"Now everyone who takes opera seriously as theatre is following the principles of Felsenstein," says Andreas Homoki. "We don't have big names. For us the ensemble is the big name." Komische Oper's brief is to be more adventurous and experimental than the two traditional companies. This is why Homoki made sure the Australian Barrie Kosky was appointed to become Komische Oper's chief director in 2012.

Audience figures for the symphony orchestras and the opera companies are impressive across the board, which explains why all talk of mergers have ceased for now. It also helps that Berlin's mayor and culture senator Klaus Wowereit's has a keen interest in classical music, otherwise this sector would almost certainly have suffered severe cuts. Berlin's level of debt stands at a staggering €60 billion (\$100 billion), largely due to excessive expenditure stemming from the reunification.

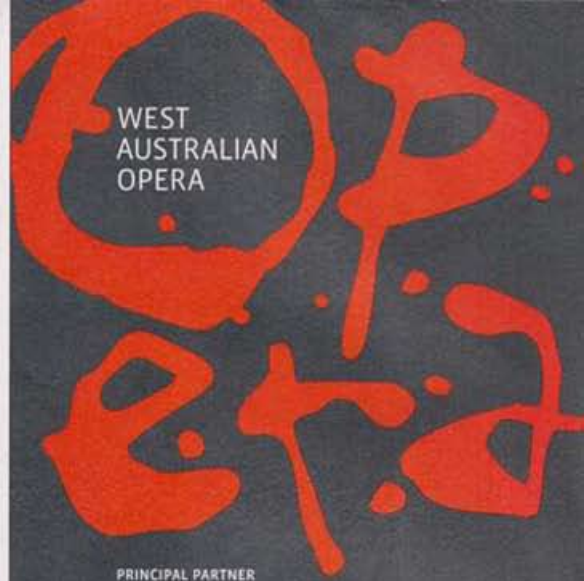
Reunification led to a building boom and many ruins were restored to their former glory. Museum Island in Berlin's Mitte district is a good example of this and an architectural triumph. Architects David Chipperfield and Julian Harrap recently finished the reconstruction of the classically stylish Neues Museum which houses the Egyptian and Early History collections.

"With all five museums on the island now operational it is clear that it is one of the European museum destinations together with the Louvre, British Museum and the Hermitage," says Alexander Schwartz, who as design director for David Chipperfield has been responsible for overseeing the Museum Island projects.

Twenty years after the wall was torn down Berlin is one of the top three tourist destinations in Europe and that is largely down to its vibrant and diverse arts scene. 📍

On Monday November 9 ABC Classic FM is marking the 20th anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall in Afternoons with a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony conducted by Leonard Bernstein and recorded on December 25, 1989 in Berlin. Drive programmer Jo Mason has selected the final movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as, she says, "it seems to symbolise the triumph of light over darkness, freedom over oppression."

1. The exterior of the Schaubühne theatre.
© Siegfried Bükler
2. Henrik Ibsen's *Nora*, performed by Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz.
© Arno Declair
3. Sasha Waltz & Guests performed their *Medea* at this year's Melbourne International Arts Festival.
© Sebastian Boleschr
4. Barrie Kosky's take on Verdi's *Rigoletto* for Komische Oper, Berlin.
© Iko Freese
5. Mozart's *Così fan tutte* performed by Komische Oper, Berlin.
© Monika Rittershaus
6. Conductor Ingo Metzmacher leads the Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin.



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