

Endless Possibilities

BY JOEL GEHRINGER

The *Deutsche Oper Berlin* buzzes tonight.

It's Friday, and as the work week ends, the weekend entertainment roars to life. At the opera house, citizens trickle into the lobby to buy tickets and rub elbows with friends and acquaintances before the main event. The modern building, clearly influenced by the architectural styles of the 1960s, begins to bustle as curtain time approaches.

The large auditorium steadily fills as patrons take their seats on several levels. The people are of all ages and social strata, some in jeans and others in black ties, elegant dress and heavy makeup. Children line up near the orchestra pit to steal a look while the musicians tune. Tonight, the opera company continues its production of *Die Zauberflöte* – *The Magic Flute* – an opera by Austrian Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and based on a German libretto.

At last, the lights dim and the murmur of the crowd subsides to an anticipatory silence. The conductor signals to his orchestra, and the magic begins. While the lights, scenery and costumes all indicate a modern, state-of-the-art production, the music, lyrics and humor bring to mind an illustrious classical tradition – a time of Enlightenment, elegance and ingenuity without equal.

In a classical sense, this is German culture.

Germany claims plenty of notables on which to pride itself: Ludwig van Beethoven, Johann Sebastian Bach, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Wagner – the names command respect in music, literature and philosophy circles worldwide.

By some estimates, Germany should claim the crown as cultural capital of the world; it epitomizes traditional classical culture. To know those names and to experience their work is to be “cultured,” and those at the opera tonight almost certainly understand this concept.

Less than a mile away, the Q-Dorf nightclub pulses. Its 300-some patrons arrive fashionably late to the party, and suddenly the venue comes to life as laser lights zip through the haze of cigarette



Classic choices, American imports characterize eclectic culture



PHOTO BY TERESA PRINCE

A rainy night does not deter fans from coming out to see *The Magic Flute* at the opera house. Germany is famous for classical composers such as Beethoven and Bach, but today, hip-hop and other American music dominate pop culture.

smoke. Tonight's theme is "Black Attack," and the disc jockeys spin the hip-hop and R&B tracks of Ludacris and Beyoncé as the crowd responds with a collective jolt of energy. Shoulder to shoulder, the people dance among friends and intermingle with strangers.

No majority population exists at Q-Dorf. Germans and Turks, whites and blacks, old, young and younger all swarm the bars as bodies move seamlessly past each other for ashtrays or alcohol. Smack in the middle of the dance floor, three "thugged-out" high school students compete with one another to see who's best at "krumping," a hip-hop dance style they learned from YouTube videos.

An aura of sex oozes through the masses as guys grab girls, girls grab guys, girls grab other girls and guys other guys. Before long, a woman in high-heeled boots climbs onto a bar in the center of the dance floor and shows off her stuff. She's joined by a shirtless man in a feathered fedora.

Meanwhile, another woman attracts the attention of a small group of admirers as she takes off her shirt to the rhythm of the music. That small group of admirers quickly grows. The DJ, in clear American English, asks for a round of applause for the night's impromptu performers, and everyone cheers for the bare-breasted woman who has made her way onto the Q-Dorf stage for another wild, alcohol-fueled dance number.

In another venue down the street, an American punk rock group performs, and across town, techno parties attract crowds of willing ravers – people searching for all-night dance parties. It's a typical night in Berlin's club scene, but all things considered, it could be Los Angeles or Miami. Music from the biggest rap artists and rock stars of the United States blares in establishments all across town, and, oddly enough, finding German music becomes something of a challenge.

This, too, is German culture – 50 years of outside influences manifesting themselves in a young populace eager to participate in the world around them.

But, as a whole, the German people have a hard time reconciling the tradition of "culture" and the reality of culture. This struggle occurs in the United States and other countries, too, but of all the world's nations, Germany might have the toughest task ahead in learning to accept its cultural elements.

Half a century of international turmoil and regrettable history has left the German people with an identity crisis. While Germans once understood who they were



PHOTO BY TERESA PRINCE

Revelers throw rose petals on the dance floor at the Keops Bar and Lounge in *Kreuzberg*, a Berlin district with a large Turkish population. Patrons began dancing at 1 a.m. after a long dinner and didn't stop until after 4.

and what they could take pride in, they now struggle with a violent past, a guilty conscience and a splintered population being forced toward homogeneity after decades of separation.

But as the divides between the cultures of East and West, North and South, old and young, traditional and Internet begin to close, Germans eager to define themselves now have an opportunity to re-imagine the German image, come to terms with differences and take pride in their identity once more.

The only question is whether they want to.

To understand the significant impact of history on Germany's culture, consider the role of the *Berliner Festspiele* organization during the past 50 years.

Smack dab between the agrarian, rural northern Germany and the stereotypical brat-eating, beer-drinking Bavarian southern Germany, Berlin played an important role as a political and cultural hotbed after World War II. Although the city had been a European center for writers and cabaret entertainment before the war, it had to rebuild its status after the Nazi regime.

The *Festspiele*, a government institution charged with organizing city-wide art, theater and music festivals of the more

high-class variety, finds its roots in the post-World War II years.

At the end of the war, the Allied Forces divided Germany into four zones, putting each zone under respective political and cultural influence of the British, French, Soviets and Americans. In 1948, the curtain began to fall between the democratic West and the communist East, effectively dividing the German populace for the first time since the German Empire's formation in 1871. Now, two German cultures existed, each claiming the people's historic past as its own.

With both countries tied up in reconstructing their cities and economies, traditional arts and customs suffered, and the national and cultural identities of each succumbed to the influences of capitalism and communism.

Enter the *Berliner Festspiele* – the Berlin Festivals – established to bring culture back to the life of the downtrodden Berliner.

"The idea was created during the Cold War," said Kerstin Schilling, head of corporate communication for the organization. "The first idea was to give the poor Berliners something cultural – something so that they can leave their hard life here in the city. The second thing was to make a window to East Europe. So for a long time it was an [emphasis] of the *Berliner Festspiele* to



PHOTO BY TERESA PRINCE

Oliver Suhr dressed as Tommy the Clown to spice up a party at the Q-Dorf hip-hop club. More than 1,000 patrons typically come to the large club on Friday and Saturday nights.

show things from Russia, from Poland, from Eastern Europe.”

Even in the early, nervous years of the Cold War, Berlin officials recognized the importance of maintaining a thriving culture. In addition to the oppressive threat of war between the East and West, Germans faced the lingering guilt of tearing Europe apart and committing atrocities beyond imagination during World War II. Suddenly, Germans weren't so proud of their heritage.

Those in the government understood this and felt the repercussions, too. At the same time, they knew not to let the German spirit sink too low.

“There's a preface of the first [*Festspiele*] program written by the mayor, and it's fantastic to read because it stated why we should spend money for culture at this time – six or seven years after World War II,” Schilling said. “He said, ‘Because we have to. We have to help the Berliner; we have to bring culture into this city.’ You can

only imagine how we felt at this time.”

And so the *Festspiele* began organizing high culture concerts and operas, daring to maintain Germany's cultural preeminence amid defeat and dejection. The organization supported not only the works of Brahms and Bach but compositions of modern German artists, too.

At the same time, the occupying United States rose to political dominance in world politics, and with it came American culture. Along with the rest of Western Europe, West Germany spent the next 40 years digesting jazz, blues, rock 'n' roll, Hollywood, television, McDonald's, Nike and Coca-Cola. A fascination with the American Way stormed through West Germany, and aside from a few rogue authors, artists, musicians and filmmakers, Germany's cultural contributors stayed relatively quiet.

Meanwhile, East Germans looked on, cultivating a culture without capitalist American imports. With nothing but the

Soviet influence to rely on, East German art, music and literature developed on its own. So, too, did the East German identity, largely shaped by the Communist regime. East Germans learned Russian instead of English or French like their Western counterparts. The social system and lifestyle of the East German adjusted to comply with communism as the country quickly became a shining beacon of Soviet success in Europe.

That pillar of Soviet strength collapsed on Nov. 9, 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent implosion of the Soviet Union. Germany reunified, and the two parallel cultures now coexisted under one roof – a free, democratic Germany.

But while a political reunification can happen overnight, a cultural reunification can't. And didn't.

The *Festspiele* now found itself a bridge between two groups of people who, despite their shared heritages, viewed their fellow

German as “the other.”

In the years since reunification, the *Festspiele* has featured cultural aspects of both East and West Germany, all the while attempting to erase the gap between the two.

But not all Berliners concerned themselves with the “high culture” the *Festspiele* represents. Many former East Germans opted toward the pop culture brewing in the streets of Berlin – the low culture of graffiti, techno and the World Wide Web. As youth across the globe developed a culture transcending political boundaries, eager East German youth wanted their print on the world, too.

Schilling said *Festspiele* research concluded only 50 percent of Germans are interested in what she dubbed “culture” – the traditional, classical art to which German contributions are so prominent.

But everyone is interested in some form of culture or another, and Germany has plenty of cultures to go around. East challenges West, capitalism challenges old communism, youth challenges tradition.

The *Festspiele* recognized this phenomenon and found success because of it. The organization now offers programs featuring theater, opera and fine art as well as world music, slam poetry and youth play productions.

“Sixteen or 17 years after the [end of the Cold War], you have this sort of laboratory here,” Schilling said. “Everything is possible in this town. It’s also in London, it’s also in New York, maybe in Paris, but not like this. It’s a special situation in Berlin.”

Today, the varying identities of Ger-

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Berliner Festspiele

mans are loosely connected by history, but that history is hardly monolithic and definitely undefined. Germans still carry the guilt of war and resentment of “the other” that threaten the one, true German way of life.

The need to understand one’s own identity is universal to the human condition, and for Germans, that peace of mind has been missing for more than 50 years. If pride and confidence in one’s national identity play any role in success on a domestic or international level, then Germany could have a serious problem on its hands.

Back in Q-Dorf, 18-year-old Yeisen Acosta-Medina has won the dance-off among his circle of friends. Compared to him, the others know nothing about this dance style.

Now that the contest is over, Acosta-Medina teaches a younger dancer a few new moves.

“I like house [a Chicago-based dance music] and hip-hop because it’s something I can dance to,” Acosta-Medina says, dressed the part with diamond-studded jewelry, a bandana around the neck, baggy jeans and boots – like some kind of ghetto cowboy.

He didn’t pick up his style in Berlin, however. He’s imitating the dancing and fashion he has seen in American music videos on the Internet.

Acosta-Medina and his friend Mike Lopez said they seek out hip-hop videos from Germany, too, but the American ones have the most “exciting” elements.

“[American music] is stylish,” Lopez says. “People just like it here.”

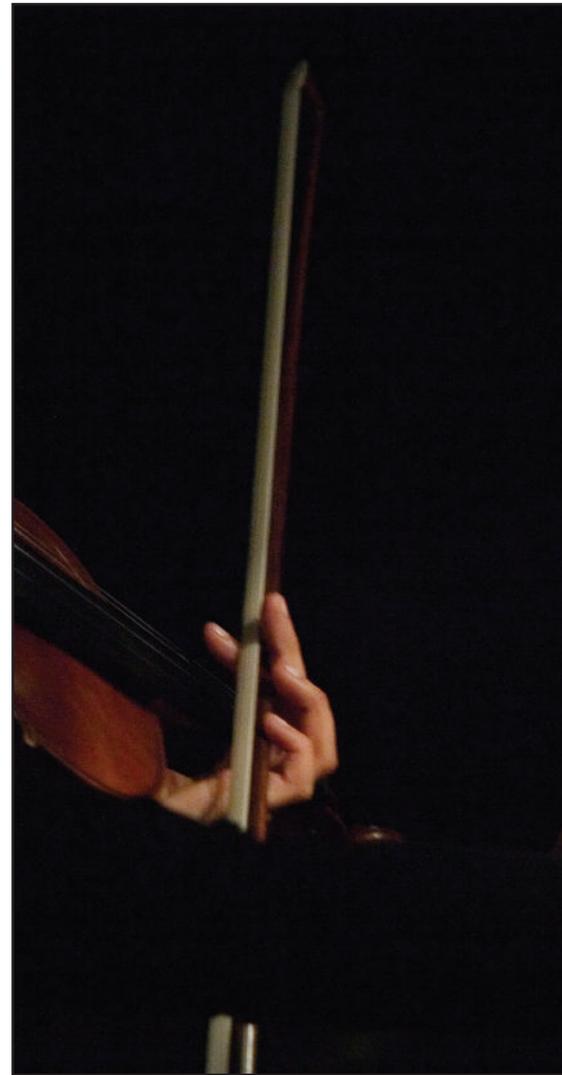
Meanwhile, the club’s emcee, DJ Van Tell, knows how to play his audience, and tonight the people want black music – as in house, hip-hop and R&B, all developed by African-Americans.

Van Tell, an African-American from Detroit, has spent eight years in Berlin, enough time to learn the tastes of German club-goers – or at least to know they have no taste for German-produced music.

“The Germans don’t want to hear that shit,” he shouts over the bass. “They want American stuff. What the Americans do is what they want to do.”

Sure enough, American culture dominates Berlin. Craving Burger King or Dunkin’ Donuts? There’s likely one around the corner, next to the theaters playing the latest Brad Pitt flick. On the train, punk rockers with fauxhawks and iPods exchange head nods with a middle-aged man wearing a Simpsons T-shirt and reading Hunter Thompson.

But while Germans consume American



culture, U.S. citizens hardly notice anything German in the states. A Volkswagen drives by, someone pops a Bayer aspirin and a film like “The Lives of Others” wins an Oscar. But German musicians and actors certainly don’t dominate U.S. television and movies as Americans do in Berlin.

The American influence supplants German culture and further complicates the identity question. In turn, Germans struggle to contribute culturally and turn to “superior” American imports. Van Tell and Lopez say they prefer American music because “it’s better.”

But perhaps that characterization too quickly paints Germans as mindless consumers of a foreign culture. Instead, the credit for this phenomenon may go to America’s cultural hegemony.



PHOTO BY TERESA PRINCE

Musicians tune before *The Magic Flute*. The production uses modern sets, costumes and lighting, but the 18th century music has not changed.

Yes, Germans love American culture, but so do the French, Israelis and Japanese. Teenagers in Africa idolize Atlanta's most prominent rappers just as much as suburban American teenagers do. Anyone who suggests Germany lacks originality because of its consumption of Big Macs and Coca-Cola is sorely misguided.

On the contrary, Germany digests whatever hegemonic imports it can and, like any thriving culture would, reshapes them to fit its own needs. Thus, American culture gets molded into the German way of life and, after a period of time, becomes uniquely German.

The hip-hop lifestyle exemplifies this transformation. As a distinctly American form of music, hip-hop entered Germany as its role as a tool of political and social

criticism waned in the United States. In the meantime, lower-class Germans and Turkish and Arab immigrants discovered the tool and used it just as black Americans had.

Rap became a lifestyle in Germany, a counterculture of social uplift and rebellion. Today, the immigrant population has made the country's hip-hop community one of the largest outside of the United States.

The same principle inspired the New German Cinema movement in the '60s and '70s. Fed up with the country's failing film industry, directors effectively rebelled against television and Hollywood by incorporating elements of existing Hollywood genres.

Today, at least part of German culture can claim the United States as its primary inspiration, and as Americans once searched

for their versions of Bach and Beethoven, Germans now seek out their Bart Simpson and "Baywatch."

And Acosta-Medina furiously labors on the floors of Q-Dorf to invent the first great German hip-hop dance.

Not all Germans like the 21st century model of German culture. Inside a local record store in Berlin's wealthy *Charlottenburg* neighborhood, an elderly clerk scoffs at a customer inquiring about hip-hop clubs.

"I don't know any because I don't listen to that; it's garbage," he says. He tersely advises the customer to search out some other kind of music – a style that might better represent Germany's musical traditions. Hip-hop, he implies, just isn't German.

Later that night, two Berliners, dressed to kill and looking for a party, beg to differ.

"We're two guys who know a lot of good music," says one, 19-year-old Lucas Schnochenberg. "I think rap is good – from America, but also from Germany."

The two say rap is part of German culture without defining what they mean by the term. For them, the idea of a unifying German identity isn't comfortable. It's limiting and restrictive. These guys don't necessarily want to be associated with the lederhosen-wearing, oompah music-playing Germans in Bavaria – colloquially referred to as the Texas of Germany.

"Here in Berlin it's very multicultural," Schnochenberg adds, saying he no longer pays attention to differences between Easterners and Westerners or German culture and American culture.

Among Berliners, older generations tend to disagree with that statement, and the young seem to support it. But neither Schnochenberg nor his friend Alex Ruthsatz is naive enough to believe Germany's cultural rifts are bridged.

Time proverbially heals all wounds, and among Germany's youth, the healing seems to have begun.

But while Germans may still fret over preserving Germany's historic culture, for those young enough not to remember November 1989, the idea of German-ness hardly qualifies as important.

Ruthsatz and Schnochenberg reflect the sentiment. They are less concerned with their German identity than with their identity as multicultural citizens of the world. Political boundaries seem to fade in their minds.

In recent years, German politicians and activists opened a discussion on what defines German culture. What they have found



PHOTO BY HILARY STOHS-KRAUSE

Sabrina Mundt, right, visits the hip-hop club Q-Dorf with a friend. American music and dance styles abound at the Berlin hot spot.

is a young populace that no longer carries history in the forefront of its mind and no longer wants to be defined by a strictly German identity.

"We had a very big discussion here about the leading culture," said Paul R ather of the *Werstatt der Kulturer*, a community center formed to give minority populations a means for political and artistic expression. "Some politicians brought that topic into discussion. But they have never really thought about what is German culture. It has been a mixed thing since ever. There is no such thing as a distinct culture anywhere."

That sentiment gains credence by the minute as the concepts of globalization and worldwide Internet access begin to dominate international relations.

Increasingly, national identity cedes importance to a universal, global culture that German, Turk, American and Iraqi alike can understand.

Instead of waiting for the latest news and cultural developments to reach Germany's borders through magazines or television, the country's Internet generation can find what it wants immediately.

Suddenly, being a part of the German culture isn't important. Suddenly, being a part of a global Internet culture is.

"I think [the Internet has] its own Internet culture, which is very multicultural, and maybe it blends the good aspects of a lot of cultures," Schnochenberg said.

Van Tell couldn't have said it better himself.

"It's a world culture now," he said. "Everything you know, they know, and they love it just as much as you do."

But not everyone loves it. The *Berliner Festspiele* still struggles to find ways to attract younger people to its traditional events. Meanwhile, Ruthsatz and Schnochenberg log on to watch the latest movie

trailers, and Acosta-Medina posts his dance video on YouTube.

Even America's cultural hegemony loses influence under the weight of an interconnected global society. Now the world knows Germans are just as creative and inventive as their American counterparts, even if they don't see it in their streets and on their television sets.

"It's all around the world," Van Tell said. "It's in Africa, it's in America, it's in Germany. People are going to get what they want to get, and it ain't going to matter where it comes from anymore."

In the summer of 2006, Germany hosted the FIFA World Cup, with Germany finishing third, losing only to Italy, the eventual champions.

The run marked a historic moment in German sports, and that summer's pride and excitement resonated throughout the



PHOTO BY TERESA PRINCE

A crowd gathers at the Keops Bar and Lounge to watch Levent, a Turkish singer, who fled from Istanbul for the performance.

streets of Berlin. For the first time since the Third Reich, Germans flew their country's flag outside their homes. Fans rallied around the home team and expressed love of their homeland. Suddenly, being German did not mean being ashamed and guilty.

Strange as it was for some at first, German identity had become a source of pride again.

"It was something really weird for the German mind somehow, and we realized how happy, unprecedented patriotism can work," said Marcus Heithecker, managing editor of the Berlin newspaper *Die Welt*.

"It was just with football, but it was a moment of awakening where you realized there is another way of being a patriot. On another level, an intellectual level, we had suddenly millions of people going to museums and rediscovering historical exhibitions and finding the good part of Germany, something before 1933."

Since that summer, Germans have re-discovered a pre-Hitler Germany, one they called a Land of Ideas, one the world's thinkers called home. Now, German identity once again means something more than war crimes and walls. It means Enlightenment and Reformation.

Memories of war still prevail, but guilt is subsiding. For the first time, academic discussion of war's lessons and legacy begins without the stigma of past actions.

"For decades, especially after the second world war, Germans had a problem being proud of being German," said Irmgard Maria Fellner of the Federal Foreign Office. "I remember when I was a youngster it was absolutely impossible to hang a German flag outside your house, which [Americans] do almost on a daily basis. It was impossible to sing the national anthem in public. You would be called a racist, a nationalist in your own country. Gradually, this has

been evolving. Slowly it has become OK to be proud to be German."

The nation seems ready to forgive itself and awaken from its cultural dormancy. Perhaps it's even ready to embrace the variations within its own identity.

"It doesn't matter anymore if you meet someone from East Berlin or West Berlin," Schnochenberg said. "It doesn't really make a difference. There's a little difference in style of talking or behavior, but there's not really those gaps anymore."

Slowly but surely, Germans are becoming comfortable with themselves. As years pass, Germany's wounds heal, and while the culture of old retains its advocates, history would teach that the new German culture — one of tolerance, pride and invention — will once again dominate the Land of Ideas.

"There is a change in the mind-set, more or less," Heithecker said, "and we don't know where it goes to just yet." ■