BDSLife's John Hudson visits Saxony's cultural heart, home to Bach and Mendelssohn, birthplace of Wagner, the city where Schiller wrote "Ode to Joy", the Expressionist haunt of Max Beckmann, the site of one of Europe's most prestigious universities, a hotbed for German publishing since the Reformation – Wittenberg is nearby - and home to the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek...

Deutsche Nationalbibliothek in Leipzig: **An Open Book**



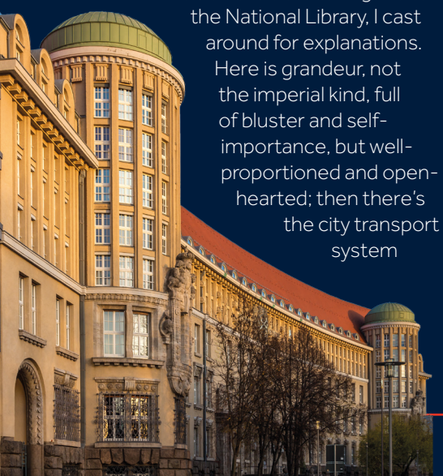
The exterior of the 4th extension added in 2011, inspired byBach's Goldberg Variations



Sandra Baumgart, Assistant to the Library Director.

As I leave Leipzig's Hauptbahnhof, I feel an agreeable sense of space and calm permeating this city situated just an hour and a half by rail southwest of Berlin.

Space is a strange thing to feel in a city that is home to 600,000 people, and as I sit on the tram taking me to the National Library, I cast around for explanations. Here is grandeur, not the imperial kind, full of bluster and self-importance, but well-proportioned and open-hearted; then there's the city transport system that seems to cope with room to spare, and the people, affable, unrushed, seem happy.



The tram trundles past the Opera House and the Gewandhaus, home to one of the world's top orchestras, stops beside gardens with lilac in bloom and sets me down before a complex of buildings the nearest of which resembles a book lying flat. Covered in coloured glass, I learn some time later that the architect took inspiration from Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, written only a few hundred meters away. The vertical lines, curves and juxtaposition of colours certainly suggest the complexity and homogeneity of the German composer's music.

I walk to the Library's main entrance. It balances solidity with rhythm and detail with relaxed humanity. The words "Deutsche Bücherei" allude to the Library's origins, an era before the Nationalbibliothek was formed after the unification of Germany in 1990.

Back in 1912 the City of Leipzig, the Kingdom of Saxony and the Börsenverein der Deutschen Buchhändler (Association of German Booksellers) agreed to found a German Library. From 1913, all publications produced in Germany were systematically collected, including books from Austria and Switzerland. This public-minded project, built from diverse sources and private funding, offers an interesting historical contrast to initiatives in other countries that were linked via Royal decree to censorship and social control.

With the division of Germany after the Second World War, there were two libraries which assumed the duties and function of a national library, one for the GDR in Leipzig and the other in Frankfurt am Main for the Federal Republic of Germany. Two national bibliographic catalogues, almost identical in content, were published annually. After unification, the "Law regarding the German National Library" came into force and the combined institutions became the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.

As I climb the stairs and enter the cavernous entrance hall, I am greeted by Sandra Baumgart, Assistant to the Library Director, Michael Fernau. She is to take me on a tour of the main building and its four subsequent extensions.

Visiting the Leipzig branch of the German National Library is a very different experience from visiting Frankfurt, which *BDSLife* covered in the Summer of 2016. The diverse political ideologies that have governed Leipzig are literally written in stone and concrete. As you walk through the reading rooms, and the remarkable German Music Archive, recent European history is enacted before you.

The Great Reading Room, now dedicated to the study of the humanities, was part of the original building. It is huge. Desks punctuate like quavers across a Bach manuscript. The dark wood of the stairs and shelves contrasts with the tall, bright windows. It is like an enlarged view into the workings of a computer. Even the unoccupied chairs wait in regular rows to accommodate the spirit of enquiry that is the human mind aided by that unique resource, the book.

The next room I visit, the Science Reading Room, is perhaps even more remarkable. Bauhaus designer Mart Stam conceived what must be one of the most beautiful reading rooms in any library, yet it is little known. Opened in 1937, when the Deutsche Bücherei was under the control of the Ministry of Propaganda, this room impressively demonstrates the Bauhaus aesthetic, but is difficult to reconcile with the National Socialist era that had it constructed. Its refinement invites learned enquiry but this Bauhaus masterpiece was once decorated with the profile bust of Adolf Hitler. Time heals and today readers feel "at home" in a delightfully cultured environment. The furnishings include black tables, dark-green shaded lamps, tear-shaped ceiling lights, a balustrade secured with curved metal tubes, cantilever chairs and a faceless wall clock.

With the division of Germany after the Second World War, Leipzig came under communist rule, and the GDR emphasised social responsibility and common goals. At first, I feel deflated by the Technology Reading Room and I am almost ushered past its Formica tables, regimented bookcases and ambient, factory-like lighting. But there is a story here, too, and an impressive mural that expresses progress, peace and hope, and I reflect that, more than any other library I have visited, I am forced to confront diverse and often contradictory trends in humanity's view of knowledge and the value of learning, a confrontation that is brought home even more strongly in the next reading room.

The Anne Frank Shoah Library is an international research library with the purpose of providing literature published worldwide about the persecution and extermination of European Jews under National Socialism. It also collects publications relating to the persecution of people for ethnic, religious, political or other reasons. It currently contains around 16,000 books, journals, audio-visual media items, maps and other materials that are directly accessible for use in the reading room that has the atmosphere of a cathedral, a place deserving reverence where conflict should never trespass.

Libraries are about much more than preserving heritage; they also probe it, unmask it and, through exposure, change it and in so doing change us.

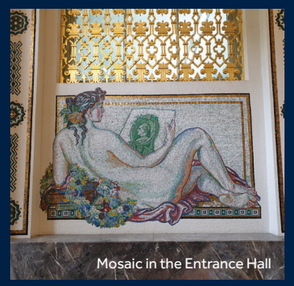
In my article on the DNB at Frankfurt, I referred to the Deutsche Musikarchiv as, "surely one of the world's treasures". Now, as I follow Sandra into the fourth and most recent extension to the Library, opened in 2011, I come face to face with it.

The archive is responsible for sheet music and sound recordings relating to Germany's remarkable musical heritage. It seems fitting that Leipzig, perhaps the most musical of all German cities, should house this invaluable collection. The Archive is equipped with work areas and stacks, a music reading room, a listening booth including surround-sound system, and a state-of-the-art recording studio complex.

A large glass cabinet, rising the height of the foyer, houses items of interest – vinyl discs, piano rolls, sheet music, early instruments and gramophones, and I realise that making music has as much to do with the technology used to produce sound as notes on a stave. Part of the role of this archive is to preserve not only the mind of Johann Sebastian Bach but also the means of interpreting and reproducing his genius.

Sandra and I walk onto the brightly lit stairs that open onto the German Museum of Books and Writing and the current temporary exhibition, housed in the magnificent Bach-inspired extension. As she says goodbye, she drops into conversation that a fifth extension is being planned.

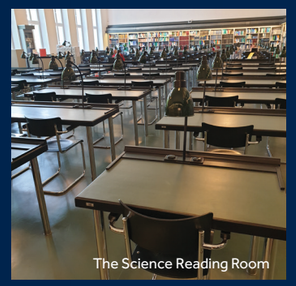
A new chapter in the history book of this building is soon to be written, a narrative that will no doubt reflect a new age and outlook to be handed to future generations. I will come back to read more in this city with space to spare, time to give and an open heart. Leipzig and its Library are European gems.



Mosaic in the Entrance Hall



The Great Reading Room



The Science Reading Room



The Exhibition Room