

by Duncan J. D. Smith

It's winter, and only the hardest souls are out exploring Vienna's back streets. With many content to stay indoors, perhaps now is the time for a little crowd-free urban exploration – and the place to go is Mölker Bastei. This unsung city corner near Schottentor offers five hundred years of history, all within a stone's throw of the bustling Rathaus Christmas market.

A Renaissance Ring

To visit Mölker Bastei is to step back in time. The journey begins at the bottom of a flight of steps, opposite an entrance to the Palais Ephrussi, made famous in the recent memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. (For a review, see “The Ephrussi Family Legacy”, TVR June 2011, and a reading, see “The Restitution of Memory,” TVR November 2011.) The steps rise steeply, culminating in a cul-de-sac of smart 18th-century town houses. The presence of the hill on which the fine old houses stand seems a mystery in a relatively flat city like Vienna, until one learns this is one of the last bastions of the Renaissance city wall. Windows at pavement level give an impression of the case mates that once riddled the wall, enabling troops to be deployed without being seen.

Erected between 1531 and 1566 to protect Vienna against the Ottoman Turks, the wall was a colossal construction. Eight metres high and 20 metres wide, it was punctuated by gates and towers, and ran along the course of today's Ringstrasse. Vienna's famously grand boulevard was laid out after the walls were demolished in the 1850s, for fear they might be used to harbour homegrown revolutionaries, as had happened in 1848.

Home of Fidelio

Quite why the Mölker Bastei escaped demolition is a mystery, although it could be some-

STONES OF VIENNA

In a space scarcely larger than a tennis court, the Mölker Bastei is a quiet oasis of a past era in a busy part of town

Exploring Beethoven's Bastion with Harry Lime

thing to do with the house at the far end of the row. This is the Pasqualati-haus (named after its onetime owner), where on the fourth floor Ludwig van Beethoven lived from 1804 to 1808 and again from 1810 to 1814. The composer penned his only opera *Fidelio* here, in a famously unkempt apartment with an overflowing chamberpot centre stage!

Take a peep inside the building's courtyard to see how light and fresh air were channelled to the inhabitants, and constructed so that a horse-drawn fire engine could enter in an emergency. Note, too, the communal water basin, and the rooftop hoist used to haul furniture into the upper storeys.

Harry Lime's Doorway

A sharp left turn sees Mölker Bastei become Schreyvogelgasse, and the houses here are suddenly Baroque. One of them, the Dreimäderlhaus, boasts a charming bell pull in the shape of a human hand, and is where Schubert allegedly wooed three sisters simultaneously through an upstairs window. Whilst this seems unlikely, it is documented for certain that in

1853 Emperor Franz Joseph I was attacked hereabouts by a knife-wielding Hungarian assassin. He was saved by his Irish adjutant, one Max O'Donnell, and in thanks ordered the construction of the nearby Votivkirche, or Church of Thanks.

As the street widens, another Baroque house appears on the lefthand side, its façade adorned



The courtyard of the Pasqualatihaus, where Beethoven lived and worked Photo: Duncan Smith

with a golden house ornament in the form of God's all-seeing eye. The unassuming doorway beneath it is where Orson Welles appears for the first time as Harry Lime in the 1949 film classic *The Third Man*. The camera crew threw buckets of water over the cobbled street so as to enhance the scene's glistening *film noir* feeling.

Subterranean Surprise

To the left of Harry's doorway, a narrow road leads upwards between further rows of apartment houses, traversing the full thickness of the old city wall in the process. At the top it descends by means of another staircase into what would have been the city proper, where more of the old brick-built bastion can be scrutinised. Look really carefully and you can see how each brick is stamped with the double eagle of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy – made by royal appointment.

At the bottom of the stairs is Tostmann Trachten, the perfect place to stock up on winter woolies. The shop occupies a small part of the so-called Melker-Hof, an imposing Baroque building constructed by the monks of Melk Abbey, who occupied it during their visits to the city. (The bastion bears their name, too). From 1629 onwards, the monks were permitted to sell their own wine in Vienna, and they stored it in vast cellars beneath the building – all forty thousand litres of it each year. These labyrinthine cellars, which were used as an air raid shelter during the Second World War, can be visited on request. And when you re-emerge, you can reward yourself with a warming mug of *Punsch* from the nearby Christmas market. ◆

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