

THE CITY OF MUSIC

A trip to Austria's capital proves the perfect harmony of old-world charm and music, writes Marian McGuinness.

“The café, this street, Vienna itself is a theme park: a film set. Fiakers trundling round with coachmen in greatcoats. Strauss is everywhere, seeping from the chocolate shops. I keep expecting Mahler to walk in, or Klimt to start an argument.”

I am reading Edmund de Waal's bestseller, *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*, to immerse myself into the world of composer and conductor Gustav Mahler. I'm a 21st-century traveller channelling the late 19th century as I join a cultural tour led by the expertise of Limelight Arts Travel. Together we will follow Mahler's seismic path through Vienna to Bohemian Prague, enriching ourselves with the musical, artistic and natural landscapes of not only Mahler, but his gifted 'tribe'.

Vienna's music aficionados

Apprehension niggles as our group meets in the foyer of Hotel Royal. How will two dozen eclectic people gel? Will there be music snobs? It's soon evident by the buzz that we may be an eclectic group of travellers, but we're all on the same music journey.

We don headsets and embark on a walking tour to get our bearings. The hot-pink café beside our hotel is called Aida. That's a musical positive, as is Richard Wagner's piano in our hotel foyer. Our tour leaders are arts writer, critic and Mahler aficionado Clive Paget, and Robert Veel, an art, architecture and history specialist. They become not only expert leaders but friends.

Vienna is known as The City of Music and it's everywhere. In the buskers singing arias, the church bells ringing

the air and the rhythmical clip-clop of horses pulling their carriages (*fiakers*) of tourists, much like the singing gondoliers of Venice. In a crooked medieval alley, there's a decorative plaque of Augustin, a 17th-century bagpiper who visited beer houses spreading joy with his music. During the plague, Augustin was drunk and thought dead. Picked up by the plague cart he was dumped in a mass grave. When he woke on top of the bodies, the only way to get help was to play his bagpipes. He was saved. He didn't get the plague probably due to his great dousing of alcohol.

Our first evening finishes with our own alcohol-doused aperitivo in the hotel's glass-walled Ristorante Settimo Cielo with animated conversations and views over St Stephen's Cathedral, the Imperial Palace and all the way to the Vienna Woods.

Following in the footsteps of Gustav Mahler

Our early days are spent discovering Mahler, his relationship with Vienna and the composers who influenced him. We board a coach named *Richard Wagner* and visit Franz Schubert's birthplace. I'm intrigued by his glasses. He slept wearing them in case he woke with a musical idea. He helped carry Beethoven's coffin, even though they never met. They're even buried side by side, at Schubert's request. Mahler was also greatly inspired by Beethoven's symphonies. We visit the Beethoven Museum in Heiligenstadt, one of Ludwig's 68 Viennese addresses. He was quite the lad, even scribbling notes on a wooden windowsill. While the owner made him pay for the sill, he later

sold it for a small fortune. After lunch at the historic Pfarrewirt restaurant, with its Viennese cuisine and wine from its vineyards, we make a pilgrimage to Grinzing to pay our respects at Mahler's grave. Born in Bohemia into a Jewish, German-speaking family, Mahler died in 1911, aged 51. His grave is a simple grey vertical slab topped with small stones (a Jewish sign of respect). He is buried with his four-year-old daughter Maria, who died of scarlet fever four years before her father. The night brings the first of an indulgence of concerts and operas throughout Vienna and Prague. Inside the Vienna State Opera House, where Mahler was director for 10 years, it's a celebration of ivory, gold, glitter and glitzy gowns.

Our group has prime seats for Giacomo Puccini's tragic opera, *Tosca*, starring the Welsh bass-baritone, Bryn Terfel as Scarpia, the lustfully-corrupt Chief of Police. How Terfel could sing so magnificently with a snarl pasted permanently on his face was surely a work of divine intervention.

History abounds

Our *Richard Wagner* coach has been usurped and we're now travelling on *Mozart* through the Vienna Woods.

Tour leaders Clive and Robert tag-team the commentary and we are drawn deeper into the life of Mahler and his fellow composers.

They were profoundly inspired by these enigmatic forests that take my imagination into the world of Grimms' fairy tales. We stop deep in the Vienna Woods at Heiligenkreuz (Holy Cross) Abbey. Established in 1133, it is the

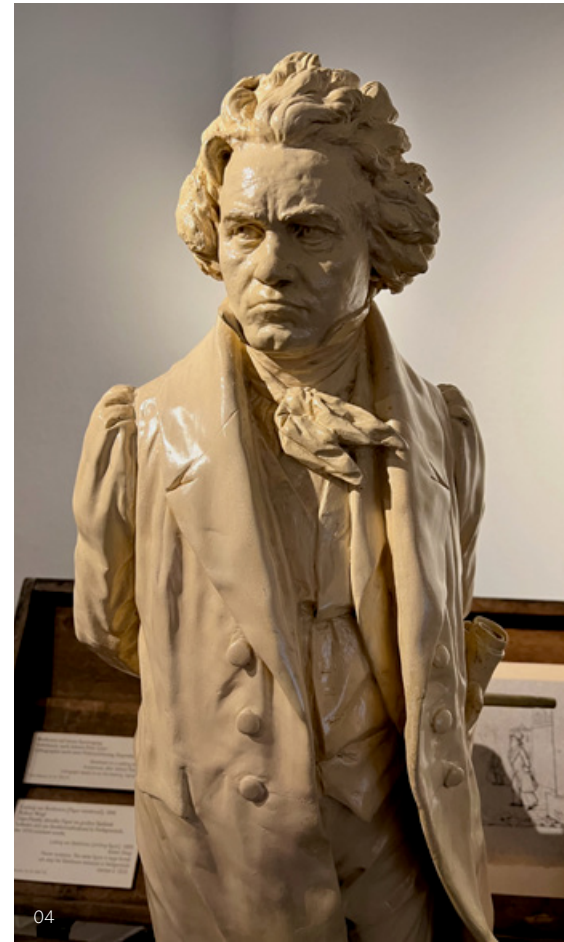




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02 The monastery of Heiligenkreuz Abbey
03 The pretty Vienna skyline © Jacek Dylag/
Unsplash 04 A statue of Beethoven in his
former house in Heiligenstadt

oldest continuously-active monastery in the world. Today, 50 monks live here where beauty is in every detail from the black-and-white stained glass to the pew carvings and slightly macabre dancing-skeleton candlesticks.

Before noon we slip into the chapel. The white-robed monks process to their choir stalls and open their prayer books. The noon bell peals and they begin their prayers of deeply mystical Gregorian chants. We are mesmerised.

Our day concludes with a concert in Vienna's Musikverein, home of the Vienna Philharmonic and the hugely popular, globally televised New Year's concert. I'm seated in a gilded box to experience the extraordinary program of Bach, Bartók and Brahms with Iván Fischer at the baton and Sir Andrés Schiff at the piano.

Driving to Prague through asparagus fields, vineyards and an inland sea of wind turbines we pass through the old Iron Curtain into Bohemia and the Czech lands. Mahler grew up in Jihlava, a tiny, silver-mining town. We visit the Mahler House of his youth, which offers a fascinating visual presentation of the man and his music.

Our guide Jana confides, "the music of Gustav Mahler started on the street, continued through nature and ended in the universe."

Sitting in the Rudolfinum in Prague, I surrender to Mahler's *Symphony No.1*; filled with nature's imagery that I now more fully appreciate. Also raising the roof is French viola virtuoso, Antoine Tamestit, playing the first viola built by Antonio Stradivari. What a riveting trio: Mahler, Tamestit and his Stradivarius.

As Clive Paget reflects, "Mahler walked his own path and was pilloried in his life. He polarised people like a tantalising piece of poison fruit."

Yet this visionary genius, who straddled the 19th and 20th centuries, has left us a profound musical legacy. Mention Beethoven and concerts sell out. Mention Bohemian Gustav Mahler, the titan of symphonic composition, and the same phenomenon occurs.

How could it not? ♦

Travel file

Getting there

You can fly to Vienna from all major Australian cities.

Information

austria.info

limelight-arts-travel.com.au