

Austria

Ode to Vienna

The mundane and the magnificent merge in a moving tour of Beethoven's adopted city, writes Marian McGuinness

When Beethoven arrived in Vienna in 1792, his shopping list included, in order, wigmaker, coffee, boots, a pianoforte desk, a seal and a writing desk. I notice how precise he was about his coffee, counting 60 beans for each cup. Multiply that by dozens of cups a day, according to some sources, and I can only imagine how charged his creative mind must have been.

I feel a coffee affinity already with this most venerated of composers when I arrive in 21st-century Vienna to join a small cultural tour group with Limelight Arts Travel. I'm excited to hear our muse and guide Clive Paget announce in a dimly lit, wood-panelled coffee house, "We are immersing ourselves in Vienna." A Vienna that in Beethoven's time was a hotspot, attracting the good and the great of music, art and divergent thinking.

After a walking orientation of the city's historic centre, passing buskers singing arias and horse-drawn carriages clip-clopping past the mosaic-tiled St Stephen's Cathedral, we're soon riding high in a classy coach named Mozart along the Ringstrasse, nicknamed the Champs-Élysées of Vienna, passing opulent once-privately owned palais, now exclusive hotels.

We're heading to the nearby Vienna Woods. Famous music names trip off Paget's tongue: Beethoven, Mozart, Mahler, Wagner, Strauss, Schubert, Vivaldi, Brahms, then those who shone in other fields – Gustav Klimt, Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, WH Auden.

These wild woods with their dappled tracks evoke the whimsy and menace of the Grimms' fairytales. They were an inspiration and refuge to many who trekked with their notebooks and pencils in hand, recording what they heard.

In the bucolic spa town of Heiligenstadt at a two-storey cream and brown building that once housed the town's bakery, there's a large treble clef stretching across the cobbles like a hero's welcome. This is one of the dozens of apartments where Beethoven lived. At age 32, his doctor advised him to leave noisy Vienna to save his deteriorating hearing. The former apartment block is now the soul-stirring Beethoven Museum.

Beethoven was quite the lad, according to our other guide, Verena Mochar. He often didn't pay his rent and was booted out. Other times he was a noisy neighbour, hammering loudly on the piano keys, feeling their vibrations until the strings broke. He had food scattered around in various stages of consumption and was lax with emptying his chamber pot. When the weather was hot, he doused himself with water that seeped through the floorboards to the tenants below. At one point, Beethoven composed on a windowsill. The owner made him pay for a new one, later selling the windowsill for a small fortune.

The more deeply I probe, the more emotionally connected I become. I'm confronted by his grand piano with the metal shell constructed over the strings to amplify the sound. I read the translation of a letter he wrote to his brothers confiding in them his despair over his deafness when he had so much music to compose. He writes of suicide, but never sends the letter. It was found after his death 20 years later, in a locked desk compartment.

Back in Vienna I have time to relax in the Art Deco splendour of one of the city's finest coffee houses, Café Sluka, choosing between plump strudel, almond-flaked torte and a chestnut heart to accompany my Viennese coffee.

Nights with our tour group bring an indulgence of concerts and operas in the ivory, gilt and glitter of the Vienna State Opera and the stately, temple-like Musikverein, home to the Vienna Philharmonic's celebrated annual New Year's Concert.

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Clockwise from top: Vienna's skyline at sunrise; the treble clef set into cobblestones outside the Beethoven Museum in Heiligenstadt; a horse-drawn carriage tour; autumn in the Vienna Woods.

Photography: Marian McGuinness (carriage)



ESCAPE ROUTE

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STAYING THERE

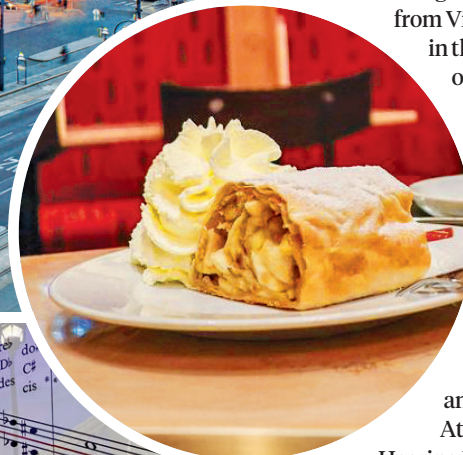
The elegant glamour of Hotel Royal in the heart of Vienna is adjacent to St Stephen's Cathedral and is surrounded by cafes and restaurants. It has Richard Wagner's piano in the lobby and a glass restaurant on the top floor overlooking the city. [hotelroyal.at](https://www.hotelroyal.at)

TOURING THERE

Limelight Arts Travel offers expert-led, eclectic small-group cultural journeys in Australia and internationally. [limelight-arts-travel.com.au](https://www.limelight-arts-travel.com.au)



Clockwise from top: Vienna State Opera; Café Sluka's apple strudel; piano staircase at the House of Music.



But there's a Beethoven earworm that won't leave me. A child is busking on a violin playing "Ode to Joy" – the soaring, choral finale of Beethoven's *Symphony No 9*, his final complete symphony. It's been performed by flashmobs, adopted as the EU anthem, conducted by Leonard Bernstein at the fall of the Berlin Wall, sung by Chilean protesters resisting Pinochet's dictatorship and blazoned across Tiananmen Square by Chinese students.

Needing to reconnect with Beethoven I head a few streets from Vienna's heartbeat centre to the House of Music in the Sound Museum in the 19th-century palace of Archduke Karl. Its five floors bristle with memorabilia including Brahms's reading glasses, Strauss's conducting batons and original manuscripts. It's hi-tech, interactive and multimedia.

I dance up the black and white piano staircase mind-singing *Do-Re-Mi*. On one floor, I compose a waltz using simulated, musical dice and on another floor I conduct the virtual Vienna Philharmonic as the orchestra waxes and wanes to my digital baton flailing. At the newest installation called Beethoven's Hearing Loss, I don headphones. Using touchscreens, I move through the chronology of his composing life, hearing what he heard. By the time I reach 1824 and the premiere of *Symphony No. 9*, composed when he was profoundly deaf, all I hear is staccato taps. It's then that I weep for the complex genius whose hearing was sealed forever.

The writer was a guest of Limelight Arts Travel.



Marian McGuinness wishes she could have time-travelled to the golden age of Vienna when she was studying piano as a child.

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