



Austria: Organs & Abbeys

Historic instruments in magnificent monasteries and remote rural churches

26 May–1 June 2025 (ML 699)

£3,290 • 7 days

Lecturer: Simon Williams

Upper and Lower Austria, one of the finest concentrations of historic organs in Europe.

Hear recitals, talks and demonstrations on 13 of them by their regular organists.

Many located in spectacular abbeys, also in modest rural churches and historic towns.

Wonderful landscapes, upland and lowland, with the mighty Danube a recurring presence.

With its exceptional heritage of chamber and orchestral music and of song and opera, it is not widely appreciated that the organ has been central to Austrian cultural life – and remains so. Upper and Lower Austria together possess one of the finest concentrations of outstanding instruments in Europe. On this tour you have the privilege of hearing around a dozen major historical organs and a couple of modern ones played by the organists who know them best. At the core of each recital will be pieces that highlight the distinct qualities of each organ.

The host buildings provide another strand of interest, for the organs are ensconced in an array of churches of immense visual and historic interest. Some of the greatest and most beautiful monastic complexes in Europe are on the itinerary as well as some parish churches, both impressive and modest. Many are Baroque, with all the frenetic gorgeousness of that style to the fore, and some are medieval.

The third striking feature is landscape – thrilling upland scenery with hay meadows, intense green pasturage, dark woodlands and breath-taking vistas; undulating, agrarian lowlands; and the riverine delights of the mighty Danube. Many communities developed along its banks, in the form of pretty villages and well preserved historic towns.

Five hundred years of organ building are represented on this tour, with instruments ranging from the grand to the tiny. All have been restored and nurtured in recent years. Each recital (of between 20 and 40 minutes) will be preceded by a conversation between the player and Simon Williams, the MRT expert, together with a demonstration of the more distinctive stops. In most cases you can choose between sitting in the organ gallery (up to 30 steps) or in the pews below.



Dürnstein, 1820s aquatint by Jacob Alt (1789–1872)

Itinerary

Day 1: Heiligenkreuz. Fly at c. 9.00am from London Heathrow to Vienna (Lufthansa). Wrapped around by the hills of the Vienna Woods, the Cistercian abbey at Heiligenkreuz is one of the great sights of Austria. The Romanesque nave of the church is beautifully austere, the cuboid Gothic chancel an astonishing contrast. The 1804 organ, between Baroque and Romantic, was built by Ignaz Kober and the organists for today's recital are Pater Tarcisius (a monk) and Daniel Schmidt. First of three nights in Dürnstein.

Day 2: Krems, Herzogenburg. Ancient circuitous cobbled lanes thread through Krems-an-der-Donau. The hilltop Piaristenkirche is Gothic and has an organ of 1892 in a Baroque case. Jesuit-style St Veit, 'the cathedral of the Wachau', has a Baroque-type organ built in 1986 by Gerhard Hradetzky. Both are played by Ronald Peter, church organist here since 1986 (when he was 13). Stift Herzogenburg, an Augustinian abbey of the 1720s, combines architectural restraint with decorative richness. The organ, in a splendid green and gold case, is played by Johannes Zimmerl.

Day 3: Dürnstein, Altenburg. The abbey on the banks of the Danube at Dürnstein is famously pretty, the interior of sombre richness; the organ of 1724 is by Christoph Pantzner and

the recital by Christian Ertl. Some free time in this exceptionally attractive little town before driving through hills to Altenburg Abbey. This is the grandest so far, with splendid Baroque halls and library, medieval parts and tremendous frescoes by Paul Troger. The 1773 organ by Anton Pfliegerl is played by Martin Wadsack.

Day 4: Weissenkirchen, Melk, Wilhering. Three riverside delights today. The fortified church of St Michael outside Weissenkirchen, endearingly wonky, contains a Renaissance organ claimed to be the oldest in Austria. Melk is a small town with one of the greatest and most lavish of all monasteries. Free time, with the option of an abbey tour. The beautiful Rococo church at Stift Wilhering has a choir organ of 1746 by Nikolaus Rummel. First of three nights in Linz, capital of Upper Austria.

Day 5: Linz, St Florian. The Neo-Gothic cathedral at Linz is Austria's largest church and has an organ to match, the magnificent 1968 instrument by Marcussen & Son, played today by Wolfgang Kreuzhuber. Nearby is the superb Monastery of St Florian, founded in the 8th century and rebuilt 1686–1751. The Bruckner Organ – the composer was organist here – has four manuals, 103 stops and 7,343 pipes. The most recent restoration was undertaken by Kögler Orgelbau, whose workshop in St Florian we visit.

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continued

Day 6: Steinbruch, Schlägl. Another day of drives on narrow winding roads through stunning hill scenery, pasture, woods, scattered farmsteads. Remote but beautifully situated, the church of St Anna in the hamlet of Steinbruch has an unchanged Baroque organ of 1727 by Franz Richter, played for us by Gustav Auziger. Continue to Stift Schlägl, a relatively modest abbey. The main organ is by Andreas Putz, an exceptional instrument of 1634, the pipes original except for the reeds.

Day 7: Klosterneuburg. Founded in 1114, Klosterneuburg Abbey became the 'Austrian Escorial', a Baroque monastery-cum-palace begun for Emperor Charles V in 1730 but never completed. From the Middle Ages there remain a beautiful cloister, some precious metalwork and the church, later encrusted with gorgeous frescoes, stucco and wood carving. The organ was built on the cusp of Renaissance and Baroque traditions in 1642 and is of international importance. Johannes Zeinler gives our final recital here. Return to Heathrow, arriving c. 7.00pm.

Accommodation. Richard Löwenherz, Dürnstein (richardloewenherz.at): a lovely old-fashioned hotel occupying a historic building next to the Danube. **Hotel am Domplatz, Linz** (hotelamdomplatz.at) a comfortable boutique hotel near the cathedral. *Single rooms throughout are doubles for sole use.*

Please note that the bathroom is separated from the bedroom by a glass wall at the Hotel am Domplatz in Linz. If you intend to share a room on this tour, please contact us for a supplement to book two separate rooms at this hotel, if you wish.

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking and standing in museums and churches. A good level of fitness is essential. You will be on your feet for lengthy stretches of time. To reach the organ lofts, you have to manage up to 30 steps, which are sometimes worn and ill-lit (though remaining on the church floor is of course an option). Average distance by coach per day: 65 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 28 participants.

Lecturer

Simon Williams. Organist and Director of Music at St George's Hanover Square 2000–2022, where he was closely involved with the commissioning of the new organ installed in 2012, and Music Director for Harrow Choral Society 1990–2022. Currently he is Director for the Royal College of Organists' East, South and South West regions. He is also an RCO Accredited Teacher.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,290 or £3,030 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,510 or £3,250 without flights.

Included: flight (economy class) with Austrian Airlines; travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 2 lunches and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; 13 organ recitals; all admissions, tips and taxes; the services of the speaker and tour manager.