



## Prague Spring

The International Music Festival in the capital of Bohemia

**19–25 May 2025 (ML 702)**

7 days • £4,220

(including tickets to 5 performances)

Lecturer: Dr Michael Downes

Prague's celebrated Spring Festival returns for its 80th edition and remains one of the most illustrious in Europe.

Three great orchestral concerts at the Rudolfinum and Obecní Dům, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Kammerakademie Potsdam making their Czech debuts.

Violinist Ivan Ženatý and pianist Martin Kasík perform in the historic St Agnes Convent.

Mozart's *Exsultate, jubilate* and *Requiem* performed by leading period instrument specialists from Vienna and conductor Tomáš Netopil.

Soloists include pianists Jan Lisiecki and Pierre-Laurent Aimard.

Talks on the music by Dr Michael Downes, Director of Music at the University of St Andrews.

Visits and walks led by Martina Hinks-Edwards with free time before performances.

The Prague Spring ranks among Europe's most prestigious music festivals, enjoying the unmatched advantages of a supremely beautiful setting, a variety of historic venues, and an exceptional showcase of international musicians as well as first-rate Czech performers.

Our tour opens with Mahler's heartfelt *Symphony No. 6*, rich in autobiographical resonances, performed by the celebrated Chicago Symphony Orchestra in their inaugural concert in the Czech Republic. Also making their Czech début is the Kammerakademie Potsdam, one of Germany's leading chamber orchestras, conducted by Antonello Manacorda. Their programme includes Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*, famous throughout the world for its four-note 'Fate' motif and *Piano Concerto No. 1*, with acclaimed French pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard.

The Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra (*Göteborgs Symfoniker*) present the third of Bedřich Smetana's symphonic poems, *Hakon Jarl*, inspired by the 10th-century Norwegian



Prague, Cathedral of St Vitus, watercolour by B. Granville Baker, publ. 1923.

king Haakon Sigurdsson. This is followed by Fryderyk Chopin's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, with renowned Chopin interpreter, Jan Lisiecki. The concert culminates with Bartók's spectacular *Concerto for Orchestra*, a landmark piece of the 20th century.

Czech musicians Ivan Ženatý (violin) and Martin Kasík (piano) return to the Prague Spring for a recital including Martinů's early *Violin Sonata in C*, as well as Rachmaninoff's *Sonata in G minor*, arranged for violin by Jascha Heifetz and later by Ženatý.

Concentus Musicus Wien, led by Tomáš Netopil, together with Silentio! – Czech Ensemble Baroque Choir, perform two of Mozart's most sublime sacred works, *Exsultate, jubilate* and the *Requiem*, complemented by František Xaver Richter's *Sinfonia con fuga in G minor*.

Given that the festival is also a celebration of Czech nationhood, this tour is not only about attending concerts. You also have the opportunity to join guided walks and excursions through the beautiful city of Prague, which is at its loveliest in May. As well as insightful talks and discussions led by distinguished musicologist, Dr Michael Downes, there is also some free time on most afternoons for independent exploration – or for preserving your energies for the evening performances.

### Itinerary

**Day 1.** Fly mid-morning from London Heathrow to Prague (British Airways). After settling in to the hotel there is a private visit to the Obecní dům ('Municipal House') to see the glorious suite of assembly rooms created 1905–12, a unique and very Czech *mélange* of murals and ornament.

**Day 2.** Walk through the Old Town (*Staré Město*), a dense maze of streets and squares with buildings of all ages and an exceptionally lovely main square. The 13th-century Convent of St Agnes houses one of the world's greatest collections of medieval painting. Some free time before an early dinner. *Evening concert at the Obecní dům, Smetana Hall: Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Jaap van Zweden (conductor): Mahler, Symphony No. 6 in A minor.*

**Day 3.** Drive up to Prague Castle, the extensive hilltop complex, long-time residence of the Dukes and Kings of Bohemia and now the seat of the President. The Old Royal Palace, within it the largest stone hall in Europe with its extraordinary late-Gothic vaulting, and the Cathedral of St Vitus, a pioneering monument of High Gothic, richly embellished with chapels, tombs, altarpieces and stained glass. The Lobkowitz Palace contains a fascinating private collection of painting, decorative

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continued

arts and music, including hand-annotated manuscripts by Mozart and Beethoven. The 7th Prince Lobkowitz was a life-long patron of Beethoven who dedicated his 3rd (*Eroica*), 5th and 6th (*Pastorale*) Symphonies to the Prince.

**Day 4.** Walk across the 14th-century Charles Bridge, the greatest such structure in Europe, wonderfully adorned with sculptures. In the 'Lesser Town' (*Malá Strana*), visit St Nicholas, one of the finest Baroque churches in Central Europe and the Czech Museum of Music, which houses an interesting collection of musical instruments. After lunch, walk through a sequence of delightful gardens on the south slope of Prague Castle and Wallenstein Palace (a 1630s residence, now the Senate). *Evening concert at the Rudolfinum, Dvořák Hall: Kammerakademie Potsdam, Antonello Manacorda (conductor), Pierre-Laurent Aimard (piano): Beethoven, Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 15; Toshio Hosokawa, 'In the Forest'; Beethoven, Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67.*

**Day 5.** The day begins with a private guided tour of the Estates Theatre, where *Don Giovanni* had its première in 1787. Continue to the 'New Town' (*Nové Město*), in and around Wenceslas Square, threading through a succession of arcades, and viewing outstanding turn-of-the-century architecture and early modernist masterpieces. The Neo-Renaissance National Museum currently houses the special exhibition *My Country*, celebrating Bedřich Smetana and his symphonic cycle, *Má vlast*, for the 200th anniversary of his birth. Early dinner before an *evening concert at the Rudolfinum, Dvořák Hall: Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Santtu-Matias Rouvali (conductor), Jan Lisiecki (piano): Smetana, 'Hakon Jarl', Op. 16; Chopin, Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor, Op. 11; Bartók, Concerto for Orchestra.*

**Day 6.** Morning lecture followed by a visit to the fortress of Vyšehrad, rising high above the river and enclosing a cemetery with the graves of many great Czechs – including Dvořák and Smetana. Return to the New Town for lunch before some free time prior to an *afternoon concert at the Convent of St Agnes: Ivan Ženatý (violin), Martin Kasík (piano): Rachmaninoff, Sonata for Violin and Piano in G minor, Op. 19 (arr. Jascha Heifetz, Ivan Ženatý); Martinů, Sonata for Violin and Piano, H 120.* Light sandwich supper at the hotel before an *evening concert at the Rudolfinum, Dvořák Hall: Concentus Musicus Wien, Tomáš Netopil (conductor), Czech Ensemble Baroque Choir:*

*Mozart, 'Exsultate, jubilate', KV 165; František Xaver Richter, Sinfonia con fuga in G minor; Mozart, 'Requiem' in D minor, KV 626.*

**Day 7.** Strahov Monastery has commanding views over Prague and two magnificent library halls, which we enter by special arrangement. Then walk down the hill, passing the formidable bulk of the Černín Palace and the delightful façade of the Loreto Church. The flight returns to London Heathrow mid-afternoon.

*A number of the visits are by special arrangement. It is possible the order of visits may vary from the description above.*

## Lecturer

**Dr Michael Downes.** Director of Music at the University of St Andrews, musical director of St Andrews Chorus, Scotland's largest choral society, and founding artistic director of Byre Opera. He has lectured for most of the UK's leading opera companies and writes programme notes for Wigmore Hall and Aldeburgh Music. Publications include books written with and about contemporary British composer Jonathan Harvey, and a collaboration with Nike Wagner, great-granddaughter of Richard. *Story of the Century*, his new book on Wagner's *Ring*, was published in November 2024 by Faber and Faber; his next project is a biography of Elgar, to be published by Oxford University Press.

## Guide & tour manager

**Martina Hinks-Edwards.** Specialist guide living in Prague. She studied English at Charles University, Prague. She began working for MRT while still at university, as an interpreter for groups visiting the Czech Republic, and from 2004 as an expert guide with a wide breadth of knowledge of the country's cultural history. She has led tours throughout the Czech Republic and has a particular interest in 20th-century Czech history and architecture. The countless accolades she has received over the years from her clients, is a reflection of her energy and enthusiasm for the job.

## Practicalities

**Price, per person. Two sharing:** £4,220 or £3,870 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £4,710 or £4,360 without flights.

**Included:** flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus A319 & 320); private coach for airport transfers and excursions; some use of tram; hotel accommodation as described below; 4 dinners including 1 sandwich supper, 2 lunches with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and Czech guide-tour manager.

**Music:** tickets (top category) to 5 concerts are included, costing c. £425.

**Accommodation. Hotel Maximilian** ([maximilianhotel.com](http://maximilianhotel.com)): A small, recently renovated 4-star hotel with a restaurant in a quiet yet central location near St Agnes Convent. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

**How strenuous?** There is quite a lot of walking, much of it on roughly paved and cobbled streets. In order to participate fully, the tour would not be suitable for anyone with difficulties with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Some late evenings.

**Group size:** between 10 and 22 participants.

**Combine this tour with:** *Music along the Rhine*, 8–15 May 2025; *Walking the Rhine Valley*, 9–15 May; *Mahler in Amsterdam*, 9–19 May; *Austria: Organs & Abbeys*, 26 May–1 June; *The Dresden Music Festival*, 27 May–2 June.