



Prague Spring Festival

The International Music Festival amid Bohemia in bloom

12–18 May 2026 (MM 956)

7 days

Lecturer: Dr Michael Downes

Prague's celebrated Spring Festival remains one of the most illustrious in Europe, and the city is at its loveliest in May.

A rich programme of orchestral and chamber concerts featuring world-class conductors & soloists – including Smetana's *Má vlast*.

The full music programme, including details of performers, is announced in early November.

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 begins with a performance of Smetana's epic *Má vlast* (My Country) – six symphonic poems celebrating the history, mythology and glorious countryside of Bohemia. This stirring work traditionally opens the Festival and it promises to be a memorable and moving occasion.

While the full Festival programme is published in early November, our week in Prague also includes a performance of Puccini's *Turandot* at the sumptuous 19th-century National Theatre (*Národní divadlo*). The most harmonically daring of all Puccini's operas, *Turandot* was left unfinished at the time of his death in 1924. It again exemplifies Puccini's fascination with the exotic – Ancient China, in this instance – and is seen by many as representing the end of Italian opera as a popular art form.

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. 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



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

performances.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly mid-morning from London Heathrow to Prague (British Airways). After settling in to the hotel there is an introductory 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.

Day 2. The day begins with 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. 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. *Opening concert at the Obecní dům, Smetana Hall: Bedřich Smetana, Má vlast.*

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. *Evening concert at the Obecní dům, Smetana Hall: Orchestral concert with a world-renowned*

conductor and soloist: works by Joseph Haydn and Johannes Brahms.

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 Obecní dům, Smetana Hall: Orchestral concert with a world-renowned conductor: works by Robert Schumann & Igor Stravinsky.*

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. Some free time before an *evening opera at the National Theatre (Národní divadlo): Turandot (Puccini).*

Day 6. Visit 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

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Old Town for an independent afternoon before an *evening concert at the Rudolfinum, Dvořák Hall: Orchestral concert with works by J.S. Bach & Mozart.*

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

Included: private coach for airport transfers and excursions; some use of tram; hotel accommodation as described below; 3 dinners and 2 lunches with wine, water, coffee, as well as interval food and drinks at one of the performances; 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.

Accommodation. Hotel Maximilian (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. There are some late evenings.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Combine this tour with: *Sailing the Dalmatian Coast*, 30 April–9 May 2026; *Early Music in Yorkshire*, 6–11 May; *The Western Balkans*, 18–31 May; *Venice: Scarpa & Others*, 19–24 May; *Moldavia & Transylvania*, 21–31 May; *Franconia*, 22–29 May.