When my wife and I decided to take a European trip for our 30th anniversary, we hit on three cities that epitomized the classical musical culture of the great tradition: Budapest, Vienna and Prague. I hadn’t been to any of them, and my wife had been in Vienna briefly once many years ago, while she was studying at a music program in nearby Mödling. We determined that, since we were traveling during the regular concert season, a major part of our tourism would be to sample as much musical life from that tradition as we could. So, with our combination of performer’s and critic’s sensibilities, what follows is some random observations on what we saw and heard (for those who bridle at my use of the editorial “we” in concert reviews, you can be assured that when I use the term here, it’s meant literally).

Our first shot at a musical performance was at the Franz Liszt Academy (Liszt Ferenc Zeneművészeti Egyetem), where we figured we’d have no difficulty getting a seat for a performance by the Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus under Zoltán Kocsis and Salamon Kamp in music mostly by contemporary composer and Academy composition chair Zoltán Jeney. Wrong. The house was sold out, partly because Jeney is a popular figure in local circles (to be honest, we’d not heard of him before), and because this was, in effect, the first public concert at the Academy since a major renovation project had shut the building down for several years (the Academy has several locations around town and also rented out other concert space, about which more below), rather like the effort at New England Conservatory several years ago. At my wife’s insistence we intrepidly showed up anyway, seeking to cadge tickets from anyone showing up with extras. Nobody had any out on the street, but one kindly concertgoer suggested we try the ticket desk inside, where eventually we were able to land two seats for a total of $6.

The exterior of the building reflects its Art Nouveau origins (this was the third building of the Academy, dating to 1907), but pales in glory next to the interiors, which are resplendent in the typical decorative style of that period.
Here’s one of the murals in the lobby outside the hall. Does the abbé overlooking the bathers in the mural on the near right look familiar?

The inside of the hall, while not exactly a letdown, is not quite on a par with these public spaces. The concert that took place there was interesting, but...odd. There was a Bach cantata, a work by Jeney’s teacher Goffredo Petrassi, and the rest by Jeney, one of which was a song cycle for a cappella choir, two for chamber ensembles and one for orchestra. I would take issue with the Wikipedia entry’s characterization of Jeney’s work as “minimal” except in the very general sense that it can be spare in texture (although the chamber and orchestral scores featured immense percussion arrays, intriguingly positioned on a “loge” above the level of the stage, so even that point is a bit stretched). It is by no means tonal, or gives any hint of phasing in the sense in which most listeners would recognize minimalism. The music is always, it should go without saying, well constructed, and the largest work on the program, Part 4 of Jeney’s chef d’œuvre called Funeral Rite, was powerful and evocative, though with the exception of Wohin, a kind of fractured “cubist” rendition of the tune from the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the music could be, how to say it, a lot of the same (perhaps that’s the connection to minimalism?). While the high turnout bespoke a commendable interest by Hungarians in contemporary music, remarks from those around me suggested that this was not the primary draw, except for the “friends of Zoltán” crowd.

We did have a chance to chat with pianist Katalin Falvai, who teaches at the Academy, about general conditions for musicians in Hungary. Her report was not particularly encouraging, with opportunities shrinking and pay inadequate—a common enough complaint among classical musicians in the US, but one some would be surprised to hear from a musician in the culturally “enlightened” part of the world.
Our next stop would have been the opera, but alas there was nothing going on during the three days of our visit that commanded our attendance, so we had to settle for taking the guided tour. It’s an astonishingly beautiful space dating from the 1870s, with funding from Emperor Franz Josef on the condition that it not be bigger than the Vienna opera house. He goofed by failing also to specify that it not be more beautiful. One peeve needs to be vented, though: the tour requires an extra payment if you want to take pictures, at which we demurred (the picture below is from Wikipedia). Another point of perhaps cultural significance is that, as in Vienna, there was a royal box—not the one you see below but straight back in the balcony—built into the design (which FJ occupied only once, when the hall was opened), but unlike in Austria, nobody can occupy it now except the President, the Prime Minister and the cleaning lady, so that it remains unoccupied almost all the time. Was this a bit of old-style royalism hanging over in post-communist Europe?
We did see one other concert in Budapest, this at Béla Bartók National Concert Hall in the “MuPa” (Művészetek Palotája, or Palace of Arts, a venue used by the Liszt Academy during its renovation) by the Hungarian National Philharmonic under American conductor Lawrence Foster, with Brazilian pianist Cristina Ortiz. Foster has developed a reputation for performing work by George Enescu, and he came through with a thumping one of Enescu’s Third Symphony. Ortiz performed Beethoven’s Fourth Concerto, and filled out her half of the program with encores by Chopin and Granados. Bartók Hall, which like the rest of MuPa and the Lincoln Center-ish Millennium City complex of which it is part, was built in 2005; one physical feature that caught our attention was the placement of traditional parterre seats alongside the orchestra section, another hangover from the imperial past when these would have been box seats (which these were too, after a fashion).
Moving on in our trek we got to Vienna, whose musical attractions need no introduction or explanation. We did get lucky again and, less than an hour after we arrived and settled into our rooms, we were standing (no €260 seats left, alas) for a performance of Der Rosenkavalier at the Vienna State Opera featuring Renée Fleming in her farewell tour (as the Marschallin, of course), under the baton of Ádám Fischer (quite a contrast to Haydn, no?), with wonderful performances by everyone in the cast, especially Sophie Koch as Octavian, and also Peter Rose as Ochs and Mojca Erdmann (debuting) as Sophie. There was plenty of juice to squeeze from this ripe score, and Fischer managed a perfect balance of Straussian lushness and Mozartean delicacy. Neither of us had ever done a standing-room stint before (total cost, by the way, €6), so we were bemused and charmed by the strict yet humane protocols extended to the hoi polloi at the railings. Having gotten to the opera house fifteen minutes before curtain, our places were way up and to the side, so in a manner of speaking we only caught half the opera; but once we got there those places were ours, assuming we had some scrap of cloth with which to reserve our spots by tying it around the railing (this may be old news to our more worldly readers, but even at our advanced ages we were happy to be newbies at something).
We both took the tour and saw a performance at the Musikverein (technically, that’s the name of the building, run by the Society of the Friends of Music), which produced Beethoven premieres (though not at this building, which like the Budapest Opera dates from the 1870s).

Since the building and the society were dedicated to serving the ordinary citizen rather than royalty, there are no boxes, royal or otherwise, in the big concert hall. Above the balcony on the sides are busts of famous (almost all German or Austrian) composers who had died by the time the building was erected (so no Brahms—he’s got the chamber hall in the building named for him and an imposing statue elsewhere), but there are two of them whose identity is unknown. I looked hard at one of them and inquired whether it might be an idealized portrayal of a younger Ludwig Spohr, who was not otherwise represented and who would have qualified both by death date and by fame at the time. If that proves to be the case, remember you read it here first.

A recent renovation of the building added three new rehearsal or performance spaces below ground level (and actually under the square next to the building).

On an impulse, we took standing places for a recital the next night (price double that of the opera!) by Anne-Sophie Mutter, who did a terrific and well-balanced program featuring Sebastian Currier’s Ring-Tone Variations with Roman Patkoló, contrabass (charming), a wicked hard confection by Kreisler, Lutosławski’s Partita and sonatas by Grieg (No. 3) and Franck, all but the Currier with Lambert Orkis at the piano. Unfortunately, the Musikverein is as ill-designed for standing room as the opera is well-designed, and a motley mob in the standing area at the back of the hall made it both
insufferably hot and impossible for anyone beyond the second row of standees to see the
performers. The better news was that with such a short rail relative to the number of
people standing, there was no way to reserve a place in the second row, so the more
enterprising could move up as the suffocating masses refreshed themselves during
intermission. There’s just no honor among the sore-footed.

Our final stop was in Prague, which netted us one and two-thirds operas and half a ballet.
The last came first: on going to the opera house in the morning to buy tickets (sitting this
time) for *Turandot* the following night, we walked around and discovered the front doors
open. Thinking we might catch a tour of the building, we went in and found...nothing. So,
like kids in a candy shop, we roamed about gorging our eyes on this lovely neo-baroque
confection from 1888 (originally called the New German Theater).

As we wandered up to the balcony, we heard the orchestra warming up and, like
Goldilocks finding the door open, we went in and sat down. What was happening was
(about to be) a rehearsal of the ballet company for Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Once
everybody, including the dancers, got themselves together, we heard and saw an excellent
performance by all concerned; the occasional tech person wandering by took no notice of
us. The dancers were, of course, in essentially street clothes, and so, with the fairly
modernistic direction of their gestures (the choreography, by company director Petr
Zuska, is new), the whole thing took on the appearance of a reverse influence from *West
Side Story*. We didn’t stay for it all, and left at the first break, after an hour.
We also left an opera early, this one *The Marriage of Figaro* put on at the Estates Theater, a venerable venue that saw the premiere of *Don Giovanni*. While the musical aspects of the production were more than adequate (conductor Jan Chalupecký and principals Miloš Horák [Figaro], Jiří Brückler [Almaviva], Jana Sibera [Susanna], Jitka Svobodová [Countess A.] and Kateřina Jalovcová [Cherubino]), the staging by Josef Průdek was so creaky and old-fashioned that (since we were once again standing) it didn’t merit the wear to which we were subjecting ourselves (and we were getting really hungry). Truth to tell, we mainly went to be in the building, with its historical associations; a better production might have tempted us more strongly to stay.

Our final musical outing of the trip was back to the State Opera, where Puccini’s final work (in the Alfano completion) also got a musically strong, visually opulent but theatrically painful rendition. Anda-Louise Bogza in the title role, Michal Lehotský as Kalaf and Jitka Burgetová as Liu were all superb under the direction of Enrico Dovico, but the static (even when rolling) sets, the rubber dragon heads of the imperial court looking like the monsters from the classic Doctor Who, and the stage business in wheelchairs of the three ministers (well sung, but reminiscent of Ko-Ko, Pish-Tush and Pooh-Bah from *The Mikado*) did not cover director Václav Věžník in glory. Still, this time being seated and the opera being a half hour shorter than *Figaro*, we literally sat it out and just enjoyed Puccini’s encounter with the 20th century.