

Musical Treasure Chest #14

Some memories, over time, are so special that revisiting them is like cresting a hill and gasping at a stunning vista below. I have many such delightful recollections from my two summers in Graz, Austria many years ago, where I played in an orchestra. I have shared some, such as waltzing in the Stadtpark in Vienna and playing at a memorial for conductor Karl Böhm. Much of my free time while there was spent exploring Vienna, which was a short train ride away, discovering and reveling in its musical legacy. Every street I walked down seemed to have some musical connection to explore--an apartment where Mozart lived, a gasthof where Schubert gathered with his friends, a palace where Beethoven performed—the history was endless and exciting, and the city pulsed with its composers' spirits. One evening in particular I had the sense that I was literally touching the past, and for this Musical Treasure Chest I tell that story.

During that first summer I played in Graz, a group of us formed a string quartet to play in the streets. Our cellist, who had been at the program the year before, had seen the response when quartets played, and knew it was a good way to make some spending money. At first we played just in the Graz, at the town square during *mittagpause*, when Austrians take their long lunch break. People would gather, intently listening, often at length (and requesting real repertory such as late Mozart and Haydn Quartets), and fill our open cases with schillings. The experience was rather surreal and very different from America at the time. We soon decided that we could venture out of Graz and finance our travel to other Austrian cities by playing. The orchestra had occasional several day breaks, and we determined the quartet would try a trip to Salzburg with the journey back to Graz, travelling via Vienna.

The four of us took a train from Graz through the Alps to Salzburg, and the ride was truly as glorious as you can imagine. In the 1980s Austrian tourism marketing was not as sophisticated or ubiquitous as it is now, and you could wander around the city and find Mozart sites in a much more "raw" way than you can now. We played in front of the huge Salzburger Dom, where both Leopold and Wolfgang

Mozart worked. Buoyed by a successful afternoon of music-making, we boarded the train for Vienna. We arrived in the late afternoon and checked into our hostel. It was too late to play, but we had time to venture into the old city and explore. This was my first time to Vienna, and I think that I was in a constant state of incredulity; there was so much to see, it was overwhelming.

We met up with some colleagues from the orchestra who had traveled to Vienna separately and had a nice dinner at an old *wirsthaus*, where we stayed rather late enjoying the atmosphere (and the beer). When we walked out, a full moon illuminated the buildings almost like daylight. None of us were quite ready to return to the hostel, so we decided to take a circuitous route back. Vienna is filled with narrow, winding cobblestoned allies that suddenly spill out onto beautiful squares, and we wandered up one, looking at an impressive church at the top of it. As we got close to the church (*Piaristenkirche*), I saw a plaque on its wall, and I read it by the brilliant moonlight. Just as I was realizing that the plaque was discussing the composer Anton Bruckner and his affiliation with the church, its bells began to peal and simultaneously a huge cloud covered the moon. We all jumped, surprised and perhaps a little scared, there was something eerie about it, as though Bruckner's ghost had brushed by. I have never forgotten that night. Of course, I know now that the bells ring throughout Vienna at midnight (it's really an awesome sound), and that at almost every corner you turn some important piece of musical history happened, but at that moment so many years ago, it seemed absolutely magical.

I love **Bruckner's** music, and actually don't get to play it very often (the symphonies are huge and not such popular musical fare in America). One of my favorites is the **Fourth or Romantic Symphony**. Written in 1874 and revised many times over the rest of his life, it is an exhilarating work to hear (if a long one). I have given you a performance with the orchestra that premiered it—the Vienna Philharmonic—and the conductor I have such a soft spot for—Karl Böhm.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1AjadBDCPM>