

WORDS KIM TRAILL



# Budapest

KIM TRAILL FINDS A MUSICAL FEAST PLUS PLENTY OF PRIDE, PASSION AND PAPRIKA IN HUNGARY'S 'PARIS OF THE EAST'

In the courtyard of Kéhl Vendéglő restaurant, a portly violinist in an embroidered waistcoat pours his soul into a heart wrenching melody – all despair and vibrato. A bass player contributes some strategically placed pizzicato plonks and a suitably sorrowful gaze. Suddenly, the fiddler erupts in foot stompingly exuberant pyrotechnics, bow flying and fingers flashing. The clarinet joins in. I'm mesmerized. Only when the musicians wind up their exhilarating Csárdás, do I realize my goulash has gone cold.

Music is the lifeblood of Hungary, and Budapest - capital of the Magyar nation - is its heart. Boasting the moniker 'Paris of the East', this vibrant city teems with remnants of its millennia long history: from ruins of the ancient Roman settlement of Aquinicum and 16th century Turkish bathhouses, to an eclectic mix of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture. Soviet-era Ladas still trundle past monuments glorifying the country's former Communist regime, while sleek, luxury vehicles pull up at ritzy new restaurants.

Budapest is also home to many fine orchestras, two opera houses, a plethora of folk ensembles, a shining new concert hall and an almost year-round program of festivals.

Since my first stay in 1991, less than two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Budapest has morphed from the faded grandeur of communist era neglect into a buzzing European metropolis, albeit with a distinctly Hungarian twist. Many historic buildings

have been immaculately restored, including the exquisite Liszt Academy of Music. The standard of performance – which took a dive after the lifting of the Iron Curtain with the exodus of many of Hungary's finest musicians seeking better economic opportunities in the west – is once again extraordinarily high, as top local musicians choose to stay home.

The daunting variety of performances on offer at any given time easily rivals that of London or New York. If you're after an orchestral concert, you'll be spoiled for choice. There's the Hungarian National Orchestra, Radio Symphony Orchestra, National Opera Orchestra, and the Budapest Philharmonic Society, and that's just for starters. Internationally renowned conductors and soloists are featured regularly, plus an outstanding line up of locals. Auditoriums are full, and ticket prices a fraction of those for comparable concerts further west.

The must-see for orchestral aficionados however, is the relatively young Budapest Festival Orchestra. Founded in 1983 by dynamic conductor Iván Fischer and pianist Zoltán Kocsis, the BFO has built a reputation as one of the world's leading orchestras. Twice awarded the Editor's Choice Gramophone Award - once for Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin*, another for Mahler's Second Symphony, the BFO guarantees audiences a thrilling experience. Musicians who've worked under Fischer describe him as a true visionary whose motto of "living for music not from music" rubs off on all around him.



**TRAVEL INFO**  
**Average Temperatures:**  
 Winter: -1°C-3°C Summer: 15°C-25°C  
**Currency:** Forint (AU\$1=220 Forint)  
**Best time to visit:** Anytime at all, really, but look out for mini-festivals and the Budapest Ring in June  
**TOURIST INFORMATION**  
[www.budapest.hu](http://www.budapest.hu)

The Danube dividing old Buda from old Pest

Usually performing in the ultra modern Béla Bartók National Concert Hall in Budapest's Palace of the Arts, the BFO comprises almost entirely Hungarian musicians. Just what exactly makes them so good? Many credit Hungary's musical education system, which is universal, intense and begins in early childhood with Kodály method voice training. Combine that with a rich tradition of folk song and some fire-in-the-belly Magyar passion, and you've got the makings of emotionally gripping performers.

Originating in the Volga region of central European Russia, the Magyars are an exotic blend of Finno-Ugric and Eastern Turkish blood, with their own distinctive (and fiendishly difficult) language and musical culture. Until the early 1900s, Hungarian classical music was heavily influenced by Germanic style. Even Franz Liszt was born in present day Austria (then the Austro-Hungarian Empire) to an Austrian mother. He spoke almost no Hungarian and grew up in France, although he did return often in adulthood to his 'native' land where he taught at the Academy now named in his honour.

It was Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók who began to develop a uniquely Hungarian musical identity, collecting folk songs from remote villages and incorporating elements of Magyar peasant music – pentatonic scales, old church modes, irregular dance rhythms – into their compositions. Both Bartók and Kodály served as inspiration to successive generations of Hungarian composers and are

### THE HUNGARIAN SUICIDE SONG

Broken hearted after being left by his fiancé, poet László Jávör penned the lyrics to *Gloomy Sunday* in 1932. Set to music by composer Rezső Seress and recorded in 1935, the mournful melody and melancholy lyrics were blamed for triggering a spate of suicides – with reports of the ditched and dejected leaping into the Danube clutching copies of sheet music. Dubbed the 'Hungarian Suicide Song', it was banned in Hungary, but famously recorded by Billie Holliday, among many others. Legend has it that when *Gloomy Sunday* first became a hit, Jávör's ex- fiancé took her own life. Seress too committed suicide, leaping from a Budapest apartment window in 1968. In recent years, Sinéad O'Connor, Sarah McLachlan and even Björk have released their own recordings of the song Seress described as his 'deadly success'.



Bartók Hall

feted today as national heroes.

Another highlight of Budapest's music scene is the Hungarian State Opera. Opened with great ceremony in 1884 in the presence of Habsburg Emperor, Franz Josef I, the opulent neo-Renaissance style Opera House is reputed to have amongst the finest acoustics in Europe, as well as a magnificent three tonne bronze chandelier. One of its first directors was Gustav Mahler.

While the repertoire includes standard German and Italian fare, if you're keen to experience Hungarian opera, then this is the place to do it. For performances in Hungarian, the theatre has English surtitles.

Hungary's most celebrated operatic works include Béla Bartók's chilling psychodrama *Bluebeard's Castle*, and Zoltán Kodály's *Háry János* – a folk opera about a veteran soldier with a fanciful imagination, who regales listeners in the village inn with fictional tales of heroic exploits.

The 'father of Hungarian opera' is the lesser-known Ferenc Erkel. Composer of the Hungarian National Anthem, Erkel's two most commonly performed works are *Hunyadi László* (1844) and *Bánk bán* (1861). A fine Romantic work, the latter is often referred to as Hungary's national opera.

Budapest's second opera house is named after Erkel. Despite recent renovations, it's still resembles the somewhat depressing Communist era concrete box it was transformed into in the 1960s, lacking the ambience of the sumptuous HSO. The landmark Art Nouveau Liszt Ferenc Zeneakadémia however, is definitely worth a visit and inexpensive student concerts are often open to the public.

The city itself is fascinating to explore. Divided by the mighty Danube, Buda – on the west bank, and Pest – on the east, were separate towns for nearly a thousand years. It was only in 1873 that they were united,

by the construction of the massive 'Chain Bridge'. The best city panorama can be found at Fisherman's Bastion perched on Castle Hill in Buda – which offers an unsurpassed view over the plains of Pest and the magnificent neo-Gothic Parliament House on the Danube's eastern bank.

Visitors shouldn't miss the Royal Palace, Gellért Hill and the city's many stunning churches. The parks and thermal baths of Margit Island are a great place to relax and in

“THE HUNGARIAN STATE OPERA IS REPUTED TO HAVE THE FINEST ACOUSTICS IN EUROPE”

Pest, Europe's largest synagogue in Dohány Street is also a must see. A particular favourite of mine is Heroes' Square, with its striking bronze statues of splendidly moustachioed Hungarian kings engaged in momentous acts: leading crusades, slaying enemies, rebuilding cities after the Mongol invasion and even banning witch burning.

The abundance of impressive historical sites makes Budapest an excellent location for festivals. The Budapest Spring Festival – an annual gala of classical music, opera, jazz and folk music – is the largest cultural event in the country. Others celebrate food, wine and art. BFO artistic director, Iván Fischer, has established an imaginative series of one-composer marathons and the Budapest Mahlerfest. Budapest is even putting on its own *Ring Cycle* at the Palace of the Arts in mid-June 2014.

From the grand to the intimate, Budapest has something to appeal to all tastes... especially if you like your gypsy violin hot and your goulash cold. ●