

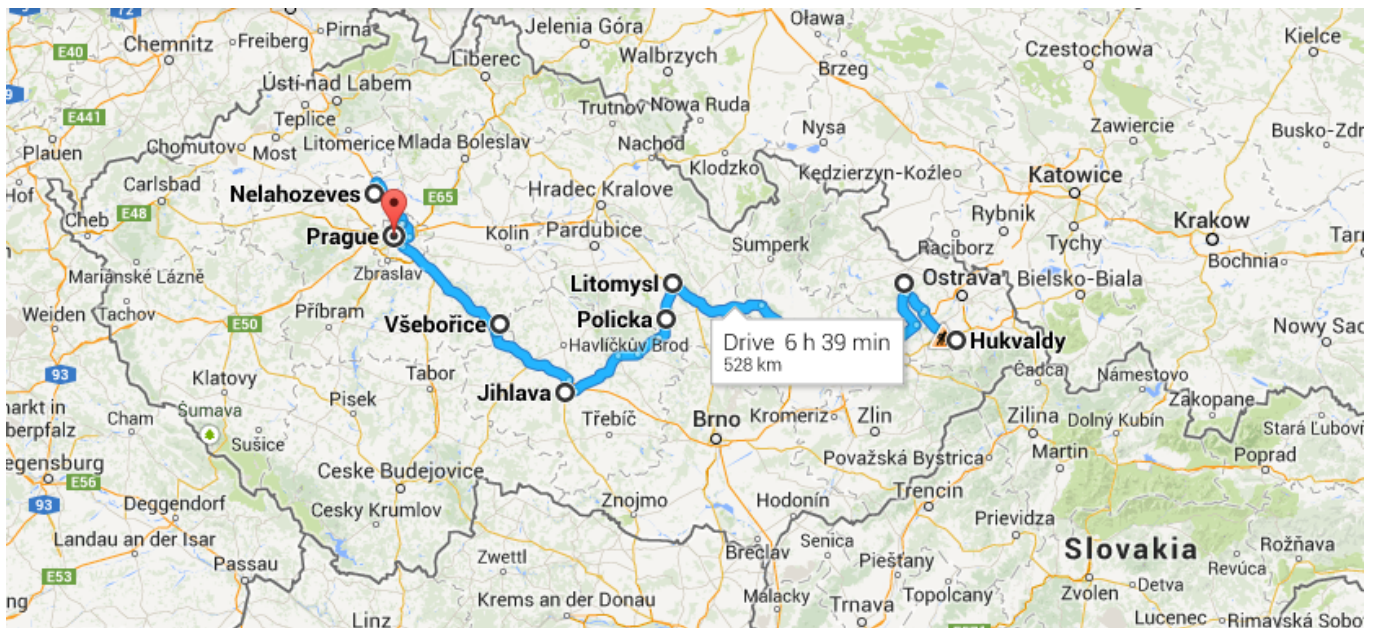
From Hukvaldy to Prague

Striking a chord from east to west

Saturday, September 3, 2005

Text, photos and itinerary by: Jeff Heinrich

After Hukvaldy, no Great Composers Tour of the Czech Republic is complete without stops in these towns:

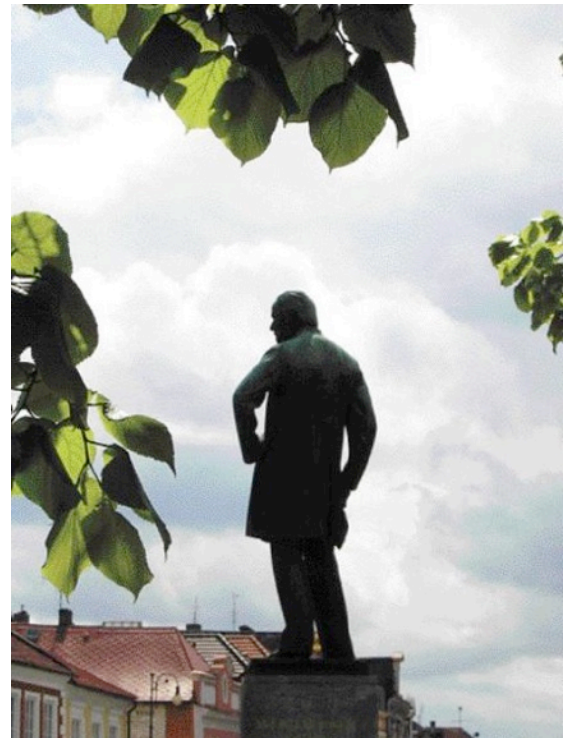


Hradec nad Moravicí

Not far from Hukvaldy, about 15 minutes south by car from the border town of Opava, are twin hilltop castles: One is now a red-brick, neo-Gothic hotel, the other is a white-plaster, neoclassical museum. Formerly known as Schloss Gratz, the latter belonged to the Lichnovsky family, patrons of Beethoven, Liszt and Paganini, among others who lived, composed and performed there. You can take a private tour and see pianos where Beethoven and Liszt sat down to play. There's a Beethoven festival in early June.

Litomyšl

Restored, floodlit at night, a jewel of the Bohemian-Moravian Uplands, Litomyšl is the birthplace of Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884). At the end of June, there's an annual international opera festival held in his honour. Smetana was born in the local brewery his father owned; it's on the grounds of the town's architectural chef d'oeuvre, the UNESCO-listed, graffitied Pernštejn family castle. There's also a statue of the composer in the town's long and lovely Baroque square. While you're on the square, look for old copies of Czech and German sheet music at the Knihkupectví antikvariát bookstore; they've got Smetana and more.



Smetana stands in Litomyšl square

Polička

The next town south of Litomyšl, its claim to fame is Bohoslav Martinů (1890-1959). The composer was born and grew up in a very unusual place: the one-room tower atop the town's St. Jacob Church. His father was Polička's fire warden and lived in the 36-metre-high tower to be able to spot fires by seeing smoke from his perch. You can climb the tower's 210 steps with a tour guide (sorry, no English) to see the unique vantage point, which Martinů liked to say gave him a sense of space that he translated into music.

Jihlava

Gustav Mahler – a Bohemian Jew, German-speaking but surrounded by Czechs – was born in 1860 in a village nearby and raised and educated in this town. It's smack in the middle of today's Czech Republic, a short jaunt by car off the E50 superhighway to Prague. There's a small museum and a plaque outside the family home, as well as a few other Mahler sites to see, none too exciting. Keep in mind that Mahler went on to greater fame away from here, in Vienna, and didn't reserve much love for his hometown. In Jihlava, he once said dismissively, "I didn't learn anything."

Všebořice

About halfway to Prague on the E50 from Jihlava, between the towns of Dolní Kralovice and Zruč nad Sázavou, there's a hamlet called Všebořice, and in the woods there you'll find an old gamekeeper's lodge. This is where Zdeněk Fibich was born in 1850. He spent his whole childhood in these woods, going on to

become one of his country's greatest opera and orchestral composers. But it's his cycle of 376 piano miniatures – Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences – that are the most modern in feel and sensibility, little romantic vignettes that describe in obsessive detail his great love for his young pupil, Anežka Schulzová.

Nelahozeves

A short drive northwest of Prague, this village was where Antonin Dvořák – by far the best-known Czech composer – was born in 1841, right next door to the local post office. If someone will let you in, you can visit the house and see objects like Dvořák's rocking chair.

Prague

Finally, if your stay in the Czech Republic is short and you can't leave Prague, or if you want to complete your journey across the country with a look at where the great composers are buried, do yourself a favour and visit the city's "other" castle. It's not the Hradčany in Malá Strana – that's a tourist mecca; it's Vyšehrad, three kilometres south of the city centre on a bluff over the Vltava. In the cemetery there you'll find the graves of not only Dvořák and Smetana, but also Fibich (Janáček is buried in Brno, Martinů in Polička).