

PRAGUE IN SPRING

In late March 2011, 35 members travelled to Prague for opera performances and other pleasures. Paul and Elizabeth Dawson-Bowling joined this group and were good enough to agree to write up their experience for the benefit of others. This is their report. Bryan Suitters.

Suitters-tours, as we think of them, generally rank high among those lucky enough to go on them, but the Prague trip in March was the tops. There was the usual first-quality organisation. There was the usual agreeable companionship of civilised and stimulating fellow-travellers. There was the usual first-class hotel, modernist Andels, which provided a feast at breakfast time and was only three stops on a fast-moving underground from Wenceslas Square, the vibrant heart of Prague. There was a half-morning, guided coach tour round the city highlights, which ended high up on Prague Castle at St Vitus Cathedral. It led to the long scenic descent down to the iconic Charles Bridge over the Vltava to the Old City Square, where a splendid three-course lunch was waiting for our by then omnivoracious attention. There was an all-day trip to Karlsbad or Karlkova Vary, the glorious spa town where notables from all over the world would take the waters, sipping the many hot springs. They were strangely sweet and made an ideal aperitif for our second mid-day feast, this time at the Grand Hotel PUPP. It really was grand, virtually a nineteenth century palace at the head of the valley, and palatial too was *La Belle Epoque*, the room where we lunched.

This was the frame for our four operas, beginning and ending with Mozart, the first fruit being a sparkling *Così fan Tutte*, and the grand finale being *Don Giovanni*. Both these were at the beautiful Estates Theatre, the very location which saw Mozart directing *Giovanni's* world premiere on 29 October 1787. As performances, they were if anything surpassed by a magical, wonderland presentation of Dvorak's *Rusalka* at the Prague State Opera and by *Parsifal* at the National Theatre. Both theatres are architectural gems, and *Parsifal* was staged in South East Asian style, out of homage to the Buddhist influences that went into it. It was superbly sung, beautiful to behold, and musically far superior to any *Parsifal* in the UK since Mark Elder conducted it at ENO in 1999. This time the magician on the rostrum was the American, John Fiore.

One respect wherein this particular Suitters-tour surpassed all others in our experience was in providing the choicest places in the opera house; and those who felt wary on past occasions of travelling such distances for bargain basement seats would have been delighted to find themselves in locations which only top bankers and other legalised crooks could think of affording at Covent Garden. There was only one puzzling question regarding costs. Last year we each paid almost £800 per ticket for *The Ring* in the last row of the stalls at Bayreuth. By what wizardry does Bryan Suitters manage to put on a truly affordable four-opera trip to Prague for not much more, all in the stalls, inclusive of flights and hotel costs and meal-rich excursions? We can only ask everyone who went to repeat gratefully after us: "Much thanks; more please!"

Paul and Elizabeth Dawson-Bowling

