Balls in Vienna

**Vienna is the world’s ball capital. Year in year out, hundreds of ball events take place in the city, from elegant traditional occasions to rollicking carnival parties. Whether it’s to Viennese waltz music or more contemporary sounds, there’s more than 5,000 hours of dancing to enjoyed during the Viennese ball season each year.**

Balls experienced their first flush of widespread popularity at the Congress of Vienna in 1814/15. Numerous royals and politicians from the length and breadth of Europe flocked to the capital of the Habsburg monarchy to redefine the continent’s borders in the wake of Napoleon’s defeat. The Viennese hosts made every effort to ensure that their venerable guests were entertained during their extended stays in the city. One distraction followed the next, but whatever they were, the proceedings were always heavily influenced by 18th century court ceremonial. Various aspects of this have survived, often with few changes, at the traditional balls that take place in the city to this day.

Not only important from a social point of view, Vienna's balls also have a wider economic significance. According to the Vienna Economic Chamber, the average ball guest spends EUR 320. Of this amount, EUR 200 goes on the event itself (ticket, table reservation, food and drink) and around EUR 120 on preparations (hair styling, clothing, dancing lessons). The 2023/24 season is expected to attract around 540,000 ballgoers and generate revenue of about EUR 175 million.

# A feat of logistics

The capital’s ball season gets underway on November 11, which is the traditional start of Fasching, or carnival season. On this day, crowds of dancers flock to the Graben shopping street in the old town to dance the waltz in a spectacle led by the city’s top dance schools. Ash Wednesday, which once marked the end of the ball season is no longer taken as a strict cutoff date, with the ball schedule now continuing long into the spring and even the summer. More than 400 balls take place in the Austrian capital every year, attracting anything up to 6,000 guests each. What other European city can match this tradition?

Given these numbers, slick organization is required, especially for the prestigious balls. They all take place in accordance with traditional rules. First, a ball committee must be appointed. Then there is an honorary committee made up of high-ranking public servants and other dignitaries. The highest-profile balls are normally hosted under the patronage of the Federal President. All names are printed on the invitation, which is in fact a beautifully designed pamphlet that also gives the date and venue, dress code, program and the admission charge.

Tickets for the Opera Ball are extremely expensive, especially those for boxes, but despite the price tag they are highly sought after. The city’s other prestigious balls, such as those held in Hofburg palace, are considerably less costly. Tickets for general admission are significantly more affordable than table reservations. Wandering through the ball rooms between dances or savoring the atmosphere at the buffet or cocktail bar are just some of the most enjoyable aspects of a Viennese ball night. Some events even install wine taverns complete with traditional Schrammelmusik for the night.

One of the most immediately obvious things about a genuine Viennese ball is the strict adherence to the dress code. Women are expected to wear full length gowns or traditional Austrian costume, while the gentlemen must wear tails or a tuxedo, giving them the opportunity to display their orders and badges of honor. At the opera ball it is strictly tails only. It should be noted that wearing a wristwatch is seen as something of a faux pas; ball etiquette dictates that a golden watch complete with chain is preferable. At the other balls, guests must wear a tuxedo or fine black suit with bow tie. Neck ties are taboo. The amazing thing is just how many young people are happy to adhere to these strict rules. In addition to the stylish clothing, the slick ceremonial program bears witness to the formality of the occasion.

Anyone hoping to cut a fine figure on the dance floor despite a lack of formal dance training will find themselves in good hands in Vienna: a number of dance schools offer crash courses in the art of waltzing (private sessions for other disciplines are also available on request), such as the feted Rueff dance school with its waltz 101s. Prior registration is not required either – just show up on the day.

# Come waltzing

The defining moment of every self-respecting traditional ball is the point when the young ladies’ and gentlemen’s “committee” enter the ballroom. The girls opening a ball for the first time are called debutantes. This “debut” is part of the ritual which dates back to the days of the monarchy – the formal introduction into society. Dressed in a long white robe, with a coronet in their hair and long white gloves with a posy in their right hand, they proceed onto the dance floor arm in arm with their tuxedoed escorts, usually to the music of the “Fächer-Polonaise” by Carl Michael Ziehrer, former chief conductor of the imperial court, which is played at practically all opening ceremonies. At the end of this solemn ritual comes a waltz – with the pairs turning anticlockwise. This is not as easy as it might sound and is perhaps one of the reasons why dance schools are so well attended. In Vienna alone there are some 30 of them. It is the schools that organize the opening ceremony, after having taught their students the necessary steps and held several rehearsals to inaugurate them into the secrets of the special choreography that they have devised. Great importance is attached to the aesthetic precision of the figures. Executed correctly, the rhythmic movements create a spellbinding visual in black and white.

The opening ceremony is brought to a close when the call “Alles Walzer” is heard from the director of the dance school organizing the ball, inviting all of the guests onto the dance floor – this time to waltz in a clockwise direction.

# Damenspende and dance numbers

Although every traditional ball opens the floor to dancers with a waltz, virtually every kind of formal dance will be represented during the course of the evening. While most of the music comes courtesy of orchestras and ensembles, many events also have discos. A tradition dating from the first half of the 19th century is the “Damenspende”, a token gift presented to the ladies by the organizers of the ball. In the days of the monarchy this might have been an elaborately crafted bijou party favor such as a mother-of-pearl fan. These days it could be an elegant watch or confectionery. In the era of gender equality, some balls also have a “Herrenspende” for men such as a book.

Midnight is a special time, whatever the ball. Ballgoers can expect concerts and performances, with highlights including specially choreographed sets by dance troupes from leading Viennese dance schools. Another midnight favorite is the quadrille, which has been danced since the 19th century. Thanks to its catchy melody, the most popular is the Fledermaus quadrille by Johann Strauss. The steps to this jaunty pair and group dance are fairly complicated and are explained in advance by the dance master. Not infrequently, however, the dance ends in good-humored chaos caused by some high-spirited dancers during the mad dash through the passages between the rows of dancers. At all events, it’s one way of giving renewed energy to tired dancers, who will need it, since the balls sometimes go on until 5am.

At all Viennese balls the official close is also a traditional affair. The lights in the ballroom are dimmed and the orchestra plays the slightly melancholic and downbeat waltz “Brüderlein fein, musst nicht gar so traurig sein” and the remaining revelers step out onto the dance floor for the last time. Many people end the night with a bowl of spicy goulash soup in one of the countless nearby coffee houses which are open at this early hour throughout the ball season. A hearty snack from a sausage stand is another popular option.

# The Vienna Opera Ball

The ball to end all balls plays out at the Vienna State Opera each year on the night of the last Thursday before Ash Wednesday. It is a major get-together for leading cultural figures, captains of industry and high-ranking politicians from Austria and abroad. For several years now the focus has shifted to give greater prominence to artists from the Vienna State Opera, who give the ball a special cachet all of its own. It hardly comes as a surprise that this spectacle is broadcast live on television, with coverage including everything from the arrival of the guests on the red carpet, to the opening ceremony and subsequent interviews with VIPs. The Opera Ball decor is unique: hundreds of palms and sumptuous flower arrangements adorn the magnificent staircase and the foyer of the State Opera House. The ballroom is also festooned with thousands of flowers. It’s hard to believe that it was the scene of an opera performance just three evenings previously. As soon as the curtain goes down on the final act, around 500 master craftsmen and other workers start to convert the opera house for the ball. The seats in the stalls are removed. A dance floor is constructed at stage height on top of a temporary scaffold over the orchestra pit. Instead of the wings, boxes are erected on three levels in line with those in the auditorium. Within around 30 hours the opera theater is completely transformed into a harmonious and festive golden ballroom.

The grand opening is celebrated as an act of state, as in the days of Emperor Franz Josef: to the sound of a fanfare, the head of state and the Austrian government appear in full regalia in the middle box of the State Opera House – the very box that used to be reserved for the Emperor. The 5,000 guests – women in evening dress, men in tails – stand while the Austrian and European anthems are played. A festive sight and one that is firmly rooted in the tradition of the Opera Ball and other balls held during the season throughout the Austrian capital.

# Leading lights

For many Viennese it is not the Opera Ball but the Philharmonic Ball that represents the high point of the season. It enjoys the reputation of being a ball for artists organized by artists. While it is smaller and has a lower media profile, the quality of the guests is said to be superior. The world-renowned Vienna Philharmonic orchestra holds its ball in the Golden Hall of the Musikverein, one of the world’s most imposing concert halls, and familiar to TV viewers all over the globe as the venue of the New Year’s Day Concert. The Vienna Philharmonic itself plays only for the opening of the ball. The entrance of the guests of honor is accompanied by a festive fanfare specially composed for this ball by Richard Strauss. But then the Philharmonic players leave the stage to other musicians – after all it is their ball and they no doubt wish to dance themselves. That said, the evening is all about the musicians, their friends and supporters. Tickets for the ball tend to sell out well in advance of the big night.

The prestigious Coffeehouse Owners’ Ball is a more formal affair. This ball is highly appreciated by the local population because of its typically Viennese ambience and is virtually regarded as a smaller version of the Opera Ball. It is also the largest traditional ball in the Vienna carnival calendar, with about 4,500 guests. The opening ceremony at the Coffeehouse Owners’ ball is more than a match for the festivities at the Opera Ball and the young debutantes are equally as elegant. The Vienna State Opera Ballet also performs at this event, accompanied by the Vienna Opera Ball Orchestra.

Guests at the Vienna Confectioners’ Ball enjoy what is presumably the sweetest night of them all, with upbeat waltz sounds and around 3,000 cake-related prizes at the Hofburg.

A slightly alternative but no less festive waltz is danced by Vienna’s LGBT community during the carnival season. The glittering Rainbow Ball takes place in the historical setting of Parkhotel Schönbrunn. At this charity event, lesbians, gays and transsexuals don formal evening wear, and celebrate the traditional entry of the “committee” as well as the hectic midnight quadrille. It goes without say that this unique get-together is open to heterosexual ballgoers, too.

The crème de la crème of the capital’s research and university scene come together in the state rooms inside City Hall for the Vienna Science Ball. The ball was set up by the City of Vienna in 2015 and is intended to draw attention to excellence, diversity and international collaboration in science.

Summer and charity balls

Summer brings the elegant Concordia Ball which has been a Viennese society highlight since the nineteenth century. The Waltz King Johann Strauss dedicated a series of his world-famous waltzes to the Concordia press club, and many of them are performed at this ball held in the Festsaal inside City Hall. Each year this journalism industry ball attracts more than 2,500 people including political, business, cultural and media personalities.

Also held inside City Hall, in May, the Vienna Refugees Ball, which features a seriously diverse musical line-up, is held under the patronage of the Mayor of Vienna during carnival season. The profits from the event are used to help refugees who are housed at Vienna’s Integrationshaus.

Note: tickets should be purchased from the organizers well in advance. There are tickets with and without seats.

# Addresses:

*Elmayer dance school, Bräunerstrasse 13, 1010 Vienna, www.elmayer.at*

*Rueff dance school, Friedrich-Schmidt-Platz 4, 1080 Vienna, www.tanzschulerueff.at*

*Vienna Opera Ball, Vienna State Opera, Opernring 2, 1010 Vienna, www.wiener-staatsoper.at*

*Vienna Philharmonic Ball, Musikverein, Musikvereinsplatz 1, 1010 Vienna, www.wienerphilharmoniker.at*

*Coffeehouse Owners’ Ball, Hofburg, 1010 Vienna, www.kaffeesiederball.at*

*Vienna Confectioners’ Ball, Hofburg, Heldenplatz, 1010 Vienna, www.zuckerbaeckerball.com*

*Vienna Rainbow Ball, Parkhotel Schönbrunn, Hietzinger Hauptstrasse 10-14, 1130 Vienna, www.regenbogenball.at*

*Vienna Science Ball, City Hall, 1010 Vienna, www.wissenschaftsball.at*

*Concordia Ball, City Hall, 1010 Vienna, www.concordiaball.at*

*Vienna Refugee Ball, City Hall, 1010 Vienna, www.fluechtlingsball.at*

The exact dates of the balls can be found on the respective websites or here:

https://www.wien.info/en/art-culture/music-stage-shows/dance/ball-season-340214

### www.vienna.info

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