

**Erotic, rebellious, scandalous.** A dance to induce ecstasy, an exuberant resistance to state oppression. Yes, it's that saucy dance with the devil, the waltz.

A staple in today's reality TV dance competitions, the waltz was a simple peasant dance until the cosmopolitan Viennese gave it an urbane makeover in the early 1800s. This year, the city celebrates 200 years since the birth of its 'Waltz King', Johann Strauss II, best known for Vienna's unofficial anthem, *The Blue Danube*.

But if waltzing today conjures up images of socially repressed salon dancers, let's skip back a few centuries to when "the devil's violinist", aka Strauss' father, Johann Strauss I, created the waltz ecstasy.

Before Strauss I took the stage as a violinist and conductor, people danced in groups, changing partners throughout. But when the waltz craze took off, couples were crushed together, hand on waist, laced bodice to uniform-clad chest, for the entire dance. Women swooned in their partners' arms, and men waltzed away all thoughts of the police state strangling post-Napoleonic Vienna from 1815.

It was a wild ride, with up to 10,000 people gathering in vast dance palaces to embrace hedonism set to music. Strauss I composed for and conducted the shows, "provoking frenzied dancing, panic and falls", according to a newspaper report at the time.

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I'm following the story at the permanent exhibition *New Dimensions*, at the Johann Strauss Museum in central Vienna, which is dedicated to Johann Strauss I and his three sons – composer Josef, harpist-composer Eduard and the genius of the family, Johann Strauss II. Even if you've poooh-pooohed the polka, the multimedia displays set a pacy beat documenting the racy life and times of the musical dynasty.

Strauss II is said to have written more than 500 waltzes, polkas, marches and operettas, and he took the waltz to levels unseen. In 1872, at the World Peace Jubilee in Boston, he conducted an orchestra of more than 1000 musicians, alongside 20,000 singers and 20 assistant conductors.

But it wasn't all jigs and violins. "[Strauss II] liked to play away!" is a comment in the museum's visitors book puts it. The writer was not wrong; Strauss I set the moral tone with rampant infidelity, eventually setting up his mistress as an open secret in gossipy Vienna, running two households, with six and seven children respectively.

His son Johann's life and afterlife are even more colourful. There was his long-running professional rivalry with his father, his marriages to an unfaithful actress, a mother figure with a septet of



illegitimate children and a young widow. A jealous younger brother who, incredibly, burnt his original works. And finally, decades after his death in 1899, his most famous melodies were adopted as Nazi anthems.

According to the *New Dimensions* display, Strauss I was furious when his eldest son, already a prodigy at six, composed his first waltz. Wanting his son to become a banker instead of a musician, he later paid concertgoers to boo his son, and bribed journalists to write rotten reviews. Then, in 1907, his brother Eduard spent five hours burning hundreds of kilograms of his sheet music, destroying an entire archive.

CULTURE AUSTRIA

# Dance of the devil

Waltzing through 2025, Vienna celebrates 200 years since the birth of its most revered musical genius, Johann Strauss, writes **Belinda Jackson**.



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**Need to know**

**About** The Johann Strauss 2025 program has 65 productions at 71 locations throughout Vienna.  
**Visit** *New Dimension* is at the Johann Strauss Museum, Friedrichstrasse 7. The House of Strauss is at the Casino Zögernitz, Döblinger Hauptstrasse 76.  
**For more** go to johannstrauss2025.at

Hapsburgs' vast Schönbrunn Palace. It was here, in a stylish salon then called Dommayer's Casino, that Strauss II made his debut as a conductor. Today, the still stylish Oberlaa Dommayer café is a traditional Viennese café blissfully free of the influencer crowds that plague the city's usual cafés. Men in long white aprons serve strudel, sachertorte and long glasses of 'melange', Vienna's preferred beverage of brewed coffee with steamed milk.

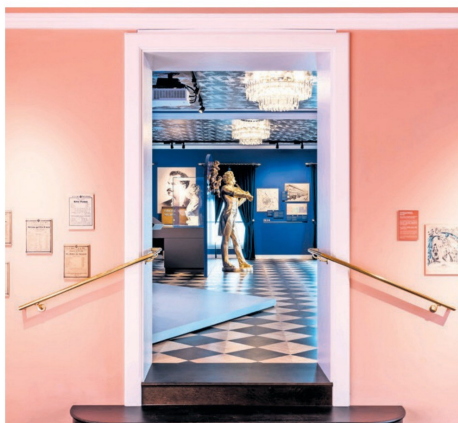
Another night, we head out to the Prater, an amusement park on the city's fringe. Here, the Mirage venue holds a twice-weekly Strauss dinner and show. It's unashamedly geared toward visitors ("Hands up if you're from Germany!" We are the only Australians in the room). The ceiling is a vivid red big top; the stage is circled by booths and tables cloaked in white. A philharmonic orchestra, a wandering soprano, an electric violinist and a couple whirl through a dizzying series of waltzes for us amid anecdotes of Strauss II's life.

"Liverpool has the Beatles. Tennessee has Elvis Presley. Vienna has Strauss," says the CEO and curator of the Johann Strauss Museum, Peter Hosek.

The composer's light-hearted operetta of mistaken identities, *Die Fledermaus*, is playing at the Vienna State Opera, and its original score – the most valuable object in the Vienna City Library's holdings – is on display alongside original costumes and listening stations in the Theatermuseum until August.

And every New Year's Eve, the Vienna Philharmonic still plays music by the Strauss family in the Great Hall of the Vienna Music Society (Musikverein), broadcast to 50 million viewers in 90 countries.

All proof that the world still spins for the Waltz King. **L&L**



Above: A grand display at the *New Dimension* exhibition. Left: The Strauss family's Bösendorfer piano and a blue room at the House of Strauss. Inset: An etching of Johann Strauss II by Theodore Zasche, circa 1895. PHOTO: ALAMY