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The free classical music festival that grants access to Barcelona's hidden buildings

The Festival Ciutat de Clàssica features a fascinating mix of venues, some of which are not normally accessible to the public

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The Estrella Damm brewery will be one of the dramatic venues hosting concerts



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I am sitting among an audience of about 120 people in the Sala de Confiança – the grand reception room of the Palau Güell which was Antoni Gaudí's first major architectural project in [Barcelona](#). We are facing a grand piano and

talking in hushed voices while we wait for the musicians to come in. The whole place has the air of a medieval church, with stone columns, arches and a highly elaborate timber-framed roof high above our heads. But with the lights turned down low, the atmosphere is one of cosy intimacy.

Even before the music has begun, it feels like a rather wonderful experience on several fronts. Firstly, instead of the tourists who would normally be thronging through the room during opening hours, I am surrounded by Barcelona's resident community of classical music enthusiasts, all dressed up in their evening finery. In a city so often reported as [labouring under the weight of over-tourism](#), it is an especially feeling to be in the midst of a crowd of people who actually live here.

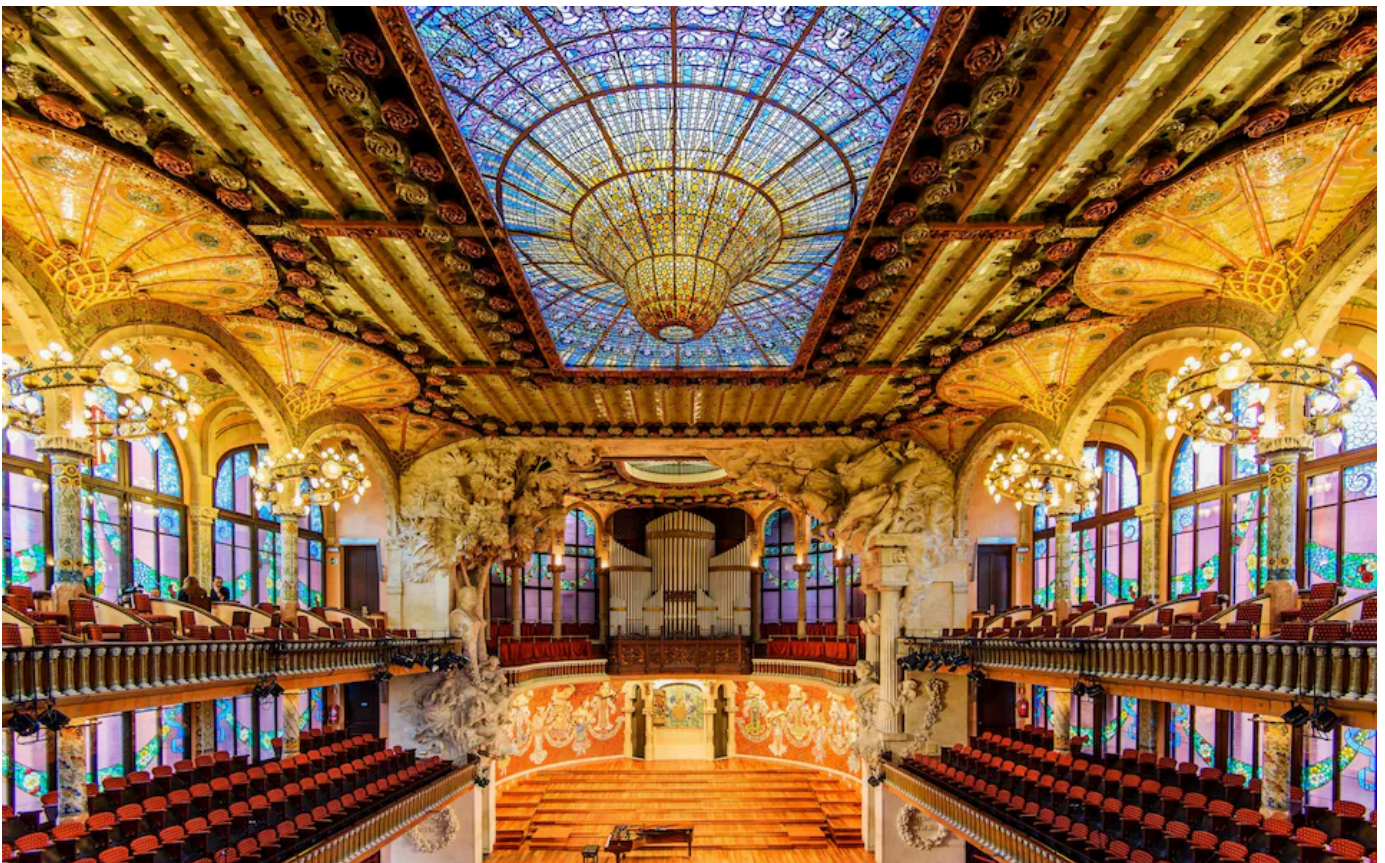


The Palau Güell is architect Antoni Gaudí's first major work in Barcelona, built between 1886 and 1888 Credit: Alamy

Secondly, and I suppose this is related to the same theme, I am rather enjoying the experience of visiting this grand house in a way that Gaudí himself might have recognised: as the venue for an evening's entertainment, rather than a museum piece tolerating an endless ebb and flow of sightseers. The main entrance and courtyard had been buzzing with arrivals, people embracing and hailing each other and chatting in rapid-fire Catalan.

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Now we had filed into the Sala ready for the concert, there was another reason to be filled with anticipation. The concept behind the evening's entertainment – a programme of songs by Mozart and Schubert, Robert Schumann and Richard Strauss – was designed to pay tribute to [Barcelona's musical heritage](#). The musical lineup was a reprise of a recital given in 1929 by one of the most famous sopranos of her time, Elisabeth Schumann, in an era when the city had only recently established itself on the world musical stage.



The Palau de la Música is the city's main concert hall Credit: Alamy

Schumann's original performance was actually given not in the Palau Güell, but in the Palau de la Música, the main concert hall in Barcelona. Such was the popularity of classical music in the city that when the latter was built between 1905 and 1908, it was paid for by public subscription. With its fabulous

interior, full of colour and extravagant Art Nouveau flourishes, stained glass windows and a spectacular central chandelier, it quickly became the epicentre of a golden age of classical music in the city. It was buoyed up by the international success of two great Catalan musicians, the pianist and composer Enric Granados, who died in 1916, and the cellist Pablo (Pau) Casals, who by then had just turned 40.



Cellist Pablo Casals would regularly play at the Palau de la Música Credit: Getty

They were among the leading lights who invited many of the world's best musicians to perform in Barcelona. Indeed, it was Casals, who played for Queen Victoria at Osbourne House and President (Teddy) Roosevelt at the White House, who had arranged for Elisabeth Schumann to perform in the city. And a few years earlier in 1920, he had also set up the Orquestra Pau Casals, which had become Barcelona's first orchestra of international repute until it fell victim to the Spanish Civil War.

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Finally, as if such a great location, sense of occasion and history wasn't enough, the recital I am attending is free – one of a series which forms part of the annual Festival Ciutat de Clàssica. These free concerts are held in a fascinating mix of venues which are either not normally accessible to the public, or which, like the Palau Güell, you would normally have to pay to visit.



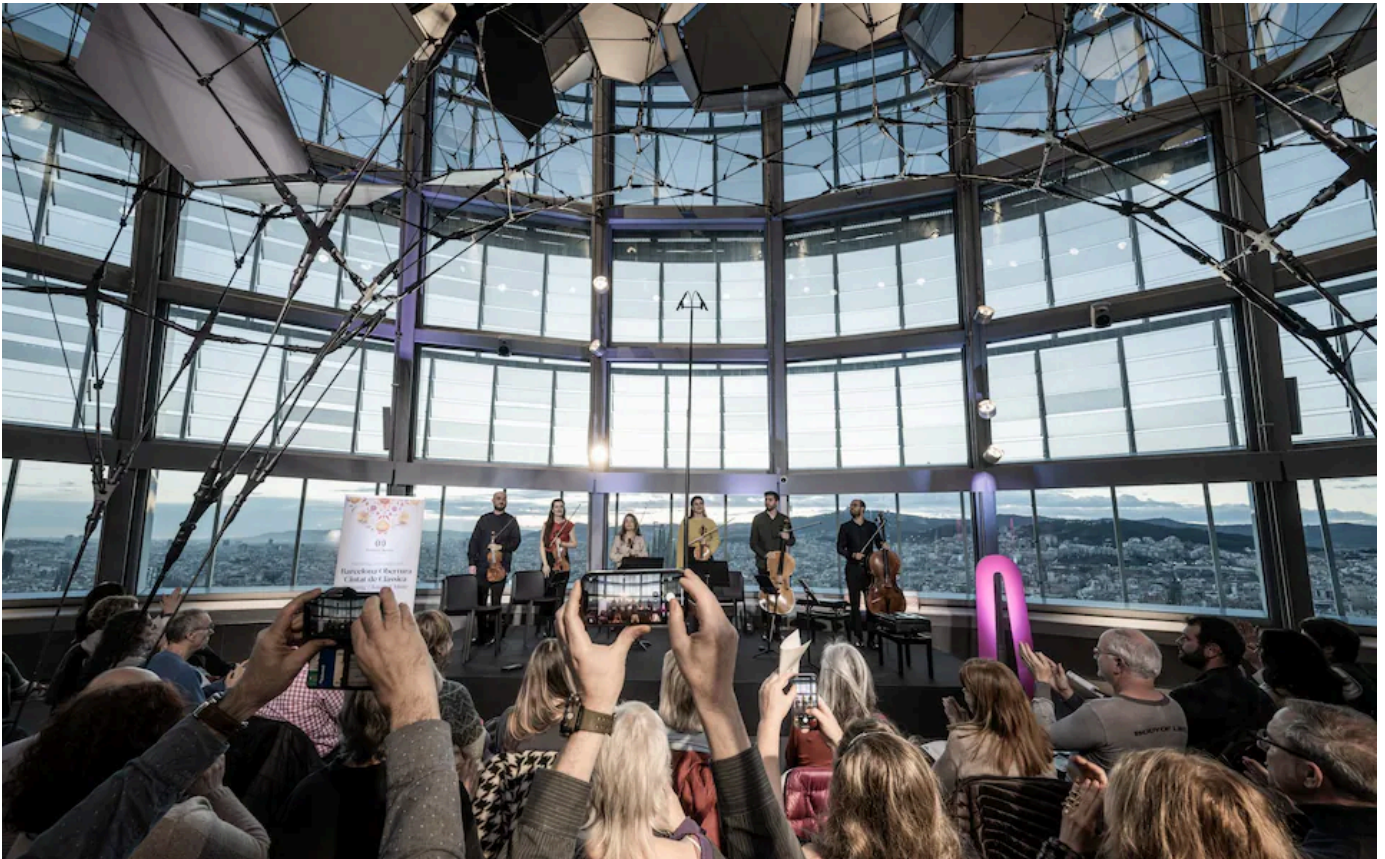
The 2026 festival programme will run over 24 days in March Credit: May/Zircus

So, if you are looking for a reason to visit Barcelona, you enjoy classical music and you want to see the city in a more intimate and less touristed light, start planning. Next year, in March, the 2026 festival programme will run over 24 days and include 26 free concerts at 23 different venues. These vary from museums like the Miró Foundation to architectural highlights such as Norman Foster's 288-metre Torre Collserola and Jean Nouvel's Mirador Torre Glòries.

The 14th-century Monastery of Pedralbes and the Estrella Damm brewery will also host concerts.

Gaudí will be especially well represented because 2026 is the centenary of his death. As well as the Palau Güell, there will be free concerts in three more of his landmark buildings – the Torre Bellesguard, the Casa Vicens, and the Casa Batlló. Meanwhile, the finale will be held at the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion, which was designed for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition – the same year, as it happens that Elisabeth Schumann had given her recital.

These performances – mostly by Barcelona-based musicians – run alongside the main programme of 23 concerts featuring major international names which are held at the city's three main music venues. You will have to pay for these, but it's a fabulous line up.



Performances will also take place in Jean Nouvel's Mirador Torre Glòries Credit: MAY ZIRCUS

Among the highlights, the Gran Teatre del Liceu opera house hosts performances of Handel's *Orlando* and Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* with Asmik Grigorian in the starring role. At the Palau de la Música Catalana, the brilliant young pianist Vikingur Ólafsson will play Bach, Beethoven and Schubert, and the Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists will perform the St John Passion. And at L'Auditori, a much more modern complex of concert venues, which is home to the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra, Martha Argerich will be

performing Beethoven's first piano concerto and James Ehnes is the soloist in Leonard Bernstein's Serenade for Violin and Orchestra.

Of course, you can enjoy opera and classical music at these venues throughout the year. But you won't enjoy quite the same atmosphere as during this remarkable festival.

How to do it

The next Festival Ciutat de Clàssica, run by Barcelona Obertura, is from March 5-31, 2026. Reservations for the free concerts will open in late December 2025. Demand is high, so if you want to try to get seats, you need to keep an eye on the website for bookings to open. Initial applications must be by [email](#), but from February 2026 you can book directly on the Ciutat de Clàssica website. Tickets can be bought already for the bigger, paid-for concerts. For full programme details and ticket reservations to all concerts, visit their [website](#).

Where to stay

Nick Trend stayed at the [Grand Hotel Central](#), where doubles start from €350 per night including breakfast. [Read our full review here](#).

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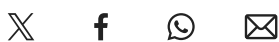
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