

Japan Music Tour 2026

Day One — 24–25 June

Group 1 arrived at the airport to check in for the eight-hour flight. After lots of photos and goodbyes, we found our tour groups and headed through security. We boarded at midnight and, after a long, sleepless flight, arrived in Hong Kong for our stopover. Following a short turnaround, we boarded the four-hour flight to Narita. Once through the airport formalities, we serenaded the terminal with our fabulous instrument checks. Our tour guide then showed us to the buses, and we travelled to the Metropolitan Hotel in Tokyo. We collected our keys, dropped our belongings into our rooms and set off for dinner: a ten-minute walk away and seven stores up. It was an all-you-can-eat buffet of meats, including Japan's famous wagyu beef, which we cooked ourselves on miniature barbecues at our tables. Then it was back to the hotel for lights out and a big sleep. What a welcome to Japan!

Day Two — 26 June

Group 2 set off from Perth overnight to make their way to Tokyo! Group 1 woke bright and early at 7:00 am and, after a buffet breakfast, got ready to visit Meiji Shrine. Lantern-like decorations greeted us as we walked among beautiful trees and crossed bridges towards the entrance. We were told to bow before entering as a sign of respect. At the shrine, we purified ourselves by rinsing our hands and mouths with the water provided, then learnt how to offer a prayer or wish by bowing twice, clapping twice and bowing once more.

After exploring the grounds, we headed to Takeshita Street, where we had free time within a set area to browse and sample the food. There were fashion shops, food stalls, animal cafés and entertainment venues. It was fun to get a taste of the culture, as well as buy some yummy food and souvenirs. When our time was up, we raced back to the bus for a 3:00 pm departure. Along the way, our guide explained the landmarks, local businesses and social customs we should know about.

Next came the famous Shibuya Crossing. By then, it was raining heavily, and we all got soaked. With people hurrying in every direction and umbrellas at every angle, it was hard to see anything around us. Still, being part of the bustle was exciting. The huge shops and high-rise buildings made us feel very small! We returned to the hotel to find that Group 2 had arrived safely. Everyone headed down for a buffet dinner before bed.

Day Three — 27 June

The night had been eventful; two typhoon warnings and a magnitude 5.4 earthquake at around 10:40 pm! For many of us, it was our first earthquake, and it certainly came as a shock. There was some confusion, with students gathering in the car parks, lobby and hallways. The hotel staff must have thought we were all crazy!

Because of the bad weather, our school visit was postponed for a day. Instead, we set off for some shopping in Odaiba, followed by a museum visit. The mall had plenty of Japanese food, including mochi and bubble tea that tasted very different from the Australian version, as well as entertainment shops. Armed with goodies and satisfied stomachs, we headed to Miraikan, the National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation. We spent an hour exploring displays on astronauts, environmental protection, space engines, alpha particles and human biology.

Back at the hotel, we had an hour and a half to find dinner nearby. Exploring the streets and trying authentic Japanese food was great fun. Yum! We were back by 9:00 pm and ready for bed.

Day Four — 28 June

The day started at around 6:00 am with breakfast and a celebration of Mrs Walker's 21st birthday, then got ready to visit Iwakura High School! We followed their custom of changing into indoor shoes and putting our outdoor shoes in bags. Their conductor, Otaki Sensei, demonstrated daily breathing exercises using milk bottles or paper bags to help students visualise their breathing and stay in sync. They also showed us how they tuned. Not one person in the ensemble of 50+ students sounded out of tune, it was impressive. They told us about their long school days, three hours of practice after school and seven hours together on Saturdays.

They played four pieces for us, some with choreography. They sounded like professionals, and we couldn't believe they were our age or younger! Their reputation as one of the top school bands in the region was easy to understand. We then performed for them, including the world premiere of Koorá Boodjarak, our specially commissioned tour piece, and shared some Australian culture and traditions. We exchanged messages and gifts before saying goodbye and boarding the bus for a bento-box lunch.

Later, we were lucky enough to hear the Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra. They opened with Wagner's Tannhäuser Overture, then welcomed internationally acclaimed soprano Aušrinė Stundytė to sing the Wesendonck Lieder. Brahms's Symphony No. 4 closed the concert. Hearing musicians of that calibre was truly inspiring.

Dinner was at a Japanese hotpot restaurant, where we added wagyu beef, pork and vegetables to miso broth. We all rolled out very satisfied! To finish the evening, we watched a ten-minute illumination show projected onto buildings, featuring popular anime and native flora and fauna. Then it was time to call it a night.

Day Five — 29 June

We woke at 7:00 am and made our way downstairs for breakfast before getting ready to visit Tokyo Skytree. Its observation areas promised a 360-degree view of the city, and we went up to Sorakara Point, 450 metres above the ground. Unfortunately, the persistent bad weather meant fog rather than sweeping views.

After an hour of looking around, we headed down to the shops below for lunch. There were fresh fish, expensive rare fruits, meats and even a matcha store. The variety was quite different from what we were used to in Australia. Some stalls sold inexpensive food and cooked it right in front of us, while others offered spices, sauces, coffees, teas and other drinks. We also found Studio Ghibli, Disney, Snoopy and LEGO shops, plus more animal cafés.

Next came an hour of taiko drumming. We learnt traditional patterns and rhythms, along with some of their history and significance in Japanese culture. We then split into two groups to visit Blue Note Tokyo. Before the show, we enjoyed four courses at an Italian restaurant, Venire Venire. The jazz performance featured an all-star big band led by trumpeter and conductor Eric Miyashiro, with singer Joyce Moreno. There was even a two-time Grammy Award winner in the audience! The hour-and-a-half concert was a memorable opportunity to hear these musicians live. It finished at 10:00 pm, so we arrived at the hotel late and went straight to bed.

Day Six — 30 June

After breakfast, we left for the Edo-Tokyo Museum's permanent exhibition. Across several levels, we explored historical buildings, archways, scale models, weapons and written records. We spent nearly two hours there before heading to DiverCity Tokyo Plaza, an eight-storey mall with popular clothing shops such as Uniqlo and Hollister.

With our shopping done and plenty of snacks secured, we moved on to teamLab. We explored four areas: Open-Air, Water, Athletics Forest and Flower Café. The displays were highly interactive and gave us plenty of photo opportunities.

Dinner was an all-you-can-eat buffet at the mall we had visited on Day Three. Curries, pasta, pizza, udon and more were on offer, along with another dessert bar! We watched the sunset from a balcony near the restaurant before returning to pack our suitcases and load the truck for the next day.

Day Seven — 1 July

With only limited luggage after sending our suitcases away the night before, we split into two groups. One visited the Imperial Gardens, while the other, Wind 1 and the Symphony Orchestra, attended a workshop with Masato Suzuki. He worked on Candide Suite and Festive Overture with Wind 1, and Asturias with the Symphony Orchestra. He was wonderful to work with and gave us plenty of ideas to take away.

We met back at the hotel, checked out and caught a bus to the station. Then we boarded the shinkansen, or bullet train, for the four-hour journey to Hiroshima. The weather limited the view, but a haiku competition kept us entertained! On arrival, we walked to a nearby restaurant for Hiroshima's famous okonomiyaki. A bus then took us to the Grand Prince Hotel, where we all crashed into bed.

Day Eight — 2 July

Eyes were open at 7:00 am, and we headed up to the 23rd floor for breakfast with a view. At 9:45 am, we walked to the docks behind the hotel and caught a ferry to Miyajima. The view was striking: oyster farms, fishing nets, mountains and industrial buildings lined the coast, with small villages tucked into the valleys. Parts of it reminded me of Perth. In places, it was hard to tell factory smoke from cloud, and closer to the island we could see pollution swirling in the water.

We arrived at 10:25 am and were warned about the deer. Apparently, they had acquired a taste for human food, especially ice cream, as well as visitors' belongings and paper. One poor woman's book was absolutely devoured. We saw whole deer families, from little Bambi-looking babies to males with ginormous antlers.

We walked towards a Shinto shrine, then had around four hours to explore the village and its local delicacies, which seemed to be eels and oysters. Some friends and I took a walking trail along the lower part of the island. We didn't have time to reach the mountain's summit and get back, which was a shame. The trail was more like a paved road than the gravel or mud I had expected, and wide enough for a truck. There were all sorts of plants, including Asian jasmine and members of the magnolia family. In a clearing, we found more baby deer with their families.

We tried some dango and bought lunch at a convenience store, since it was convenient. By then, the tide had gone out around the torii gate in the water, so we could walk close to it for photos. Where the water had been, we

spotted barnacles on the wood and yen coins. Eventually, we retreated to the ferry to escape the steaming heat and returned to the hotel for an early night.

Day Nine — 3 July

Today featured a more leisurely start, rising at 7:00 am for breakfast before catching a bus to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. The site commemorates the atomic bombing of 6 August 1945, near the end of the Second World War. We saw the haunting ruins of the A-Bomb Dome and visited the hypocentre. The Dome has been preserved as a reminder of the devastation, with debris still visible inside the restricted area.

At the Children's Peace Monument, we saw the statue of Sadako surrounded by long chains of origami cranes. We learnt how she folded paper cranes, including some made from medical wrappers, while being treated for leukaemia following her exposure to the bombing as a young child. The cranes honour the children who died in the bombing and its aftermath. We also learnt about students mobilised to work in factories during the war. Our choir sang in front of the monument to pay our respects and express a hope for peace.

Inside the museum, we saw photographs of the aftermath, including injuries, destroyed buildings and people who had died, alongside salvaged clothing. One display included items of a student's uniform recovered 900 metres from the hypocentre. These personal belongings made the scale of the loss especially confronting.

We left at 11:45 am for lunch nearby, then travelled to Hijiya High School. Their ensemble played with remarkable precision and unity. Our own stick piece was so energetic that one of the sticks snapped, setting the audience laughing. After some time chatting with the students, we returned to the hotel for dinner and a quiet evening.

Day Ten — 4 July

We woke fresh and ready for action at 5:30 am! After breakfast, we packed for the shinkansen journey to Kyoto and loaded our luggage onto the truck. My friends and I folded a few paper cranes before leaving, carrying a little of Hiroshima's message of peace with us.

We caught the bus to the station, then boarded the shinkansen for the hour-and-a-half ride. As we travelled towards Kyoto, the landscape opened into countryside, with farms, rice fields and dense stands of trees. Kyoto Station was very busy. We found lunch in and around the station before meeting at 1:15 pm to catch the bus to the Golden Pavilion.

The pavilion shone yellow and gold among carefully shaped trees, with a phoenix perched on its roof and carved stone statues around the grounds. At 3:00 pm, we left for the Arashiyama bamboo grove. It was stunning. Picture lime-green tubes about the diameter of a Pringles can, towering four storeys high, just like the photos on Google. There were so many that all we could see was green.

The rain grew heavier as we walked, and I ended up with puddles in my shoes. No umbrella was saving this group from squelchy feet. Dinner was at another tasty hotpot restaurant, before arriving at our hotel overlooking Lake Biwa. The view was beautiful, and lights were out at 10:00 pm.

Day Eleven — 5 July

We assembled at 7:00 am to a great view across Lake Biwa and a buffet breakfast with extras such as okonomiyaki. At 9:00 am, we left to watch the Kyoto Symphony Orchestra rehearse Brahms's Requiem with a brilliant choir, conducted by Masato Suzuki. The rehearsal ran for more than two hours. Visitors are not usually allowed, but Maestro Suzuki had invited us after our workshop a few days earlier. We felt very lucky.

At 12:30 pm, we headed to Uzumasa film village, where samurai dramas are filmed. We found curry udon for lunch, extremely yummy, then watched a ninja show. Most of it was in Japanese, but an English storyline projected on a screen made it easy to follow. Even without the translation, the fifteen-minute performance would have been hilarious. We also tried traditional games and toys, including spinning tops and cat's cradle, with staff teaching us a few tricks.

We returned to the bus at 4:00 pm, relieved to escape the rain, and napped on the journey. We had planned to dry off and change before our cruise, but traffic meant going straight to the docks. Aboard the Michigan, we enjoyed an American-themed dinner. Most of us agreed that the cream puffs were an absolute delight to the taste buds!

After dinner, we went upstairs for the crew's song-and-dance show. They performed American songs, including The Tennessee Waltz, and an original Japanese song about hope and good fortune. We docked at 7:30 pm after cruising Lake Biwa, Japan's largest lake, and had lights out at 10:00 pm.

Day Twelve — 6 July

Up at 6:30 am, packed our bags and were ready to leave by 8:30 am. Our first stop was a Buddhist temple. The rain was so heavy that we could barely see a few metres ahead. We would have been soaked through without our trusty 7-Eleven umbrellas! Carefully shaped trees, ritual washing stations, small monuments and plenty of

greenery lined the paths, with shops and stalls nearby. We bought lunch at the markets, where I tried yatsushashi, a triangular sweet with a filling in the middle.

At 12:40 pm, we left for the Shinto shrine famous for its thousands of torii gates. It was crowded, so photos had to be taken quickly! The gates wound around the sacred mountain, while older shrines, with peeling paint and encroaching greenery, appeared along the way. Nearby shops had plenty of strawberry treats, which went down very well.

We left at 3:00 pm for Hotel Universal Port, about an hour's drive away. That evening, we explored the area near Universal Studios and bought our own dinner. I chose pork ramen with extra cabbage and bean sprouts. After a look around the shops and scenery, we were back by 8:30 pm to dry off and get some sleep.

Day Thirteen — 7 July

We woke at 6:30 am and enjoyed breakfast before visiting Osaka Castle and its museum. After a quick photo, we worked our way through the castle's different levels, learning about its history and taking in the tranquil view from the balcony. I read about Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the powerful sixteenth-century samurai who built the original castle in 1583 and helped unify Japan, which made the visit more meaningful.

Following our leisurely walk through the museum, we travelled to Dotonbori for lunch, sampling treats such as tanghulu and mochi from the street stalls. At 4:45 pm, we headed out for Osaka-style okonomiyaki. Unlike the layered Hiroshima version with noodles, this had cabbage mixed into the batter, and most people preferred it. We were back at the hotel by 7:00 pm. Although we could go for short walks, the heavy rain persuaded many of us to stay indoors, play cards and relax together.

Day Fourteen — 8 July

Today was the day everyone had been waiting for: Universal Studios! Many of us woke early, eager to collect our tickets from the lobby and make the short walk to the park. Once through the long security queues, we went wild, rushing towards the biggest and most thrilling rides. The Flying Dinosaur and Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey were firm favourites.

Much of the day involved queuing under the scorching sun, so later we welcomed the chance to head indoors for a private show and dinner. It was a fitting final celebration, with everyone singing, dancing and waving glow sticks alongside the performers. We even had an extra hour in the park afterwards. By 9:00 pm, we were back at the hotel to pack for our departure from Osaka and get some well-deserved rest.

Day Fifteen — 9 July

Our final full day began with breakfast at 6:15 am before we boarded the shinkansen from Osaka to Tokyo. Later that morning, we explored a local market and shrine, admiring fresh produce and colourful flowers. After lunch, our guide took us around a beautiful temple and explained its wartime history.

In the afternoon, we made a two-hour drive to Shinagawa Joshi Gakuin, a private girls' school with musicians from several year groups. We listened to their ensemble, performed for them and then joined voices for a lovely rendition of Amazing Grace. Our time to socialise was brief, but we happily exchanged gifts before heading back to the Metropolitan Hotel.

The farewell party featured an all-you-can-eat buffet, lively Rubik's Cube and haiku competitions, and thank-you gifts for our teachers and chaperones. We went to bed at 10:10 pm, exhausted but grateful, ready for Group 1's early start on the journey home to Perth.

Day Sixteen — 10 July

We woke at 5:00 am to get ourselves and our belongings downstairs and onto the buses within 45 minutes. Breakfast followed before we headed to the airport. Our first flight, from Japan to Hong Kong, was due to take four hours but was delayed by 30 minutes because of a typhoon. Everyone was too tired to bother being nervous!

The late arrival in Hong Kong meant a race through security to catch our connecting flight. We literally had to run to the gate! Luckily, we made it in time to board the eight-hour flight to Perth, only to face another hour's delay because of strong winds. We finally arrived home at 11:00 pm, meeting family, saying goodbye to friends and teachers, and heading home to distribute souvenirs and gifts before crashing into bed for a much-needed sleep.

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