

PREFACE

2007 ~ Somewhere in Europe

What The FACH?! is the definitive, interactive resource for opera singers planning to audition and work in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. This book is filled with my personal experiences as a full-time, working American opera singer in Germany and Austria. I have included advice about what you need to do in preparation for a successful audition trip, information about negotiating your first contract, and plenty of thoughts on how to make a smooth and painless transition to a working singer, making a living in Europe.

I am not shy about expressing my opinion and you are, of course, welcome to take it or leave it. However, this book presents you with accurate, factual information from numerous sources that will save you countless hours of searching, mental anguish, and all-too-frequent frustration.

Many sources were used in compiling information for this book: official publications from the German, Austrian, and Swiss governments; publications from professional organizations; interviews with numerous colleagues; Rudolf Kloiber's *Handbuch der Oper*; *Deutsches Bühnen Jahrbuch*; and also plenty of personal experience. Because my German-speaking European performing experience is mostly in Austria and Germany, I have chosen to include Switzerland only when I can confidently present accurate information. Although I am American, I have made a concerted effort to keep citizens of other English speaking nations in mind while writing this book, particularly Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and South Africa. Occasionally, the information I have provided may be slanted towards the American reader, and I hope that it does not diminish the usefulness of this publication for singers of other nationalities. For this, I ask your understanding.

For the sake of clarification, whenever I mention *Fest*, the *Festsystem* and auditioning in Europe, I am referring to the same entity: being a full-time, employed singer in a German, Austrian or Swiss opera house. Throughout the book, I have included German translations in both the masculine and feminine (e.g., *Intendant/-in*) that are useful words for your German vocabulary. A comprehensive phrasebook and dictionary has been included.

I have chosen to remain anonymous (writing under a pseudonym) as have some subjects of my interviews; anonymity affords me the luxury of expressing my uncensored opinions, and it's just the way I prefer it. With that said, what I write is true and unembellished, the people I have interviewed are

real, working professionals, and I have double-checked my facts to insure that I present you with accurate information.

Here is the *Reader's Digest* version of who I am and the path I took to my present career in Europe, where I have been living and working for a few years. In December a few years ago after completing the New York City main stage audition season, I was faced with two months free before my next engagement. I had recently earned my Master's degree from a top program in America and had just completed my distinguished (and perhaps too lengthy) young artist program career. I was working with an artist manager in New York and was just beginning to do main stage work in America. I had around twenty roles—big and small—on my résumé and two engagements in my future, but I wanted to gain experience one can only find in Europe.

I decided to come to Germany for five weeks in January and February for an impromptu audition tour. In preparation, I lined up one German house audition through a generous friend and then sent my materials semi-randomly to about forty agents and ten theaters in the German-speaking world. I really had no idea at all how to go about an audition tour. To my amazement, within a week of sending my materials away, I began receiving invitations to audition from both agents and theaters. Before I left America, I already had six auditions arranged.

After three weeks in Europe and a few auditions, I had a stroke of incredibly good fortune when an agent (for whom I had not yet auditioned, strangely enough) called me at 11:30 AM. He asked me if I was available to jump immediately into rehearsals of a leading role in an opera (that I had already performed twice). "Yes, of course," was my answer. At 6 PM that same day, after stopping briefly at the music store for the piano/vocal score and then taking a three-hour train trip, I was rehearsing on the stage of a reputable regional German house. I was hired as a guest for the production, which paid for my next few months in Germany. Just like those bad diet pill commercials say, results may vary, and my results were an enormous stroke of good fortune combined with preparation.

A few months later and with another stroke of great fortune, I replaced a singer at the last minute as a guest in a production that also led to my first *Fest* contract with a "B" House. The rest is history and a few seasons later—full of both *Fest* and guest work—I am now in the ensemble of a wonderful theater with a contract extending until the end of 2009.

So there you go. I have been here for a while, I have the beginnings of

a healthy, international career, and I have some worthwhile tips to pass along. Living and working in Europe is exciting, interesting, frustrating, exhausting, invigorating, fulfilling, and always an adventure. Let this book be your guide!

Visit what-the-fach.com
to get the complete e-book.

DEDICATION

For my grandfather who quietly encouraged me...

AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book began as a Thursday evening project, stretching into an all-night project, and growing steadily into an insatiable obsession to create the definitive audition and working guide for opera singers in German-speaking Europe. I could not have done this alone—there are so many people who assisted in various capacities.

I must first and foremost thank my charming and intelligent girlfriend, Sarah, for her indefatigable patience, advice, and German proofreading skills. This book would have never come to fruition without her input and listening capabilities. Sarah put up for over a year with my constant yammering about this book.

I am fortunate to have a number of generous colleagues who agreed to be victimized by my sophomoric interviewing technique, among them (those, at least, who were not interviewed anonymously): Ellen Rissinger, Angela Fout, David Blackburn, Damon Nestor Ploumis, and Robert Tannenbaum. To those who were kind enough to read through my various drafts and put their good names behind my work: Garnett Bruce, Kirsten Gunlogson, Corey McKern, Monica Yunus, Erin Williams, Larry Cotter, Aaron Judisch, Patrick Carfizzi, Damon Nestor Ploumis, and Kate Aldrich—I am immensely grateful for your feedback. Ravil Atlas was not only a frequent source of helpful advice and brainstorming, but he also encouraged me to think big. Ravil was often there with creative ideas that helped take this project in new directions. I thank my father who has been a constant supply of *pro bono* legal advice, certainly saving me from an onslaught of libel litigation. I must also thank Matt Trevino for his help posting the original guide to the Web and for giving me the Web domain. I owe him a big beer.

To all of my online friends and colleagues at the [NFCS](#) forum, I thank you for your input, advice and generosity: Gypsygirl1974, Anglogreek, The Masked Researcher, MT, Ppd, HT, Grahamophone, Divarae, and the many others who helped me with their insights.

1 EINS

How Good Are Your Goods?

So, you've been thinking about coming to Europe—more specifically, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland—for an audition tour. You certainly have plenty of questions about the entire process: *Where do I begin? What do I do in preparation for an audition tour? Whom do I write? Is there even any work left over there? What kind of competition am I up against? How much does this cost? How long should I stay? What is life like in the Festsystem? Do I even want to live over there?* There are a thousand questions to ask and answer, so you need to get organized. It's best to start at the beginning.

Is a Fest contract right for you?

This book presents you with plenty of vital information for auditioning and working here. However, merely having this information is not going to get you a job. You need to honestly assess if you are ready for this new career direction.

Accepting a *Fest* contract means that you are essentially a member of a large theater family, performing a number of roles in repertoire over the course of a season (generally 10 1/2 months). You are a full-time employee of the theater and are (for a finite time, at least) no longer your own boss. It is up to you to decide if this is a wise move for you and one you wish to make. Keep in mind that a *Fest* contract will keep you occupied in Europe, and it will be a challenge to maintain personal relationships and professional contacts in your home country while you are in an ensemble.

Before you embark on this adventure, ask yourself a number of important questions and answer them honestly. You should candidly assess if you are able and willing to take on the vocal, mental, and physical challenges of a *Fest* engagement. Are you working now in your home country? Yes? Good. No? Why not? What kind of feedback are you getting from opera professionals? Do they give positive feedback and encourage you to come over to Europe and further your career, or do they say your technique is not together and your skills (e.g., languages, stage skills, etc.) need more work?

First thing is first. Your technique absolutely must be together for your *Fest* engagement to be a success. Is your technique in good shape and will it be in even better shape at the end of a busy season? If you are a *Dramatischer Koloratursopran*, can you juggle Norma, Fiordiligi, Violetta, and Miss Wordsworth in the same season, singing performances in repertoire? If you are a *Lyrischer Tenor*, can you sing Ernesto on Tuesday, Belmonte on Thursday, and Almaviva on Sunday, all while in final dress rehearsals for Alfredo in the mornings? The morning dress rehearsals are all with orchestra, so the conductor will probably want you to sing out. Of course, not every week is so severe, but I cannot remember how many times I have faced similarly challenging schedules. You will frequently rehearse and perform on the same day, and the opera you rehearse in the morning will often be a different opera than what you perform in the evening.



While opinions about opera and aesthetics are certainly different here in Europe than in North America, a tenor without high notes, a mezzo with a wobble, and a baritone who sings a half tone flat, all sound the same whether they are in New York, Sydney, or Mainz. If these problems are keeping you from getting work at home, the same is going to happen here, I promise you. Or even worse, you may actually get work and exacerbate your technical problems. Bad idea. Spend your money first on resolving these issues. If you have some serious technical problems, getting a *Fest* engagement is just going to put you in a world of hurt when you run out of gas in the middle of a production during the middle of the season. Being in an ensemble can take its toll on you if you are not prepared for the work. On the contrary, you should not wait until everything is perfect (although there really is no “perfect”) before you come.

Once you begin performing an opera as a member of the ensemble, the next production will often begin rehearsals. By the end of the season you may be juggling four, six, or ten shows, including rehearsals for the opening opera of the next season. If you think you can sing from forty to over one hundred performances in the same season (I'm not joking) and still be in good shape at the end of the season, this may be for you. Moreover, you will have few, if any, chances to get back to your teacher in New York, London, or Sydney, during the season.

The work is hard—yet immensely rewarding—and I find being in an ensemble to be a wonderful, artistically fulfilling, and enjoyable lifestyle. Life is good! If you are ready for the challenge, this is an ideal way to build your repertoire, improve your craft, and give your career a solid foundation on which to build. Imagine the experience of performing Gilda seventeen times over the course of a season. Such an experience is invaluable and you certainly are not going to find that opportunity so easily in America or England. Believe me, after you perform a role fifteen or twenty times, your stagecraft improves in ways you could never imagine, and (if your technique is together) the role really gets into your voice, so to speak.

So if you are in doubt about whether this is the right step for you, hop to it and get some professional advice. Consult people who know first-hand the business of *singing professionally in international theaters for a living*, preferably with experience working in German-speaking theaters.

Can you really live over here? Do you really want to live here?

You should really ask and answer this question truthfully. Germany, Austria, and Switzerland are completely different cultures from America, Britain, and Australia. I find the pace of life over here refreshing, and in contrast to life in America, people take more time to enjoy the present and are not riddled with guilt by taking a couple hours in the afternoon to relax and take a walk. Most rehearsals take place in the mornings and evenings, leaving the afternoons free for life outside the theater. Don't misunderstand me; we also work hard here, but the culture here places importance on relaxation and the pleasure of everyday simplicities. It's a good life.

Although there are some reminders of home (i.e., MTV in German, McDonalds, the occasional and Starbucks, etc.), the cultural differences far

outweigh the similarities. The Germanic mentality is much different from the American or British mentality, and the Austrian mentality is something else altogether. Then there are the Swiss. I don't know much about them, they seem very nice, and I do not understand a damned word they say. If you can understand Swiss-German (*Schwyzerdütsch*), you are two giant steps ahead of me.

Are you all right with being away from your family and friends for an extended period of time? Is your spouse or significant other supportive? If you have children, is this a move that the entire family is willing to make? When you have a death in the family, can you live with yourself because you had to sing a performance of *La Bohème* instead of making it back to America for the funeral? Can you live with not shopping on Sundays?

Although stores in Germany used to all close at 8 PM Monday thru Saturday, this is changing. The German government has just deregulated shopping hour restrictions and passed a law allowing each of the individual states to set their own shopping hours. This means that some stores may now stay open until 10 PM. The stores still often close early on Saturdays, and much of the country shuts down on Sundays. If you want to buy shoes on Sunday, forget it.



Austria is more extreme; on weekdays, stores here stay open until either 6 PM or 7 PM, many close early on Saturdays (i.e., 2 PM) or are closed altogether, and virtually nothing is open on Sundays. I must say, though, that while I initially had trouble adjusting to the relatively limited shopping hours here, I now enjoy that things close down in the evenings and on Sundays. (When in dire need of a jar of mayonnaise or other essential items, I can always go to a gas station; they stay open late into the evening.)

There are certainly many wonderful aspects to raising children in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, but it is different in so many ways from life in Indiana. If your spouse or partner does not speak German, the first few months can be difficult. But don't freak out; you are not moving to the Moon. With a bit of effort and a positive attitude it is possible to learn German and assimilate into European society.

German society is somewhat rigid and formal compared to America, the degrees of which depend on where you are in Germany. Just as in America, some cities have incredibly friendly inhabitants (e.g., Köln and Berlin) and others not so much (I am not giving examples). What we Americans sometimes consider good social graces, the Germans often consider superficial (*oberflächlich*). The phrases “How are you,” and “it’s pleasure to meet you,” for example, are just not thrown around like they are in Omaha. If you ask how someone is, be prepared to chat about it for a minute or two because they assume that you are genuinely interested. And vice versa; if someone asks you how you are, they are genuinely interested.

Customer service in stores and restaurants is, diplomatically stated, dreadful. With some exceptions it is common to be treated as if I should consider myself lucky I am gracing a store or restaurant with my business. It is also quite common to be nudged, pushed, and bumped into on the street and to receive no “excuse me” (*Entschuldigen Sie*). Each city and state is different and the degrees of decorum and rudeness vary, you’ll see.

Once you get to know German people, they can be quite warm. They do not, however, traditionally open right up to newly met acquaintances as Americans might do. Germans value friendship greatly, something you will appreciate when you are invited to a new friend’s home for your first coffee and cake (*Kaffee und Kuchen*), a tradition of afternoon coffee and dessert. But be warned that they are very direct. If you ask a question, you will get an honest, often unedited, response.

I find Austria much different than Germany, in that people take pains here to engage in the simple social graces reminiscent of my Midwestern American upbringing. Life appears also to be a bit more relaxed here. I find the pace of life in Austria to be a bit slower than life in Germany; there is an everyday optimism evident with people, and the customer service is generally good. One of the many great things about Austria is the abundance of coffee houses. They are everywhere, the service ranges from just ok to fantastic, and you are expected to not only enjoy your café, but also stay for a while and soak in the atmosphere. The wait staff will not put the pressure on you to pay and turn over the table to the next customer.

There is cigarette smoke absolutely everywhere in Austria as well as in Germany, something with which I constantly struggle. I have never smoked and I absolutely hate cigarette smoke. However, people smoke everywhere here including in the theaters. In fact, I was on stage the other night singing

my big duet with the soprano and I smelled smoke! That's amazing, no? The duet came right after intermission and the audience had just been blazing it up in the foyer.

You will unfortunately get used to it. The good news is that the anti-smoking movement here is picking up momentum. Germany is expected to vote anti-smoking measures into law sometime in 2007. This means no more smoking in hospitals, theaters, cinemas, schools, and public transportation. Yes, until now you could smoke in hospitals (only in Germany...). There will be separate non-smoking sections in restaurants, but if you want to go to the pub, forget it; they're not included in the smoking ban. Austria is being pressured to follow soon but some people and businesses (particularly restaurant and bar owners) are resistant. While there are some anti-smoking regulations in Austria, they are not enforced.

None of my cultural observations are meant maliciously, and if you have been here you may likely have conflicting views. Let me make it very clear: I absolutely love it here and I am comparing apples and oranges, so to speak. As well, I do not mean to challenge or question you by suggesting you ask yourself all these questions. Rather, it is best to face any fears or concerns head-on to see if you are ready for this career and life change. When you come to Europe, resist the urge to constantly compare the culture here to that of your home country. Jump in and try to assimilate—let yourself be open to new experiences. Simply being here can be a thrilling and life-changing experience.

How old are you? Are you hot? How much do you weigh?

My colleagues in America often ask me what role physical appearance and age play in the hiring of singers in Germany and Austria. These factors play a role of varying degrees depending on the tastes of the theater, and they are often part of the hiring equation. Some theaters want an ensemble of singers fresh out of school that look like Abercrombie & Fitch models, while other General Directors (*Intendanten*) hire singers based just on singing and/or acting. They want you to look like the roles you might sing.

Age. It is simply a matter of taste whether the *Intendant*—*in* likes younger or older singers. Younger singers in *Fest* engagements (very generally speaking) sound not only fresher than their older colleagues—they have not been singing eight productions and one hundred performances in repertoire, per