

## Six Weeks in Austria: Worth Every Cent? By Sara Thomas

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It was a beautiful August day in Graz, Austria, with not a cloud in the brilliant blue sky. The temperature was a perfect 80 degrees, and a slight breeze stirred the air—but I sat inside a classroom, desperately trying to shape my lips into the correct position for the “sh” sound my German diction teacher wanted.



I had come to the session in hopes of getting help with “Ich schwebe,” the charming Strauss Lied, and almost 15 minutes later, we were still drilling the first two words. “Sara, you’ve got to relax,” my instructor said in his perfect English, laced with just a hint of German accent. “Do you mind?” he continued, and before I could answer, he had his hand around my lips, pushing them into a pucker. “Now say ‘shhhhvve.’” I did as instructed, praying the sound would come out right. “Yes, yes!” he shouted, and I breathed a sigh of relief. We continued to work for another 15 minutes or so, slowly moving our way through only the first line of text, carried along by his constant stream of reminders to “relax,”

“release your jaw,” “loosen your tongue,” “relax!” And of course, when I would finally do it right he always favored me with his big smile.

At the end of the intense 30-minute session, he offered the following advice: “Sara, I think before our next session you should try having a beer or two to see if that can help loosen you up,” he said, followed by a hearty laugh and his signature smile. I had a good chuckle at that one as I left the classroom, practicing my pucker-lipped “sh” and reciting the German words with as loose a jaw, tongue, and lips as I could muster sans alcohol!

That was but one of many great experiences I had this summer with the attentive, caring and extremely knowledgeable teachers, coaches, and instructors at the American Institute of Musical Studies’ summer program. Summer programs often are a topic of controversy: Are they worth the money? Should I attend? Will it really help further my career? Do they really offer everything they advertise?



I have read enough pay-to-sing stories in *Classical Singer* to have a few reservations when I considered participation in AIMS. I am happy to report, however, that this summer program offered excellent training, as well as a wide variety of performing opportunities in

beautiful venues. Every program isn't for every singer, but I hope my experiences will help you determine whether AIMS might be right for you.

### **Program Description**

The American Institute of Musical Studies began more than 25 years ago in the picturesque Austrian city of Graz, where it remains an annual summer event. Graz, in the southeastern Styria region of Austria, is a two-hour train ride from Vienna and four hours from Salzburg. A clock tower adorns a hill in the heart of town, offering spectacular views of the surrounding countryside. A host of half-day and day trips to castle ruins, churches, neighboring towns, and nature hikes are available in the vicinity of Graz. Average temperature in the summer is in the cool upper 70s, a welcome reprieve for those accustomed to much warmer summer temperatures.

Originally designed as a program to help singers launch a European career, the six-week program consists of intensive training, with voice lessons, coachings, German diction and language classes, stage artistry courses, and an audition training seminar. Available extracurricular activities include private coaching sessions in Italian and French, ballet, yoga, jazz dance, operetta, lectures on various topics, and master classes. Tuition for the program is just over \$5,000, which doesn't include airfare, but covers housing, breakfast every day, and lunch on weekdays.

Singers must make their travel arrangements through the AIMS travel agency or be charged a fee. At first, I was a bit bothered by this stipulation, but in the end, I was grateful for this tremendous service. Michael Baird, the head of travel, was always willing to answer my every question in a timely manner, and worked hard to arrange alternate cities and travel dates to accommodate the additional traveling I wanted to do. I might have saved a few hundred dollars had I booked the travel myself, but his expertise saved me a big headache and made for a smooth and enjoyable trip. Another singer booked her own travel, only to encounter problems en route that made her days late for the program and cost her a lot of extra money. Another singer used frequent flyer miles, paying in essence \$600 for her ticket (the fee for not using AIMS travel), and saved substantially. (Note: FF seats are rarely available in summer.)

Students, faculty and orchestra members stayed in a large dormitory affectionately called the "Heim" (abbreviation for the German word *Studentenheim*). Each person had a private room, complete with sink, mirror, and high-speed Internet connection (fee charged). Showers and bathrooms were shared among 15-20 people of the same sex. This was adequate—I only waited for a shower twice during the entire six weeks. Daily maid service also was provided.

Because everyone lived in the same building and ate breakfast and lunch together, the opportunities for networking were endless. Getting to know both professionals in the field and fellow singers is a huge benefit of the program. Faculty members were very approachable, and I felt like they were there to help me.



The singers also enjoyed a definite feeling of family and camaraderie. One singer who attended AIMS recently flew to Minneapolis for an audition. At her hotel she bumped into a fellow AIMSer, there for the same audition. She immediately felt more comfortable in the unfamiliar city, she said, because she had a friend and comrade. The two hung out together and offered each other support—a very valuable thing in this business!

Another singer, applying for young artist programs, felt she could choose from a variety of professionals for letters of recommendation, because of the many people she worked with at AIMS.

All classes are at a school, a separate facility about one mile from the "Heim." A public bus

stops directly in front of the dormitory for the 10-minute ride to the school. The four-story building has adequate space for the hundreds of voice lessons, coachings, and classes going on there every day. My only complaint about the concrete, high-ceilinged rooms is that they are almost too live. It gave me a false sense of the size of my voice and the ease of production. The school building has no official practice rooms, but most classrooms have pianos and are available when not in use for lessons. Also, the staff encourages participants to practice in their dorm rooms at the “Heim” (also very live). This was very convenient, because I knew I had a private place to practice when I needed it.

The food was decent, but fairly high in carbs, salt, and fat. Breakfast consisted of rolls, cold cuts, cheese, yogurt, cereal, juice, and milk. Eggs, served on Sunday and Wednesday, were a welcome break in the monotony of the rest of the week. Lunches were served at the school: mainly soup, pasta, bread, and meat, with an occasional shredded iceberg lettuce salad. Vegetables, however, were few and far between. This got a little old, but we put up with it because we’d already paid for it, and it was convenient. (Schedules were tight, and there was little time to go elsewhere). For dinner, we were always on our own.

Each floor in the “Heim” had three full kitchens, and each participant was assigned a small, personal refrigerator. We could visit two grocery stores directly across the street or any of several rather inexpensive restaurants with good food and within walking distance.

### **Getting into the Swing of Things**

I made my first new friend on the flight from Frankfurt into Graz. She was just finishing her degree in voice at the University of Michigan, and we found we had a lot in common, including most of our repertoire! It was hard not to feel immediately threatened by such imminent competition seated right next to me—and I soon discovered this was just the tip of the iceberg. Of the almost 100 singers participating in the program, about 70 were sopranos. That may have seemed rather unfair, but I didn’t hear too many complaints—most of us understood that’s how it is in the real world, not to mention most summer programs.

The majority of the singers were between 25 and 30 years old, and the oldest person was in her

early 40s. Some students were at a more beginning level, but we had many, many exceptional singers on an emerging professional track.

We arrived on a Tuesday evening, and the following Thursday and Friday we were assigned a time to sing for the entire voice and coaching faculty. Each singer was required to have prepared a selection of five pieces from which each of us chose our opening piece, and then the faculty chose a second selection. This was taxing for the pianists, most of whom were up to the task, but still commented on the stress of these two days.

Each singer also submitted in writing their first, second, and third choice for their teacher and coach. From this initial hearing, taking into consideration students’ requests, AIMS assigned teachers and coaches to each student.

### **A Typical Day in the Life of an AIMSer:**

|             |                          |
|-------------|--------------------------|
| 8:00-9:00   | Breakfast                |
| 9:45-10:30  | Stage Artistry           |
| 10:30-11:30 | German                   |
| 11:30-12:00 | Lunch                    |
| 12:00-12:45 | Voice Lesson or Coaching |
| 12:45-1:30  | German Diction           |
| 1:30-2:30   | Audition Training        |
| 4:00-5:00   | Guest Lecture            |
| 5:00-6:00   | Studio Class             |
| 6:00-7:00   | Dinner                   |
| 7:00-9:00   | Performance              |

Those first few days, fighting jet lag and enduring our first audition, seemed like weeks. Once classes began and a routine set in, however, the time started to fly, and much too quickly! A typical day began with breakfast before 9 a.m., with classes starting at 9:45. Each singer received two voice lessons and two coachings per week, and studio classes with both coach and voice teacher once a week. German diction and stage artistry classes occurred twice weekly.

I had an amazing stage artistry instructor, who worked in great detail to stage my arias. He had extensive knowledge of the operatic repertoire and offered great insights into the characters. Four different levels of German language classes with top-notch instructors were a daily affair. A twice-weekly audition training seminar focused on auditioning in German speaking countries,

with tips on presentation taught and practiced in mock auditions.

AIMS also made extra classes, coachings, lectures and master classes available. We could schedule French and Italian private coachings at anytime Monday through Friday with two excellent language coaches. Operetta coachings were open to everyone for four hours daily, and yoga, ballet, and jazz classes were offered at alternating morning and afternoon times. Gabriele Lechner did two days of nonstop master classes during the hearings. Juilliard's Cynthia Hoffman and world-renowned conductor Edoardo Müller also did special master classes. We never had a shortage of opportunities to learn, but we had to manage our time and energy to stay healthy while availing ourselves of them.

### Performance Opportunities

The program began July 6 and ended Aug. 14, totaling 42 days. We gave about 40 performances during that time. Some felt this was too many to maintain a professional performance level, but with 98 singers, all wanting performing opportunities, those almost 40 concerts seemed necessary. I was concerned about not getting enough performance opportunities, but sang one to two concerts every week, all of which, with one exception, were well-prepared and well-received.

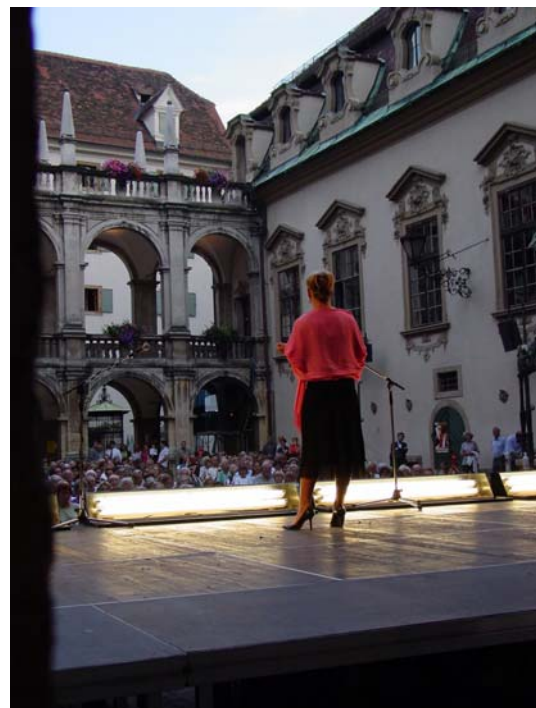


Weeks before the summer program began, AIMS gave all the singers a list of the themes for the concerts and of the specific works that would be performed. This gave us an opportunity to choose the concerts that interested us and prepare accordingly. You don't sing on every concert you prepare. I learned a Russian aria for a Russian music recital, for example, but was not selected to sing. I had plenty of other opportunities, however, so I didn't see this as a problem, but rather a relief.

The program featured weekly recitals in a small concert hall near the "Heim." Anyone could sign up to participate in these recitals. This gave everyone an opportunity to perform, even if they

were not chosen for some of the more prestigious concerts. Each coach was in charge of one of these recitals, so that all singers in that studio had a chance to perform at least once.

Thomas King, the head of the program, chose singers for all other concerts, with input from teachers and coaches. The AIMS Festival Orchestra—with Cornelius Eberhardt and Edoardo Müller as guest conductors—provided the accompaniment for weekly concerts, and AIMS featured several concerts in neighboring communities. Singers on those concerts were treated to an evening-ending dinner.



I had the opportunity to sing in one of the orchestra concerts with Edoardo Müller. In preparation for the concert, I had two coachings with Maestro Müller before meeting with the orchestra. I had two rehearsals with the orchestra prior to a final dress rehearsal in the actual performance hall. In addition, I had private Italian coachings on my aria. My Italian diction coach, voice teacher, and coach were all present at each rehearsal and gave invaluable feedback. Of course, with so many people telling me what to do, it was impossible to implement everything in a matter of days. I had to choose the most important elements to focus on. I felt very prepared going into the performance. My teacher and coach were especially supportive. It was

great to know there were people who wanted me to succeed.

### **When Problems Arise**

Of course, no experience is perfect, and there were certainly some problems during my six weeks in Graz. But the sign of a good program is its ability to handle problems. I know of several singers in the program who had problems with their coach or voice teacher. The program addressed these concerns and gave the students an opportunity to work with someone else. Another singer felt she wasn't getting the instruction she needed from her coach, but had decided to stick it out anyway. A faculty member became aware of her concerns and encouraged her to take the steps necessary to get the training she had paid for. She voiced her concerns to the head coach, AIMS listened—and she enjoyed a positive experience with a different coach for the remainder of the summer.

One downside tempers this glowing report on AIMS: The program is not the jumpstart to a European career it once was. Several singers said they went to AIMS for the agent auditions, but the program provided only two agent auditions during the entire six weeks. The audition training seminar provided valuable information for auditions in Europe, but the opportunities for those auditions were not part of the program.

### **Fund raising**

Deciding to participate in a pay-to-sing program, especially one abroad, often begs the question of how to raise funds for such an opportunity. Small scholarships and work-study grants are available through AIMS. I received \$600 in scholarships and work-study grants, and was required in return to work 30 hours during the six weeks of the program. This included working in the bookstore and library, passing out programs at concerts, etc. In addition, I joined a group of fellow students and a faculty member from my university who planned on attending Graz together and applied for qualifying grants from our university. We raised two-thirds of our tuition costs for nine people, a significant amount of the cost.

One singer at the program decided at a late date to attend. She thought fund raising would be impossible, but gave it a go anyway. She stuffed envelopes during opera rehearsals and sent letters

to everyone she knew, explaining this great opportunity and asking for any contribution they might be able to make. She enclosed a demo CD to those she felt might be able to make a larger donation. For her six to eight hours of time, she raised \$3,000.



Other participants gave concerts and charged admission, or asked those in attendance to donate what they felt they could give. Others received scholarships from their local NATS [National Association of Teachers of Singing] chapters as prize money for winning competitions. AIMS offers scholarships to Metropolitan Opera winners and many other competitions. The AIMS office also writes letters of recommendation to supplement fund-raising materials.

In summary, AIMS is an ideal program for singers looking to polish and hone their skills and gain additional performance opportunities. It also provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience European culture and study the German language. My hat is off to the staff at AIMS, who run a very fine program and my thanks goes to all the teachers and instructors who helped me become a better singer and performer.

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