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## A Singer's Guide to Staying in Touch While Living Abroad

by **Chantal Panozzo**

Funny things happen when singers move abroad. They ration Oreos. They go to McDonalds for home-cooked food. And they learn a new language. In previous decades this was limited to German, French, or Italian, but today a singer also learns the language of communication technology. From Skype to Slingbox, singers have ways to keep in touch like never before.

### Keeping in touch with friends and family

Keeping in touch with people back home is a full-time job. If you're in Europe, certain nights will most likely be dedicated to calling family and friends—despite all the communication possibilities out there, nothing can challenge the 5,000 miles of distance like an old-fashioned conversation. But with all the options for calling these days—from calling cards to digital phones—it's hard to decide what is best. For me, as an expatriate in Switzerland, Skype wins.

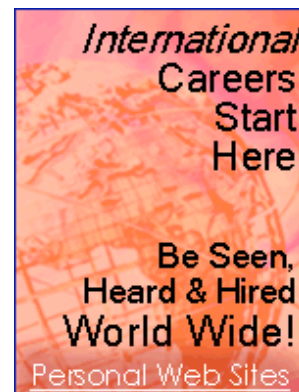
*Skype: Call the world for free*

Skype is software you can download that lets you make free calls to anyone else on Skype, anywhere in the world. Just go to [skype.com](#), choose a username, and call from your computer to other registered Skype users around the world. If you've got a SkypeIn account the people who call you don't have to be Skype users. They can call your SkypeIn number like any normal number. It isn't free, but it's cheap.

*SkypeIn: Pittsburgh is the new Paris*

You're in Paris, but your mother's in Pittsburgh. She wants to call you but still can't make sense of how to dial a number with a "+" in front of it. (A number in Paris, for example, would read +33 1 45 80 16 60.) Using a feature such as SkypeIn, you can tell your mother she can call you in Paris as if she's calling Pittsburgh—with SkypeIn, Pittsburgh and Paris can have the same area code. SkypeIn makes Munich no different than Milwaukee, or Seville no different from San Francisco.

SkypeIn is truly the great equalizer. You can live anywhere in the world and have a phone number of your choosing. If you live in Rome and have friends in Richmond, Va., you can set up your own Richmond number so they can call you easily. And in about 10 minutes, you can also set up call forwarding so that



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**40th AIMS**

anyone calling your Richmond number actually rings your land line or cell phone in Rome. Skype calls this forwarding feature SkypeOut.

*SkypeOut: Call landlines, cell phones, or forward Skype calls to regular phones*

Let's say the thought of talking from a computer makes you cringe. With a SkypeOut account you can enable call forwarding to your land line or cell phone and never talk on the computer for incoming calls again. When your mom calls Paris from her home in Pittsburgh by dialing a Pittsburgh area code, the call is forwarded to your land line or cell phone in Paris. Your computer doesn't even have to be on.

Another option is to buy a VoIP [Voice over Internet Phone] with PSTN (regular phone) capabilities. It's just like a regular phone—you can even choose a cordless option. For about \$100 (make sure you buy it in the country you are living in so the plugs work) you can have a phone that works as a regular land line and also with Skype.

My phone in Zurich receives both local and Skype calls. This is the best of both worlds and worth the investment. When you move abroad you will most likely have to buy a new phone anyway.

Tip: One word of caution: Skype isn't perfect. Sometimes it drops calls, or has bad connections. It's improving continually, however, and works perfectly about 80 percent of the time—and for the price and unique features, it's hard to beat.

### **Other Electronic Communication possibilities**

#### *E-mail and Instant Message*

Nothing is faster or cheaper than an e-mail or an online chat. Andrea Huber, a soprano living in Germany, mostly uses e-mail to keep in touch with her four sisters, brother, mom, stepson, and cousins living in the States. E-mail is time-zone neutral, one of its best benefits. Sending a message at 10 a.m. Munich time won't wake your friends in Chicago. Huber also uses instant messaging as a fun way to stay in touch. Like the phone, however, time zones often require scheduled "chat" times.

#### *Digital Pictures*

The fastest way to show your friends and family your new apartment, latest pants-role costume, or your new foreign boyfriend or girlfriend is through digital photos. You can send them via e-mail, post them on a personal website, or display them through sites such as *snapfish.com*, *shutterfly.com*, and *picasa.google.com*.

Tip: If you live in an area where the cost of printing photos is outrageous, sites such as *snapfish.com* deliver to many parts of Europe for only \$4 extra.

#### *Websites*

Having a professional website is always a must, but when you're



living abroad, it can be worth it to have a personal website as well, where you can keep friends and family updated on your whereabouts, travels, and triumphs. Even if it's really a glorified site for your mother's benefit, she'll love you for it. Programs such as iWeb (if you have a Mac) make it easy to create sites with music, video, blogs, podcasts, and photos without being too computer savvy.

Tip: Visit other expats' sites to get ideas on how to keep friends and families in touch with your daily life.

### *Blogs*

A blog is an electronic journal and it can be a great way to keep family, friends, and fans posted on your thoughts. The best blogs are focused on one topic and are updated constantly to keep readers coming back. Many artists keep blogs these days to keep readers returning to their websites. Mezzo Joyce DiDonato has a blog on her website, [joycedidonato.com](http://joycedidonato.com).

Tip: Try a free site, such as [blogger.com](http://blogger.com), to create your own personal blog.

### *Networking Sites*

Huber recently joined Facebook to keep in touch with her AIMS students. Networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster are great for connecting with people and keeping each other up to date on happenings in your lives. They are a bit like your own personal Web page, with a place for photos, a blog, and more.

## **Non-electronic Communications**

The computer is really transforming the way we live abroad, but nothing beats good old snail mail or an in-person visit.

### *Personal Letters or Cards*

If you need an excuse to visit a sidewalk café, take along some paper and write a hand-written letter while you sip a cappuccino and people-watch. Because they take more effort than electronic communication, personal letters can be more meaningful, says Huber.

Tip: To encourage a full mailbox, give friends and relatives in the States international postage from the U.S. Post Office. You can order stamps directly online and mail them to people you'd like to send you letters.

### *Personal Visits*

Overseas flights can be expensive, but nothing is better than a personal visit. Because you aren't home much, however, relatives and friends will be protective of their time with you. Plan ahead and let people know exactly when you will visit them and for how long so you cause no future disappointments. Planning also ensures you can fit everything in—from that visit with your old voice teacher, to the last-minute master class, to the very important shopping spree at Target.

Tip: Bring home empty suitcases so you'll have enough room for

all that mac and cheese you'll want to bring back.

### **Keeping in Touch with Culture**

#### *Television*

In most European countries, you will have access to CNN and BBC through basic television. You can avoid having to buy a television if you install a TV card in your computer and watch your local television through your computer. If bad German copycat reality shows are getting the better of you, however, or you just can't bear to miss the Super Bowl, the Slingbox (see below) might be for you.

Tip: Instead of buying a television abroad (your U.S. TV won't pick up European TV signals), consider purchasing a dual-powered projector. You can connect a projector to your computer and project your movies and TV shows (if your computer has a TV card) movie-theater style, right onto your wall. Plus, you can take the projector back to the States and it'll work there. (Just make sure it is also NTSC compatible.)

#### *Slingbox*

The Slingbox is a device that lets you watch television over the Internet. When we left Richmond to live in Zurich, Switzerland, a friend of ours offered to "host" us: He has a Slingbox hooked up to his cable outlet in Richmond. When we watch TV through our Slingbox Internet connection in Zurich, we can watch his Richmond TV. The image is not as clear as with regular television, but it is very watchable and a great way to keep up on local news and our favorite sports and reality shows.

Tip: The only catch with Slingbox is that it is live television. An afternoon soap opera in the States is prime time in Zurich. Watching the Super Bowl usually takes some endurance in Europe—the starting time is about 1 or 2 a.m.

#### *Podcasts and Radio*

For me, leaving Richmond was one thing. Leaving NPR was another. Many shows on NPR, however, are available as podcasts. I can listen to *This American Life* on any day in Zurich, at whatever time I want, on my computer. Many radio stations have similar offerings. Visit iTunes or your favorite radio stations' websites to explore the many possibilities.

Tip: Live at the Met. For a list of radio stations that broadcast Met performances in Europe, visit [www.operainfo.org/stationfinder/eur\\_radio.htm](http://www.operainfo.org/stationfinder/eur_radio.htm).

#### *Magazines and Newspapers*

Most magazines and newspapers have offers for international subscriptions. They are double or triple the price of a regular subscription in the United States but well worth the money. Newspapers such as the *International Herald Tribune*, a pared down version of the *New York Times*, are available at newsstands in most of Europe. Magazines such as *Classical Singer* and *Opera News* can also send copies overseas.

Tip: If you need to ship a lot of books, music, or periodicals

overseas, the "M" Bag from the U.S. Post Office is for you. In this bag you can ship a minimum of 16 pounds of material for about \$1 a pound. It takes about six weeks to arrive, but is a good deal for those on a budget.

### *Websites*

Websites are the most obvious choice for keeping up to date on news and pop culture. Popular sites include *cnn.com*, *youoldlocalnewspaper.com*, and *thenewyorktimes.com*.

Tip: For television shows, check out favorite network websites such as *nbc.com*. Many are now making shows available online. They may not be downloadable from Europe, however, due to regulations.

### *iTunes, Movies, and Television*

Thanks to iTunes, expatriates have many more choices than they used to have for movies and music. All you need is an account, and it can even be in U.S. dollars. It's the best way to find your favorites for cheap. Many television shows are also beginning to put episodes on iTunes. You may be a few weeks or up to a season behind, but you can still download your favorite shows.

Tip: The Met is in its second season of international HD transmissions—eight of them for the 2007-2008 season, up from six last year. At local movie theaters around the world, you can watch Met performances live. Check the Met website for performances near you:  
[www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/broadcast/hd\\_events.aspx](http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/broadcast/hd_events.aspx)

### **Books and Music**

Books in English are more elusive than you might think, especially in certain countries in Europe. The best website I have found for English language books is *bookdepository.co.uk*. They offer better prices than Amazon and have free shipping to almost anywhere.

Thanks to the Web, you can also download and print music, making expensive shipping charges a thing of the past. Good sites include *sheetmusicplus.com*, *tismusic.com*, and *musicnotes.com*. Another big benefit? You can buy everything in dollars. This is a big cost savings for singers living in countries on the Euro currency, says Huber.

### **Conclusion**

Whatever ways you use to stay in touch, technology always seems to be begging you to try another. Today, the best investment when moving abroad is a desktop computer or laptop. With a computer you can live anywhere in the world and still be close to home. Sitting in Paris, you can watch Chicago TV while your mother calls a U.S. phone number that forwards to your European cell phone. If only getting a hold of some Oreos were so easy.

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