

By Grammy Winner
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Guestbook

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Diva of Deutschland Soprano Andrea Huber

by Chantal Panozzo

Perhaps the *Kleine Zeitung* summed it up best: "*Die Amerikanerin Andrea Huber ist eine echte Diva.*" ["The American Andrea Huber is a genuine Diva."] Whether Huber is singing opera, operetta, musicals, or recitals, this soprano, with her roots in the cornfields of Illinois, has achieved one result in Europe: success. Having sung in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria for more than 20 years, Andrea has carved a niche for herself in the German-speaking world.

In this interview she discusses her experience, gives advice on how to launch a successful career in Europe, and talks about what her presentation, "The State of the Singing Business in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland," will entail at Classical Singer's Convention this May in San Francisco.

Can you talk a bit about your background? Where you are originally from?

Having just read Sara Thomas's "Editor's Note" in the February issue of *Classical Singer*, I will take my cue from her: I am from a three-part harmony with four sisters and a scowling only-brother, orchestrated by my mother while driving to quarter horse shows.

I am from my bigger-than-life dad's "sweet and sugary" hugs and kisses, and an Irish grandfather's unabashed singing of folk songs.

I am from the flattest farm county in Illinois, where a dirt road led past corn as "high as an elephant's eye" to my great, good, safe place under a rusty ol' bridge by a creek called Scatterin' Fork.

Where did you go to school?

I attended Illinois Wesleyan University and the Manhattan School of Music.

How did you decide to come to Europe to pursue

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Did you save up money before moving or did you just go for it?

I was fortunate enough to have a wonderful patron while I was a singing waitress living in Dallas. His name is David Lundberg, and he made so much possible. Also, my husband has supported me every step of the way—and I think I was so young when I came over (25), that I didn't realize it was supposed to be hard!

Was there a reason you focused on the German-speaking countries in pursuing your European career?

I think every singer, no matter which country they live in, has to confront the question, "Do I give Germany a try?" Germany has been the Mecca for so long and one really can make a living over here singing full time, with luck, patience, and tenacity.

Did you speak any languages before you got here? How difficult was it to become fluent in German?

I took private German lessons from Sheila's husband, Werner, before going over for my audition tour, plus I memorized the sample phrases in the AIMS [American Institute of Musical Studies] handbook "Towards a Career in Europe." I am a mimic, so I sounded like I was more fluent than I actually was, and I pretended to understand more than I did.

It took me about six months before I stopped getting headaches after trying to hold up my end of an evening of German socializing. Now, it's no problem, after 20 years.

How long did it take before you became comfortable living and performing in another culture?

Oh, I loved it all right from the start! I love adventure and being exposed to new cultures and ways of looking at things. I was also keenly aware that I was being allowed to live out my dream. (As Shirley MacLaine says to Meryl Streep in *Postcards from the Edge*: "It's really important to enjoy your turn.") I was cast in leading roles in a wonderful opera house [Krefeld Mönchengladbach], and getting paid to do it! Are you kidding? What a blast!

What challenges did you have to overcome living as an "expat" in Europe?

None—except for the fact that my family lived so far



away and I missed a lot of family events. I make every effort to make it home for all the big things . . . but I did miss one of my sisters' weddings, which was just plain awful.

What challenges does singing in Europe present to an American soprano?

OK, the key word here is "soprano," of course. There are a million of us. If you happen to be a dramatic, it's perhaps a bit better, since they are rarer, but soubrettes and lyrics really have to hang in there.

Identify your strengths and play them up. Sing arias from operas you would be cast in now. Diversity is a plus: your Fest contract at a theater will most likely have you singing "*Oper, Operetta und Musical*."

Americans have the edge here, I believe, (as long as you can handle the dialogue—get help from one of the house actors with your lines) since we have the reputation for being able to "do it all." When it comes to operetta, think Kathryn Grayson and Howard Keel—musicals are our heritage. You just have to get used to singing in original English and speaking the dialogue in German, something I did as Kate in *Kiss Me, Kate!* and as Julie in *Showboat*.

Did you ever feel you were overlooked for roles because you aren't European? Are the challenges similar for other voice types?

I had the feeling that I was overlooked for the classic Viennese operetta roles in Austria. There, I am usually cast as a "foreigner": the French Iduna in *Das Feuerwerk* or the Hungarian Mariza. Although I have done countless Rosalindes in "*Fledermaus*" in Germany and Switzerland, I only did her once in Klagenfurt, Austria, never in Vienna. It would be akin to casting a Viennese singer in the role of Laurie in *Oklahoma!* on Broadway, in their eyes, I think. For soubrettes and *Spieltenor*, you certainly need impeccable German, since they have a lot of speaking to do.

How hard is it for Americans to get work in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland?

I think it is getting more and more difficult simply because so many theaters are suffering from budget cuts, therefore cutting down on the number of *Fest* singers. Jobs are scarcer, but they are still out there. You just have to have the tenacity of a pit bull these days. As one agent told me, "If you look good, are musical, can move onstage, and have a wonderful voice, you will find work."

Is knowledge of the German language a must? If so, what, in your opinion, is the best way to learn the language? Should you study before you come over?

Yes! Not only is German a must for just getting around and making sense, you must have it if you expect to reach the third dimension in your singing. Just singing syllables and correct vowel sounds is not enough, nor is it very satisfying for you or the audience.

Listen to native speakers, find a native speaker near you and have conversations. Are there German chat rooms for beginners, I wonder? But nothing beats living in the country to force you to learn, or just seeing a billboard in German with the picture, or studying the products in the grocery stores to learn what's what. Also hearing it everyday in rehearsal is great.

Do you believe it's easier to carve a niche for yourself as a singer in Europe versus the United States?

I can only speak to what I know, and that is having carved a niche for myself over here. Easy? Sometimes, but hard other times. All I know is that there are still more jobs over here than in the States. And all kinds of choruses if you want those jobs. Chorus members make good money and have all the benefits.

What about leaving Europe to focus on singing in the States? Has that ever crossed your mind or will you ever leave?

The \$64,000 question! This is one my family has wondered about for a while now. I just had my U.S. debut at Lyric Opera San Diego in November 2005 as Countess Mariza and will do Desiree in *A Little Night Music* in 2008. I hope to find more work in the States, including teaching. I have started to apply to various universities in the States, so we shall see. There's the old joke that goes: "Who is the second unhappiest person in the world? An expatriate. And who is the most unhappy person in the world? An expatriate who's moved home." That kind of says it all.

How hard would the transition be from singing mainly in Europe to establishing your career in the United States? How does a singer go about that?

It is difficult to make the transition because of two things:

First, connections. I have 20 years worth of networking over here in Europe (Belgium and Ireland included) in the German-speaking system. Most of my work comes from those connections and hardly any from agents. . .

Which leads to the second difficulty—age bias. Yes, it is becoming more of an issue even in the opera world. Agents and intendants have told me that "*wort woertlich*" [word-for-word]. I recently was considered for a production in Wuppertal and my agent was told that "Frau Huber was perhaps a bit too '*herbstlich*'"—a very poetic way of saying "autumnal!" I recently read

that Sylvester Stallone said, "An artist dies twice, and the second time is easier." But that has given me impetus to search out the roles that are perfect for me now.

Right now I am in Mainz, singing the role of Mary Sunshine in *Chicago* and having a blast sending up a hilarious aria, à la Dame Edna meets Phoebe Tyler. You noticed most of my recent work has been musicals and operettas? That has become my niche. I did a Violetta in Prague three years ago and loved it, but there are other singers who can do it better than I these days. I have retired her.

What advice could you give a singer who's hoping to start a career in Europe?

Don't wait until your technique is "finished." It will always be a work in progress. You also learn a great deal by doing. Doing challenging roles that are right for you will ramp up your capabilities and take you to another level. Make sure you really need singing/performing in your life, and be sure that you are doing it for you, not to please a parent or a teacher.

Is there really a mystique about American singers in Europe in the same way that exists for European singers in the U.S.?

"The expert is always the one from out of town." Oh, I suppose there is a kind of mystique—although perhaps less these days. All the American colleagues I have worked with are models of professionalism, have excellent training, can usually move well, and have an idea about acting. Most people doing the hiring will agree with that assessment— and we are so much fun besides.

How do you learn to market yourself in a foreign country?

Still learning! More about that at the convention.

Do you feel young singers have more opportunities in Europe than America?

Yes, I do. The sheer number of theaters, orchestras, and choruses speaks for itself.

Are singers treated differently in the States than in Europe?

Most of the people doing the hiring over here are still called "*Herr*" this and "*Frau*" that—even people I have worked with for 20 years. With us "*Amis*" (German slang for Americans), we are usually on a first name basis from the start. That can be a touchy point for most Germans in positions of authority. You are expected to wait until they offer you the "*du*" (the familiar form of you, as opposed to the formal "*Sie*").

Americans are notorious for being too forward in this way. So I miss the American mindset of "putting on a show." It was great being at the Lyric in San Diego. I look forward to making more contacts in the States so I can sing there more often.

Do you believe Europeans appreciate classical music more than Americans?

Many Europeans grew up in a household where mutter und vater had season tickets to the theater. This is where opera was born, so they have simply been exposed to it more, even in the mid-sized cities, not just metropolitan areas.

Can you talk a bit about what your presentation, "The State of the Singing Business in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland," will entail?

I have been interviewing my colleagues working in every aspect of the music scene over here: conductors, intendants, coaches, opera directors, soloists, choristers, instrumentalists, Studienleiters, agents. I am trying to gather data to put my finger on the pulse of the German theater system as it is today. I want an up-to-the-minute impression about what is going on. I will try to gather statistics, too.

Questions are welcome, so start thinking some up.

I look forward to seeing everyone at the convention in San Francisco.

Chantal Panozzo is a writer living in Zurich, Switzerland.
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