



The Hills Are Alive with the Sound of Musiktheater

BY GREG WAXBERG

Musiktheater Bavaria trains singers in both musical theatre and opera during four weeks each summer in beautiful southeastern Germany.

Musical Theatre and Opera in One Program

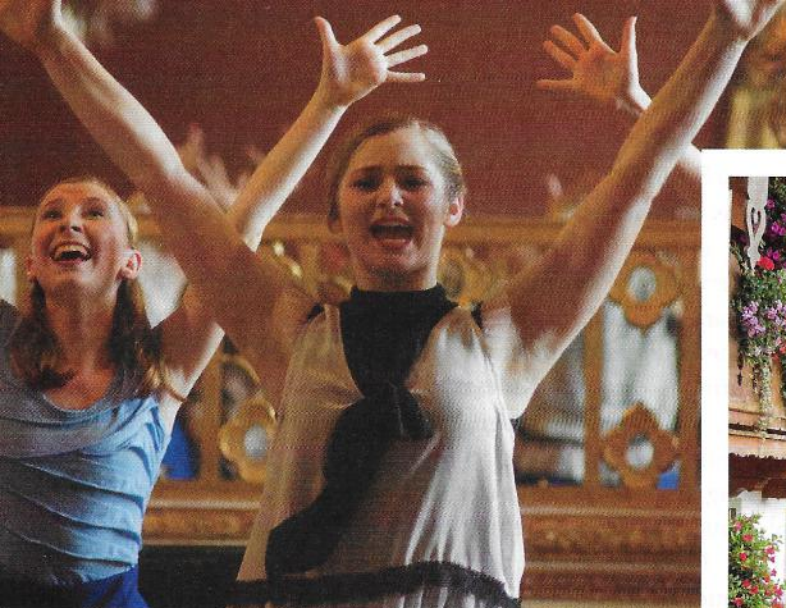
MTB is located in Oberaudorf in Bavaria in southeastern Germany, midway between Munich and Salzburg, near the Austrian border (for scenery, visualize the mountains in *The Sound of Music*). "Germany and Austria support a plethora of regional and international opera houses where American singers are welcome to audition. There is even an impressive opera house/concert hall just two kilometers from Oberaudorf," Munzer says. MTB takes its name from the German term *Musiktheater*, encompassing opera and musical theatre.

"We are delighted to offer a program for both types of singing stage actors," Travis says. "When musical theatre students and opera students work side by side, they learn from each other in unexpected ways. For example, opera students may learn about letting go of their inhibitions, and musical theatre students may learn to sharpen their focus of energy."

This doesn't mean that students enroll in both the Opera Studio and Musical Theater Studio—they choose to enroll in one of them (when MTB was new, students did both—but over the years, most have preferred to focus on one area). But there is some overlap: all students can work on solo repertoire in both genres during private lessons and coaching sessions if desired, all students take dance/movement, masterclasses for either studio are open for anyone to watch, and the final concerts include opera and musical theatre scenes for the entire company.

"I see Musiktheater Bavaria as a high-end training program for young singers and a natural step for those who want to audition and perform in Europe's German-speaking countries," says Cynthia Munzer, artistic director of Musiktheater Bavaria (MTB), a four-week summer program for young singers dedicated to German language, opera, musical theatre, and dance.

Associate professor of vocal arts and opera in USC's Thornton School of Music, Munzer joined the MTB voice faculty in 2014 and added the position of artistic director in 2015. In this role, she follows in the footsteps of Rollins College Professor Richard Owens, who founded MTB in 2000. According to MTB President Joan Travis, he saw "the growing enthusiasm for Broadway-style musical theatre in Germany and realized there were many opportunities for American singers and dancers to work in Germany in musical theatre as well as in opera."

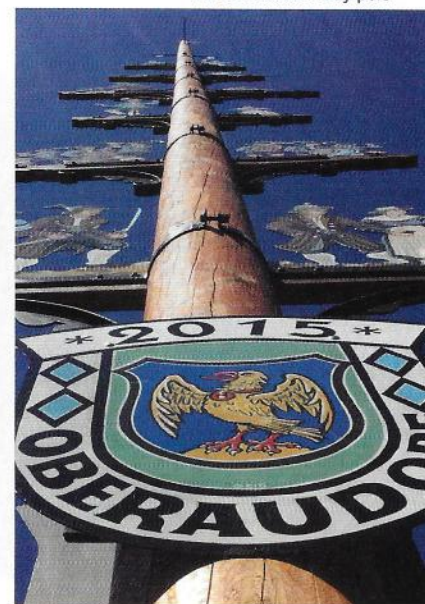


Emma Copp and Julia Hemp in a Musiktheater Bavaria production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* at Neubeuern Castle, 2015

Bavarian windowboxes in bloom



The Oberaudorf May pole



MTB offers four concerts with German audiences during the second, third, and fourth weeks of the program. These concerts take place in area recital halls and performance centers.

International Faculty

Faculty and students praise MTB for fostering student/faculty, student/student, and faculty/faculty interactions. “Students and teachers stay in the same hotel, have two daily meals together, and enjoy coffee breaks or hiking in the beautiful mountains together,” says Munzer. “We get to know our students! The faculty are internationally known artists recognized for their outstanding teaching abilities.”

MTB’s fairly small size for a summer program, about 30 students working with nearly 20 teachers, is what makes it feasible to have this personal attention. Teachers include Dean Wilmington, music director of the Joop van den Ende Academy in Hamburg and faculty member at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Munich; Stephen Hopkins, a coach at Vienna State Opera; Perrin Manzer Allen, artistic director of the Joop van den Ende Academy; and French conductor Laurent Pillot.

MTB is able to bring together this extensive faculty mainly because of the program’s four-week duration in July—all of the teachers can be in the same place at the same time. Munzer also believes that “one month is the right amount of time for this type of program. We work very hard during the week, then help students arrange for weekend cultural and opera trips to other cities and countries. This allows for a weeklong concentration and focus on training and performance, while giving students freedom to travel on Saturday and Sunday.”

Musical Assignments

Singers need to be 18 to 30 years old to apply for MTB, with at least one year of college or conservatory training (MTB

occasionally makes exceptions to the age limit if advanced singers want to audition in Germany). Admitted students are given arias and scenes to memorize prior to starting MTB and then spend the month working on those pieces.

These assignments can work two ways. With guidance from their primary voice teachers, opera students can submit “wish lists” of arias they are working on or would like to work on at MTB. If they plan to audition in Germany, this list should include music they want to use in those auditions.

If students do not have wish lists, or if the lists do not seem appropriate for the students’ work at MTB, the teachers suggest music to complement assigned scenes. For scenes, the faculty use the students’ audition videos as guides. Assignments are approved by the singers’ primary teachers.

Curriculum and Incorporation of German

MTB provides all students with voice lessons, coaching sessions, acting, dance and movement, workshops, masterclasses, German language and diction, and cultural instruction about Germany. German head teacher Katja Riek’s program includes discussions of cultural expectations for Germany, such as behavior, demeanor, and local customs. Guest speakers talk about the opera and musical theatre scene in Germany.

The Zahmer Kaiser mountain



Musiktheater Bavaria President Joan Travis, left, and Artistic Director Cynthia Munzer at a 2015 scholarship fundraising event.



Travis summarizes the German component of musical assignments. “All opera students receive at least one scene assignment in German and are encouraged to work on additional German repertoire,” she says. “If opera scene assignments are in a language other than German, they are from operas that are often performed in the German houses in their original languages. Most musical theatre scene assignments are from Broadway repertoire, in English—but if musical theatre students express interest in learning repertoire in German, we are also happy to assign scenes from musicals in German. Additionally, all students in both studios perform in a full company finale scene that is sung in German.”

Graduate students are assigned more challenging music and can participate in a mock audition for Munich native Antonia Klein, owner of the international management company Klein Agency. Others can attend her workshop about careers in Germany.

Opera Studio

This summer will mark JoAnn Kulesza’s fifth year at MTB. Head of the Opera Studio, Kulesza is chair of Peabody Conservatory of Music’s Opera Department and, at one time, lived and worked in Salzburg for two years. “This region of Europe holds a dear place in my heart,” she says.

During lessons, Kulesza demands integrity to the music, style, and language. “We also work with the text—‘wordsmithing,’ listening to inflections of the spoken text, looking at how the composer set the text. In addition, musical phrasing, vocal color, telling the ‘story’ holistically as a vocal actor. I get to know the singers and their backgrounds, aspirations, and training and inspire in them a sense of passion about the piece and what they bring to it.”

Kulesza considers much of the German repertoire too heavy for most of the younger MTB students. “We have to be prudent,” she says. “*Die Zauberflöte* is the most popular and most performed work in the German repertoire. We also have operettas, Italian operas, or operas in English that are performed in Germany but in German.” Opera students also work with faculty member Gordon Ostrowski, assistant dean/opera producer at Manhattan School of Music.

Justin Fatu Su’esu’e, a tenor, was eager for the opportunity to study in Europe and take dance classes to make himself a more well-rounded performer. He comes from a musical theatre background and considers MTB special for its partnership of opera and musical theatre. What’s more, he says he learned about his voice, the German Fach system (types of voices singing certain roles in Europe), and how to begin a career in Europe.

Fellow student Leah Golub, a coloratura soprano, attended MTB to gain performing experience, polish her German skills, and become more familiar with German culture since she will

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probably move to Germany to start her career. She was pleased with MTB's emphasis on German opera, learning about which operas are performed most often in Germany and German-speaking countries and having the opportunity to perform in scenes from popular German operas.

Golub's experience also speaks to the value of working hard. "The reward was being able to give satisfying performances for audiences who genuinely enjoyed our shows. It reminded me why hard work and studying are so important. It is easy to forget how much we love singing when we are in school or auditions all day. MTB is purely about the process. I have done a lot of summer programs, and MTB is the only one that made me feel like a 'real' singer . . . a glimpse into the professional world of opera singers in Germany."

With that in mind, her advice for future MTB students is simple. "Remember the process and allow the beautiful surroundings to inspire your art," she says. "Plus, people in Oberaudorf are friendly and *love* opera—get to know them."

Musical Theater Studio—Plus Dance for All Students

This studio is led by J. Austin Eyer, an MTB student 15 years ago and an MTB faculty member since 2012. Among his extensive musical theatre credentials, he is assistant professor of theatre and the dance coordinator at Pennsylvania State University. Eyer brings to MTB a combination of classic teaching methods and knowledge of the current Broadway culture.

"I've been blessed to work with teachers who worked with great people like Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse, so I understand the techniques that are foundational to musical theatre today," Eyer says. "With my Broadway experience, I know what's happening *now* in New York City and what is expected of performing artists." The Musical Theater Studio also offers classes and masterclasses with German faculty about the international musical theatre scene.

MTB has more students and teachers than when Eyer was a student. "One of my main reasons for coming back each summer," he says, "is this 'meeting of minds' from universities around the world. It's valuable to students because they're getting the best training. They get their money's worth from that training and our intense work during the week."

Eyer and dance teacher Rolann Owens teach various dance styles, combined with yoga and breathing techniques. Musical theatre students are taught "theater dance," a term for storytelling through movement, as well as ballet, tap dance, and jazz dance. Opera students are taught ballroom dance, ballet, and jazz dance. In Eyer's words, "It is essential for classical singers to care for their whole instrument and gain knowledge of proper alignment. Opera, especially in Europe, is increasingly physical." He also wants students to understand all levels of choreography. "As a choreographer, I look at singing, acting, dancing, and their respective techniques."

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A musical theatre student who sought an alternative to a semester abroad, mezzo-soprano Emma Copp says MTB is the only program she found that offers musical theatre and classical voice. Plus, as one pursuing a liberal arts degree, she had a rare opportunity for training. "It was also interesting to learn how musical theatre operates in Germany. I had never thought about performing in Europe because I didn't realize that niche exists, but it is good to know there is a market for these types of skills. I'm tempted to audition for an English-speaking European tour."

Mezzo-soprano Isabella Ward, a ballet dancer who began to study musical theatre in college, was a two-year MTB student in musical theatre so she could extend her work into the summer in a high-intensity environment. "Because I began studying musical theatre so late, I needed to immerse myself

in year-round training," Ward says. "MTB's intensive, one-on-one work environment, in which I was surrounded by musical theatre and opera students, helped me achieve a vocal standard that seemed almost impossible for me [when I began the program]."

Ward's success story speaks well of MTB's connections among its faculty. "Katja Riek, our German language instructor, teaches at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland," Ward says. "That led me to look at the programs at RCS, and I am now getting my master's in musical theatre at RCS. In three years, I went from never having a voice lesson or performing in a musical to getting my master's in musical theatre. I attribute much of that success to my training and teachers at MTB."

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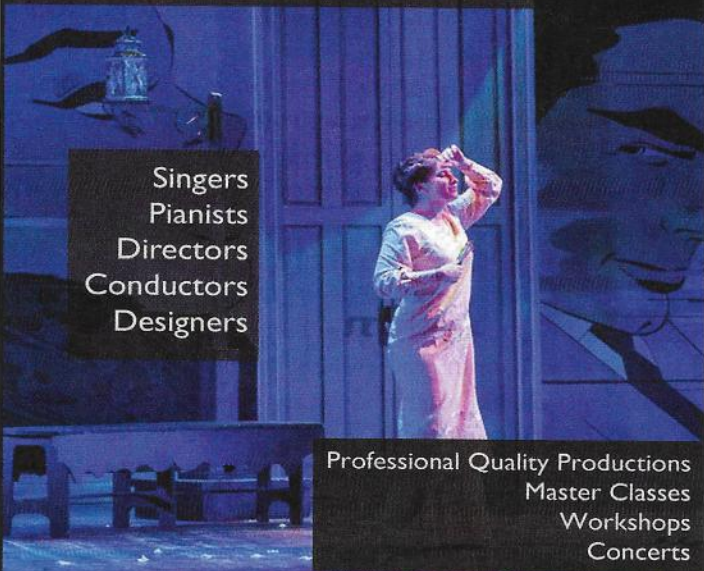
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Collaborative Piano

The concept of “collaborative piano” is educational for singers because pianists have long been described as singers’ accompanists. “The word ‘accompanying’ is now considered a dated term because it suggests a secondary function. A pianist collaborates with someone else as two equal partners making music together,” says Amanda Johnston, head of collaborative piano who joined MTB’s faculty in 2013. At one time, she lived in Germany for seven years. Johnston is associate professor of music and music director of opera theatre at the University of Mississippi.

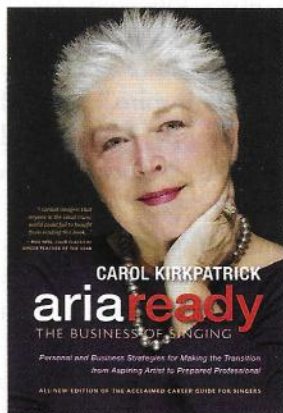
At Johnston’s recommendation, MTB created a program devoted to vocal collaborative pianists. At MTB, pianists play for singers’ voice lessons, observe coaching sessions, prepare opera scenes, participate in masterclasses catered to challenges in collaborative piano, and perform in public concerts. “Having a trained pianist work with a singer makes

for a completely different working relationship,” Johnston says. “We train pianists who are interested in learning to be coaches. They love singers. They love the vocal repertoire. The pianists and singers work intimately together. That can spawn a longstanding collaboration once MTB is over. Singers and pianists learn mutual respect and how to work together.”

New faculty members in 2016 are baritone Kim Josephson and tenor Gary Glaze in the Opera Studio, and mezzo-soprano Pamela Phillips and Broadway director/choreographer Richard Hinds in the Musical Theater Studio.

For more information about MTB and the 2016 season, visit www.musiktheaterbavaria.org.

Greg Waxberg, a writer and magazine editor for The Pingry School, is also an award-winning freelance writer. He can be contacted at GregOpera@aol.com. ©



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