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## Lied Austria

### Rediscovering Lieder

**by Shannon Postier**

Are you interested in Lieder? Do you want to know more about the Lieder texts and the poetry that inspired the great composers? Do you often hear performances of Lieder that are dry and don't really express anything, even though the singer has laboriously translated everything and has near perfect diction? Yes, yes, and yes.

I was tired not only of hearing well intentioned but dry performances, I was also tired of giving them. I decided it was time to understand more about song literature, and time to develop a closer relationship with the German language.

So this past summer I spent two and a half weeks in an amazing little castle in southern Austria studying what I love most: Lieder. I attended Lied Austria: The Step Beyond Singing. I learned how to bring song texts to life, sampled as much Austrian culture as I could in my first visit to Europe, and met other interesting singers from around the United States.

Five planes and 23 hours after leaving Tulsa, Okla., I arrived in Vienna, my first international destination. To save money, I chose to take the train from Vienna to Graz where the Lied Austria staff could pick me up and drive me to Leibnitz, the county seat of Styria in the southern-most part of Austria.

When I arrived in Graz, the founders of Lied Austria, Dr. Wolfgang Lockemann and Tracy Brighty, were waiting at the train station to pick me up and immediately made me feel at home. Right away, I got a sense of how important this program is—and how important I was to the program. How often is a singer for a summer program picked up at the train station by the artistic and executive directors?

Schloss Retzhof, which was to be my new home for the next two and a half weeks, is an amazing 16th century castle built amidst Roman ruins. The very evening I arrived in Leibnitz, I joined an excursion taking a group of participants to see a few of the ruins, one of many excursions we ventured on during our time in Leibnitz.

The next day we arrived at class ready to sing a couple of Lieder selections. One of the great things about Lied Austria is that singers do not receive their repertoire assignments until they arrive in Austria, for three reasons. First, many singers experience growth over the course of just a few months, so in the time between applying to Lied Austria and the actual program a singer may become ready for repertoire they might have been denied if the program had chosen their repertoire in advance. Second, recorded voices sound different from live voices. Tracy and Dr. Lockemann wanted to meet and hear each participant in person before assigning repertoire, to get the best possible fit.

Finally and most importantly, the focus of the program is the text. The Lied Austria approach is to be intimately involved with the text before experiencing the music. By assigning the repertoire upon arrival, the program can control this text-before-music concept, so that each participant can experience and understand the method.

We were each assigned five or six songs from a variety of Lieder composers. The goal was to work on each song text, in either the classroom setting or during our private coachings with Dr. Lockemann, before learning the music. This approach meant we were better able to understand the original intent of the poet before adding the composer's thoughts, leading to a much greater understanding of the composition as a whole. We were responsible only for performing our own assignments, but any one of us could have performed the others' songs, because of the time we spent studying everybody's assigned Lieder.

We began each day with “warm-ups,” particular texts Dr. Lockemann had gathered to help us warm up to the images certain sounds in the German language evoke. Some people think of German as a harsh language, but these exercises helped make the words come alive and helped us explore the possibilities for interpretation. We worked on rhythm, tempo, stress, phrasing, and dynamics, and on how changing them could completely change the meaning a performer is trying to convey.

Participants were able to partake of daily voice lessons, musical coachings, and text coachings. The text coachings were very intense. After a few days of working with Dr. Lockemann it became impossible to sit down while reciting a text—I had to stand and move, so that I could be free to express the things inherent in the text. I learned very quickly that I speak too fast. Learning to really “taste” the words has improved my performance.

The daily voice lessons and musical coachings were equally wonderful, with no sense of competition between the participants. Voice lessons and musical coachings were geared towards revealing the truth of the composition, not toward building the next “perfect” voice. The program accepted each singer as they were, with both strengths and weaknesses. It was a terrific environment in which to grow as a performer.

In the afternoon, we met together to work on the text as a group. Often we worked on a text that one of us had worked on during the private text coaching, assuring that we all had an understanding of the text. Afterward, we participated in a masterclass. We each sang through one of our assignments, receiving comments and suggestions about vocal technique, text interpretation, and musical interpretation. This was the schedule of the typical day at Lied Austria.

We had several opportunities to perform outside of our daily activities. We put together a concert of American music for a group of bicyclists from Germany residing in the Schloss. A few of us performed for a Sunday morning service at a nearby church. We concluded our visit to Leibnitz with a concert of our assigned repertoire. This concert was remarkable and allowed us to repay the community for their kindness and welcoming spirit. We were all amazed at how far we had come in the two and a half weeks we were in Austria.

The accommodations at Schloss Retzhof were unbeatable. Each participant was housed in a double room with a private bathroom. Everyday the custodial staff cleaned the rooms and fluffed the pillows. I really appreciated this personal touch.

The food was to die for at Schloss Retzhof. The chef and his staff prepared amazing Austrian cuisine everyday. For breakfast, we enjoyed a light breakfast of cereal, cold cuts, cheese, and rolls. Lunch—typically the largest meal of the day in Austria—was a big event: salad, soup, a main course, and dessert everyday. One day we enjoyed lamb; another day we had schnitzel. Each day we were surprised with a different selection, often a regional delicacy. I really miss the food in Austria. In the evening, we often had cold cuts or a light buffet of salads and strudel.

We had the opportunity to go on several excursions. We took a trip into Graz, where we took a historical tour of the city and then spent the rest of the day shopping. We went to the southern border of Austria and were able to see Slovenia. We traveled to a spa town, Bad Gleichenberg, where we were able to take a break and get a massage. We also visited the town of Ehrenhausen and a mausoleum. We returned to Ehrenhausen later to enjoy a weekend art fair. It was really interesting to see all of the local artwork.

Also, we regularly visited a great little coffee shop across the street from the Schloss. One night we sat at the coffee shop and played UNO while drinking coffee and eating pizza. It is one of my fondest memories. It was so wonderful to have such a close group of people at a summer program.

I loved this program and would definitely do it again. It is limited to a small number of participants, so that the process remains intimate and each participant gets a great deal of one-on-one time. It is also a real value, costing about half as much as comparable programs. Since food and housing are included at the Schloss Retzhof, participants do not have to worry about bringing a large amount of spending money or finding transportation to and from class.

I would recommend this program to anyone in love with Lieder and with a desire to find its true meaning. For more information about the wonderful and enriching program go to [www.liedaustria.com](http://www.liedaustria.com).

Shannon Darlene Postier earned a bachelor's in music education from Oklahoma State University and is currently working towards a master's in vocal performance at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she teaches private voice and voice skills. Her roles include Jenny in *Threepenny Opera* and First Knitter in Seymour Barab's *Game of Chance*. Concert appearances include soprano soloist in Haydn's *Missa in Tempore Belli*, Mozart's *Coronation Mass*, and Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem*. Ms. Postier is an active member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS).