

Heidelberg University, Germany

2014 Semester 2

BA MUSI

Before we get started, I would just like to say my story is a little bit different. I have made the decision to stay in Germany longer than my exchange. That's a big call in a new country, but there have been a lot of contributing factors.

Firstly, I chose to go on Exchange to Germany because I have studied Classical Singing and there is *so much opportunity* for musicians over here. I would love to be able to pursue this path, but I only have an Undergraduate Degree, and to be considered for an Opera House, people generally need a Masters behind them. I'm currently working towards auditions in July.

Secondly, I have an Irish Passport. As a member of the EU it means that I can just be a normal resident and stay as long as I like. I also got to skip a lot of the hard work in New Zealand applying to leave and in Germany applying to stay, which is definitely a bonus if you can swing it!

Thirdly, my living conditions are stable here. I am staying with a friend and her family. The biggest downside to this arrangement was that the family lived 1 - 1½ hours away from my classes. That was up to (and often more than) 3 hours of public transport PER DAY, including trains, trams and busses. While initially stressful, I quickly adjusted and studied or read while I travelled.

This also meant I wasn't really a big part of the exchange student community. Living in another town meant it was a lot of effort to attend parties and because I wasn't living in the student communes I wouldn't have known a lot of people there anyway. That is sad, but I really did come here with a different goal in mind: to see if I would be able to live here. I am, however, really glad that the Exchange programme was flexible enough to let me try this. I also got to know a lot more 'real Germans', which means my German is some to a lot better than my fellow classmates and exchange friends and I'm also a lot more confident speaking because I have had to use the language, whereas people living in dorms tend to use their native languages or English to communicate with other exchange students. Keep that in mind if you're really keen to improve your language skills!



L-R: Mannheim, where I lived; Heidelberg, where I studied

Getting Here

The flights took collectively about 30 hours for me. I took the jetlag pills and tried to get into a normal Germany sleep pattern on the plane, but I was still exhausted when I arrived. I got in around 5am and I was ok at first, but around lunchtime I absolutely rock bottom crashed. It took me at least a week to come right.

The first few weeks were confusing. I went and signed up with the Rathaus the first day I got here, and started talking with the Bank about an account, but there are so many little things that need to be sorted, for example:

a German Sim Card, insurance, internet banking, uni applications, etc.

Just try and be on top of things. Where possible, do research beforehand which companies you want to sign up with. I always found 'Toytown Germany' (an online discussion page for newcomers) very accurate and informative.

Money Money Money

I needed to earn a couple of thousand dollars to fund this. The exchange programme cost \$2000NZD and the flights cost \$1400 (I stayed a few days with a friend in Melbourne which made it a bit more expensive (I had to pay ~\$90AUD Ground Tax to Australia)). I also wanted to have a bit of money to fall back on for travel and needed ordinary funds for things like groceries. I knew, however, that I wanted to find a job here, and I didn't need to factor in rent since I was staying with friends, *so I didn't personally need the \$10,000NZD in savings that some people talk about.*

I started planning for my Exchange about a year in advance. I had a summer job and also got two jobs in Dunedin to pay for this. I also begged everyone for money for my 21st Birthday and applied for all the scholarships I could get my hands on. I managed to get the Baden-Württemberg Scholarship from Germany which was 400€/Mo. And of course the travel grant from Otago (\$1000NZD). And now I've found a job in Mannheim in a clothing store which is another ~400€/Mo.

Expenses in Germany

Food is very cheap here. I put aside 20-25€/Week for food, which is generous. I go to Discounter Supermarkets (ie Aldi or Penny where you compromise on brand names, but still get really good quality food) and pay around 10-20€/week for my food there. Note: I am only eating meat once or twice a week! And of course, there's always coffee/brezels while travelling.

I haven't so much gotten into the beer here, but I don't know what I'll do without brezels! They are always appropriate and always amazing.

As a student, you can buy a travel ticket for 150€. That lasts 6 months, and you are allowed to take practically everything except for the really fast trains (ICE).

You also have to have Health Insurance (you're not allowed to study or work without it!). That costs about 75€/Mo, depending on which company you pick, unless you sort something out yourself from NZ.

I'm also on a phone plan for 5€/Mo (Simyo), which covers internet. The connection isn't always amazing, and you have to pay extra if you want to make phone calls and text, but it's good for a cheap solution.

Adjusting and German Efficiency

Culture Shock is something that is really hard to talk about because there isn't technically anything wrong with you. Why can't I get up today? Why am I always stressed even though everything has been going well? Why can I suddenly not understand German at all even though yesterday was ok? It is a LOT for your body to process and you just have to be ready to take a few deep breaths and appreciate how far you've already come. And always have someone there for support.

The expectation for efficiency here is also something that takes getting used to. As kitchy as it sounds, NZ is really the land of 'she'll be right', which, unfortunately, doesn't translate particularly well into German. And empathy for personal shortcomings runs a little...short. You ran out of toilet paper? Why didn't you buy another packet when you saw that you only had 2 left? You're stressed about your homework? Why didn't you start it a month ago? On top of that, Germans are very direct. If they are thinking something, they will probably say it. This is a different sort of polite which is an acquired taste. In NZ, one will err on the side of politeness, even if what you've said isn't necessarily true. Germans ALWAYS err on the side of honesty. But they mean it in the best way. Also note: In Germany, *personal relations* and *efficiency* are two completely unrelated categories.

Classes

I took the month-long intensive Summer Course (Mon-Fri 9-12.30) which I found super helpful. The brunches at 10.30 were also always legendary.

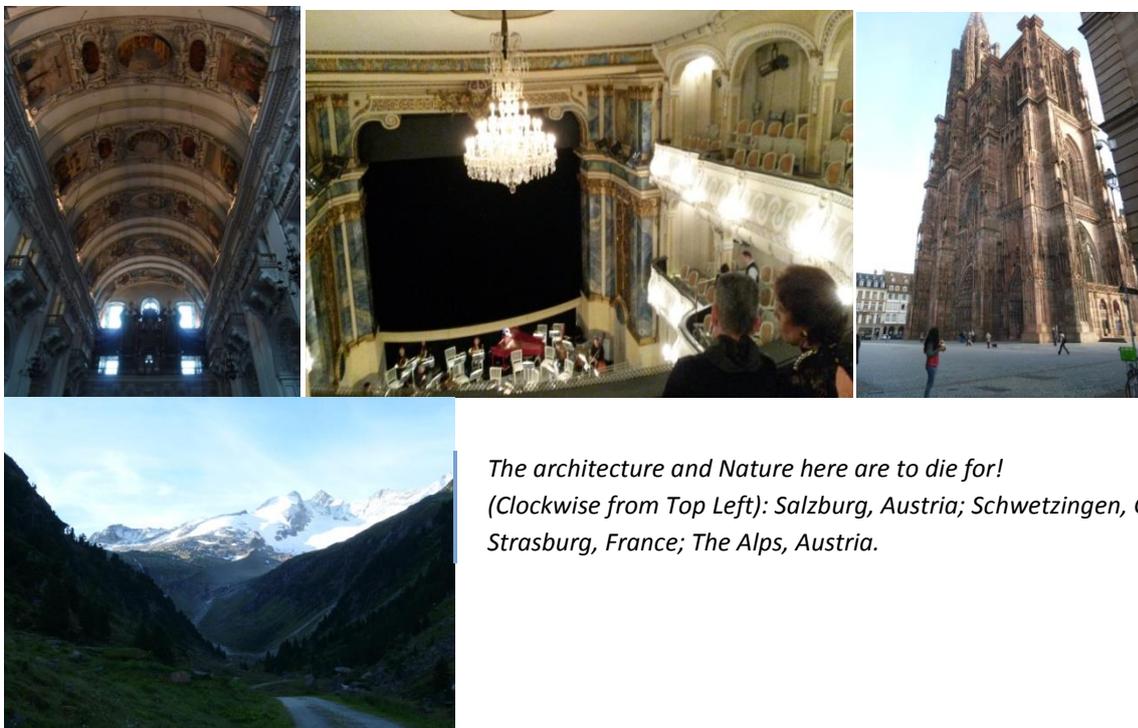
For the whole semester I was only allowed to accumulate 20 Punkte, which meant I could only take another 2-3 papers during the semester itself, since the Summer Course alone took up 8 points. I ended up taking a German as a Foreign Language paper (similar to the Otago layout, but all in German) and a course on the opera 'Der Freischütz' by Carl Maria von Weber. This course was about a million times harder and was not only about music, but also Philosophy and the Enlightenment and so many other things that I hadn't ever studied in English, let alone in German! It was a real challenge, but my German improved so much. I would definitely recommend pushing yourself.

Travelling

I've been to some really awesome places – day trips to lots of little towns around Heidelberg/Mannheim (ie Worms, Weinheim) and a day trip to Strasbourg, France. I have also done some longer trips to Austria and Bavaria, and saw some awesome things including Oktoberfest, the Salzburg Music Festival, Silvester in Lam, Bavaria and a night in the Alps.

I usually prepare for about 200€ spending including food, transport (a day ticket outside of Baden-Württemberg costs about 11.50€ for a Day Pass), accommodation (Hostel budget) and potential shopping. Adjust as required.

Long-haul bus tickets are also relatively cheap (I paid 30€ return to Munich – about 6 hours away from Mannheim).



*The architecture and Nature here are to die for!
(Clockwise from Top Left): Salzburg, Austria; Schwetzingen, Germany;
Strasbourg, France; The Alps, Austria.*

On this Exchange I have learnt that I am able to not only survive in a foreign country, but to flourish and that I am capable of taking care of myself. I have also been really lucky to find some true friends here that I know I'm going to keep. This exchange has also helped me see and understand the world and where I fit within it better and also where I could go from here.

Finally: Exchange is a lot of effort. You have to be committed, come up with the funds, and also maintain good grades. However, the positives far outweigh the negatives. I honestly couldn't recommend it highly enough!