Marita Knobel ♦ Brigitte Steinert

Singing Opera in Germany

A Practical Guide



Bärenreiter

About the Authors

Marita Knobel was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, and studied psychology, voice pathology and speech therapy at the University of Pretoria. She worked subsequently for six years as a speech therapist for disabled children while singing in her free time at the Pretoria State Opera. After completing her studies at the London Opera Centre, she began her career as a soloist (mezzo-soprano) at the Cologne City Opera, in Germany in 1971. There she sang many roles of her *Fach*, specializing in the German, Slavic and modern repertoire. Fourteen years later she returned to South Africa as Assistant Artistic Director at the Cape Town Opera, where she also developed the Young Professionals Training Program.

In 1985 she resumed her operatic career in Germany, where after a few years of freelancing she joined the Bavarian State Opera in Munich as a soloist in the character *Fach*. She has also appeared as a guest singer in Barcelona, Madrid, Bilbao, Rome, Tokyo, Vienna, Tel Aviv, Strasbourg and Toulouse.

Marita Knobel now offers individual audition training and career counselling for the operatic profession. She is also the founder and artistic director of the *Sommerkurs für Operndarstellung*, a summer course offering movement, acting, musical interpretation and audition training in Munich.

She is the co-author of the German opera handbook, *Beruf: Opernsänger. Ein Ratgeber*, which was published by Bärenreiter in 2002.

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She is the co-author of *Beruf: Opernsänger.*

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Foreword

This book is based on our handbook for young opera singers, *Beruf Opernsänger*, which was published in Germany in 2002. The English version is intended to help young opera singers from other countries to make a career in Germany. Many of our readers who are at the beginning of their careers live in countries or areas where there are no opera houses or opera schools and they consequently lack experience in the opera business. Although you can't learn acting and singing out of a book, we have also included some basic information on these subjects.

In the past, Germany was Utopia for opera singers from all over the world. Within the last five years however, the situation has changed dramatically. The global economic situation plus the specific financial problems created by the reunification of East and West Germany have forced many opera houses to close down or tighten their budgets. This has resulted in a reduction of the amount of vacancies available every year. The reality is that you may find 200 singers lining up for one solitary vacancy within a single week. The opera houses are at present in the enviable position of having the pick of the bunch.

This handbook is intended to give you the know-how on what to do and what not to do in order to achieve your goal. We hope that it will be read by young singers in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Africa as well as South America and the Asian countries.

A few hints for using this book:

- Our book addresses the specific situation in Germany, but many of the facts can also be applied to opera houses in Austria and Switzerland, which function along the same lines.
- The German expressions in brackets are in the nominative singular form.

- We use British English.
- We use the male form when referring to somebody. This is done for practical purposes. We are well aware of the fact that people working in the opera business can always be male and female.

Dear aspiring opera singers – a word of advice on your way:
You will be moving into a career packed with rich traditions that have a very long historical background and comprise a magnificent artistic treasure. There is much to learn, much more than you can even begin to anticipate at the start. It will take time and effort to grow into becoming a complete singer-actor. Do not expect that what you bring into this profession – your enthusiasm, natural talent and lovely voice – is going to be good enough by itself. Dedicated opera singers never stop learning until the day they retire from this wonderful but extremely complex profession.
Our aim is to encourage the most talented singers before they start out on the exciting journey of becoming an opera singer in Germany. We also hope to discourage those singers who do not belong on the opera stage.

We wish to thank Roger Clement for his support and Jennifer Trost, Assistant Professor of Singing at the Pennsylvania State University for her professional advice.
A special thanks to our friend, Neville Dove, Senior Coach and Rehearsal Conductor at the Bavarian State Opera, for his invaluable advice and support.
We wish you all a hearty toi-toi-toi!*

Munich, March 2005
The Authors

* Toi-toi-toi means good luck, and is used universally by theatre people in German-speaking countries. It originated from the tradition of spitting three times over the left shoulder of your colleague.

When in Germany, do as the Germans do

Does the typical German really exist?

The following was written by the Romanian-born student Ana-Maria Tighineanu, living in Germany since 1999:
"Germans drink beer at the Oktoberfest, in lederhosen and a silly hat. Proper Germans are blond and have blue eyes. They live on sausages with sauerkraut. And their music does not go beyond Beethoven and Bach. Clichés abound. Always good for a laugh when you try to find an answer for what is typically German. But what is typical, when you are talking about a country with a population of more than 80 million?"
To answer this question, we will start with some background in German geography and history.

Federal States

The Federal Republic of Germany (*die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*) consists of 16 Federal States (*das Bundesland*) and – believe it or not – these states and their inhabitants are so different from each other that even the Germans themselves are surprised at how big these differences are.

On 9 November 1989, the most important historical and political event since the Second World War occurred in Germany. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of the two German countries became possible. After a year of negotiation, East Germany, the former communist German Democratic Republic with its states Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Brandenburg, Sachsen, Thüringen and Sachsen-Anhalt, joined the democratic Federal Republic of Germany on 3 October 1990.

1 ◆ When in Germany, do as the Germans do

Federal States	Capital Cities
Baden-Württemberg	Stuttgart
Bayern	München
Berlin	Berlin
Brandenburg	Potsdam
Bremen	Bremen
Hamburg	Hamburg
Hessen	Wiesbaden
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	Schwerin
Niedersachen	Hannover
Nordrhein-Westfalen	Düsseldorf
Rheinland-Pfalz	Mainz
Saarland	Saarbrücken
Sachsen	Dresden
Sachsen-Anhalt	Magdeburg
Schleswig-Holstein	Kiel
Thüringen	Erfurt



The difficulties arising from the personal, political, economical and social coming-together of two different population groups have still not been fully resolved. The former East Germans grew up in a totalitarian system and have had to adjust to capitalism in a very short time. There are still some differences between East and West Germans, as well as the usual regional differences that are normal in a country with so long a history, such as:

- The geographical differences between the Alps in the south and the sea in the north.
- The climate, which can be rough in the coastal and mountain areas, yet mild in the wine-growing areas in the west and south-west. You will be surprised to find that people in the wine-growing regions are more outgoing than people living in the beer-brewing areas.
- The difference between the conservative life in the country, and the big cities where people are more open-minded and used to living in a multicultural society.

- The variety of dialects, which are sometimes hard even for a German to understand.

This is only a small and incomplete list. When you come to Germany you will find many more. Be prepared! There is no such thing as "the typical German".
There are, nevertheless, a few typical habits you should be aware of if you want to become a successful guest or inhabitant of this interesting and diverse country.
The following tips should make your stay easier and more pleasant.

Daily life

For general information on the city, town or village you will live in look up its website. There you will find useful information on the town and the surrounding area. The website of Munich (*München)* for instance would be www.muenchen.de (*ä*, *ö* or *ü* have to be changed to *ae*, *oe* or *ue* in the web).

Public transport

Public transport is very efficient in Germany, in the big cities as well as the smaller towns. It will not be necessary to own a car. You will be able to rely on the time-tables for trains, busses, underground (subway) and trams. It is possible to buy weekly or monthly tickets in advance. These are much cheaper than single tickets.

Driver's licence

If you plan to stay longer, you should get your driver's licence changed into a valid German one as soon as possible. This can only be done within the first few months of your stay. After that, you will have to apply for a German licence, with all the necessary tests. This can prove difficult and very expensive. For further information see www.verkehrsportal.de (in German) or go to the local office of the German automobile club (*der Allgemeine Deutsche Automobilclub*, abbr. *ADAC*).

1 ◆ When in Germany, do as the Germans do

24-hour clock

In Germany, one uses the 24-hour clock. A train will depart at 13.00 (1:00 p.m.) and arrive at 16.10 (4:10 p.m.). Your first rehearsal of the day will start at 10.00 in the morning and could end at 13.00 (1:00 p.m.). Your afternoon rehearsal might start at 17.00 (5:00 p.m.) and end at 21.00 (9:00 p.m.). Midnight is at 24.00 also called 0.00.

Accommodation

It is not always easy to find suitable and cheap accommodation, particularly in the big cities. Your first step should be to find a furnished place to stay for a couple of months. Websites like www.homecompany.de or www.mitwohnzentrale.de will be helpful here. You could also try www.immonet.de if your German is good enough. Once you are on the spot it will be easier to find a place to rent. You can then advertize or read the rent notices in the local newspaper and look at the notice board in the theatre or (for students) in the university. Students should also contact the student union (*das Studentenwerk*) of the university. You'll find it in the university website.

Once you have decided to live in Germany and have found a place to stay (*der Wohnsitz*), the first thing to do is to register (*die Anmeldung*) with the authorities. When you change addresses, you have to cancel (*abmelden*) your registration and re-register the new address.

Tip

An apartment (*das Appartement*) in Germany is a bed-sitter with normally only one room.

Shopping

Department stores are usually open Monday through Saturday from 9.30 to 20.00. Smaller shops and bakeries open earlier in the morning, some as early as 7.00, but then will close by 18.00. On Sundays all shops are closed except for a few bakeries and florists in the morning and the very expensive supermarkets in the main train stations. If you see supermarkets named ALDI, PLUS, PENNY, NORMA or LIDL you can be assured of low prices and good quality.

Tip

The Germans are very aware of environmental pollution (*die Umweltverschmutzung*) and many shoppers will look at you

with disapproval if you ask for a plastic shopping bag. We suggest that you always carry a cloth shopping bag.

Weights and quantities

Whether you're shopping or reading a recipe – welcome to the land of the kilogram (*das Kilogramm* or *Kilo*, abbr. *kg*), the gram (*das Gramm*, abbr. *g*), the litre (*der Liter*, abbr. *l*) and the millilitre (*der Milliliter*, abbr. *ml*).

For quick conversion of kilograms into pounds, use the following formula: double the kilogram weight and then add 10%. Example: 50 kilos × 2 = 100 + 10% = 110 lbs.

1 kg = 1,000 g
The word pound (*das Pfund*) is often used in the south.
1 Pfund = 500 g = 1/2 kg (not to be confused with the English pound!)
1 l = 1,000 ml (1 quart is slightly less than 1 litre)

Linear measurement

The linear measurements are the kilometre (*der Kilometer*, abbr. *km*), the metre (*der Meter*, abbr. *m*), the centimetre (*der Centimeter*, abbr. *cm)* and the millimetre (*der Millimeter*, abbr. *mm*).

1 km = 1,000 m; 1 m = 100 cm; 1 cm = 10 mm
0.39 inches = 1 cm; 1 foot = 30.5 cm; 1 yard = 91.5 cm; 1 mile = 1.6 km

Tip

In Germany, one writes divisions with commas instead of full-stops (periods): 1,6 km instead of 1.6 km.

Temperature

Temperature is measured in Celsius
0° Celsius = 32° Fahrenheit (freezing point)
17.8° Celsius = 0° Fahrenheit
20° Celsius = 68° Fahrenheit (room temperature)
100° Celsius = 212° Fahrenheit (boiling)
In German, you say 20 *Grad* without the word "Celsius".

Normal body temperature is 37 *Grad*. A temperature above normal begins at 38 *Grad*. A high temperature is between 39 and 41 *Grad*.

Electricity

The standard electric current in Germany is 220 volts. You might need a transformer for your appliances, depending on where you come from.

Health care and pharmacies (chemists)

In Germany you will find many general practitioners (*der Allgemeinarzt/die Allgemeinärztin*). It makes sense to go to a GP first who will then recommend the necessary specialists. To find a good dentist (*der Zahnarzt/die Zahnärztin*) ask your colleagues or friends for a recommendation.

Medicine, with or without prescription, can only be bought in a pharmacy or a chemist (*die Apotheke*). You won't find medication in a normal supermarket or drugstore (*die Drogerie*). You will find vitamin pills there, but to get quality vitamins we suggest you ask your pharmacist or chemist.

In general, your health insurance will pay for a normal check-up by your GP, also for treatment by a specialist, for hospital treatment, for all prescription drugs, or for certain dental work. Specialized dental work such as crowns, bridges or dentures are not covered completely. You should explore the possibilities of additional insurance to cover these extra costs (see chapter 6).

Tip

The medication you have been taking at home will have a different name in Germany. It might be a good idea to find out from your doctor at home what the exact ingredients of your regular medication are, so that you will be able to find it in Germany.

Banking

The first thing to do after arriving in Germany is to open a bank account (*das Girokonto*). Ask your bank to explain to you how to do automatic monthly transfers (*der Dauerauftrag*) for your rent (*die Miete*) and utilities like electricity, gas, water and telephone. In Germany, most money transactions are done by bank transfers (this can also be done online) and not by cheque as is usual in some other countries (see p. 104f.).

Smoking

Smoking is allowed in most restaurants and also in theatre canteens (cafeterias) at certain times. If you want to avoid smokers, look for signs saying *Rauchen Verboten* (No Smoking) or *Nichtraucherzone* (non-smoking zone). Smoking is not allowed in trams, busses and undergrounds (subways). On the national and international trains you will find special smoking compartments.

Television and radio

In Germany you have to pay a monthly fee to the *GEZ* (*die Gebühreneinzugszentrale*) if you own a radio or a television set. You must go to the Post Office or your bank to register for this. Controllers come around regularly to check, and if you are caught without a subscription, you have to pay quite a big fine. This also applies to your car radio.

Telephoning

If you call someone you don't know very well, you should announce yourself by giving your full name. If the person you need to speak to does not answer personally and you have to ask for him or her, it will be regarded as impolite not to identify yourself first.
In Germany it is normal practice to answer your own phone with your surname. This may sound very formal and odd to people who come from countries where one just says "hello", but, when in Germany, do as the Germans do. It will make a bad impression on a business partner not to follow this custom.
A cell phone or mobile phone is called *das Handy* in German.

Important telephone numbers

Police: 110
Fire Station or Ambulance: 112

Punctuality

Another typical quality of German life is punctuality. If you get an invitation for 19.00, be there at 7:00 p.m. (remember the 24-hour clock). You should never arrive late, but don't come too early, either. It is customary to bring a small gift, such as flowers or chocolates for the hostess. For the host, a good bottle of wine will always be welcome.

Weather

Your rule-of-thumb is: Be prepared for warm, cold and very cold days in each season. Don't be fooled by the word 'summer'! Summer in Germany very often turns out to be cold, windy and rainy, but it can also become very hot and humid. For summer, bring a warm sweater, an outdoor jacket, summer clothes, and don't forget your umbrella! Autumn (fall) and spring can surprise you with real summer days and temperatures around 25°C (77°F). But the next day can be rainy and stormy! Be prepared for snow and ice in winter. You should bring a good pair of waterproof boots with thick soles, warm gloves, a scarf and a warm hat.

Seasons

Spring: March, April, May (*März, April, Mai*);
Summer: June, July, August (*Juni, Juli, August*);
Autumn: September, October, November (*September, Oktober, November*);
Winter: December, January, February (*Dezember, Januar, Februar*).

What to wear

In general, Germans do not overdress. The well-dressed woman doesn't use too much make-up and jewellery. Strong perfume during the day will be regarded as slightly common. Understatement is considered chic at any time of the day. You will also see the opposite, but this is not really considered suitable for the singing profession. The days of the divas dripping in furs and jewellery are over. This does not mean that one should be sloppy. Chic but understated is the rule. For men, blazers and jackets are worn far more commonly than in other countries, but it will be acceptable to replace a formal shirt with a good quality T-shirt.

Privacy, friends, "Du" or "Sie" and more ...

The Germans like their privacy. The German word for this is *die Privatsphäre* and you will quickly find out how important

this is. It is not a good idea to pay an unannounced visit to anyone who is not a close friend.

Acquaintances or friends?

For a German, a friend is someone to whom he or she is very close. You can trust such a friend in all situations, and these friendships normally last for a lifetime. Maybe this sounds a little bit over the top, but there are advantages to having a few good friends and keeping the others at a slight distance. This will inevitably include your superiors as well as certain colleagues.

Forms of speech

In your first German lessons you will learn about the difference between the formal *Sie* and the informal *Du* forms of speech. Never use the informal *Du* to a person you don't know well. This can be your boss, landlord, the sales assistant, your doctor or caretaker. You also do not use *Du* when speaking to an older person unless he or she formally offers you the *Du* (*das Du anbieten*). In the theatre, you will find that your colleagues will be far less formal and that you will very soon say *Du* to them, with the exception of the *Intendant* or the GMD (*der Generalmusikdirektor*). It is also a good idea at least in the beginning, to say *Sie* to the stage director (*der Regisseur*).

Form of address

A person is addressed as Mr. (*Herr*) or Mrs. (*Frau*) followed by the surname. The term Miss (*Fräulein*) is no longer used in German. It would be considered impolite to address a woman as *Fräulein* privately or otherwise, even if she is not married. The term Ms. does not have a German equivalent. A celebrity will be called *Frau* Kathleen Battle and not *Fräulein* Kathleen Battle.

A 1994 study by the Humboldt Foundation (www.humboldt-foundation.de) revealed the following opinions: "'typically German' are orderliness, efficiency, discipline, obedience to rules and regulations but also friendliness, openness, helpfulness, and interest in guests. Particular mention is also made of politeness, reliability, a sense of responsibility and

duty, including to the environment, and preservation of traditional values. Other 'typically German' qualities are said to be reserve, coolness, difficulty in making friends, and a lack of spontaneity. Arrogance, hostility to children and foreigners, egoism, Eurocentrism and a marked inclination to material values are also listed.

When you come to Germany for the first time you might feel strange and sometimes a bit lonely. Meet fellow countrymen to share your experiences but don't forget to make contact with the Germans. People who understand the manner of thought and the everyday life in Germany will be able to help you analyze the difficult task of becoming a part of the German way of life. And the most important advice is: Learn German!

Typical characteristics should apply to a nation as a whole, but are often the result of experience of individuals. You will find that Germans may, indeed, possess the above characteristics, but that the individual character traits of the new colleagues, friends, and acquaintances you make during your stay in Germany will have a more lasting effect on your picture of 'the Germans' than the general impressions made by people as a whole.

However, in spite of the diversity of individual characters, there are distinct cultural and – more particularly – linguistic differences (dialects) in the individual federal states. Depending on the region, people are said to have very special peculiarities and modes of behaviour. Indeed, much of this is based on prejudice but some of it is confirmed now and again.

It is best to trust your own judgement and not be put off by other people's generalizations."

We hope that this chapter will make for better understanding and communication and that you will discover the advantages of living, studying and working in this country with its centuries-old cultural traditions.

Studying in Germany

General requirements

Opera singing is a multi-dimensional art form consisting of singing, acting, speaking and dancing. Before you start your studies, you have to be very aware that each of these facets of stage art is equally important. It is never enough to learn singing technique and hope that the rest will develop by itself. If you feel that your music or opera school does not put enough emphasis on all the facets of singing onstage, you will have to find possibilities of training the lacking skills. The more qualifications and experience you have before coming to Germany the better.

Are you ready for going abroad?

It is not such a good idea to go abroad as a nineteen or twenty-year-old "youngster". You will need strength, courage and humour to survive Good Old Europe, and perhaps a strong and supportive partner at your side helping you deal with disorientation and homesickness. It is up to you to decide whether you are ready to take such a major step in your life. You should start studying in your native country and – having gained more experience – go abroad one or two years later to further your studies.

Advantages to studying in Germany

Although the opera courses in Germany are not always ideal (as well as all over the world we suppose), there are a few very important advantages to studying in Germany, if you intend on starting a career in Europe:

- You will get to know the singing business in Germany
- You will learn to speak the language fluently
- The tuition is free
- You can compare your skills with other students
- You get to see opera in Germany