Summer 2019 in Germany & Austria

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Thanks to the support of the DUCIGS, I was able to spend three months this summer studying German at the Goethe-Institut of both Göttingen and Dresden, as well as the Deutsch-Institut in Vienna. I chose these three cities not only for their four-week, intensive language courses, but also to experience the regional contrasts and absorb the individual cultural inflections: the medieval, university city of Göttingen with its use of “High German;” Vienna, the adopted home of the Hamburg-born Johannes Brahms, and Dresden, in the former DDR, home to the world-renowned Staatskapelle Dresden and Semperoper. For a total of twelve weeks I gained invaluable language skills that would significantly aid and advance my dissertation research through a heightened fluency in reading German scholarship and ease in communication with German-speaking scholars of my field.

My dissertation, “Probing the Brahmsnebel: Case Studies in Reception History (1875 – 1910)” investigates the musical climate after the death of Johannes Brahms (1833-1897). The evocative term "Brahmsnebel" (trans: Brahms fog), coined by the late nineteenth-century German music critic Wilhelm Tappert, aptly describes the pervasive influence of Brahms in fin-de-siècle Europe. My research attempts to probe this haze, whose density can be measured not only by the near one hundred works dedicated to the composer during the final third of the nineteenth century but also by the sheer volume of compositions of this period attempting to emulate aspects of the German master’s multi-faceted compositional technique. The thrust of my analysis focuses on how later composers perceived and extended Brahms’s achievements in similar realms of symphonic, chamber, vocal, and keyboard genres. By analyzing a range of practices that find renewed precedence in the works of Brahms (e.g. the use of variation form,
contrapuntal and canonic practices), as well as considerations in style, formal design, and structure, my research provides a critical and substantive review of Brahms’s reception during the dusk of romanticism and dawn of a new modernism. Through a series of regional case studies, I explore how markers of his compositional style persisted among select composers from Vienna, the Kingdom of Hungary, Bohemia, England, and the Americas.

Prior to my trip, I had acquired a rudimentary (if not, rusty) grasp of the language. Daily, intensive courses and full immersion into the culture, however, liberated the grammatical rules from a dormant, passive memory into the active exchange of everyday life – eventually residing at a subconscious level, such that the German cases or adjective declinations came naturally rather than theoretically. Grasp of the language also provided the necessary bridge into German and Austrian scholarship that formerly lay out of reach. It would have been disadvantageous to be limited only to English scholarship, or to only obtain a crude and cursory understanding of the German sources available. Now the window into the latest findings and research methods from international scholars has opened.

From May through July, I also had opportunities to visit museums, historical sites, art galleries, and concert venues, all of which significantly enhanced my understanding of the cultural, geopolitical, and historical backdrop concurrent to the formation of the musical repertoire. These experiences brought my research to life from a personal angle.

Upon return to the States, I continue my studies through auditing a three-credit German course at Duke, perusing Der Spiegel (one of the most circulated German newspapers), and plowing my way through endless German biographies, encyclopedias, articles, and monographs.

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity!