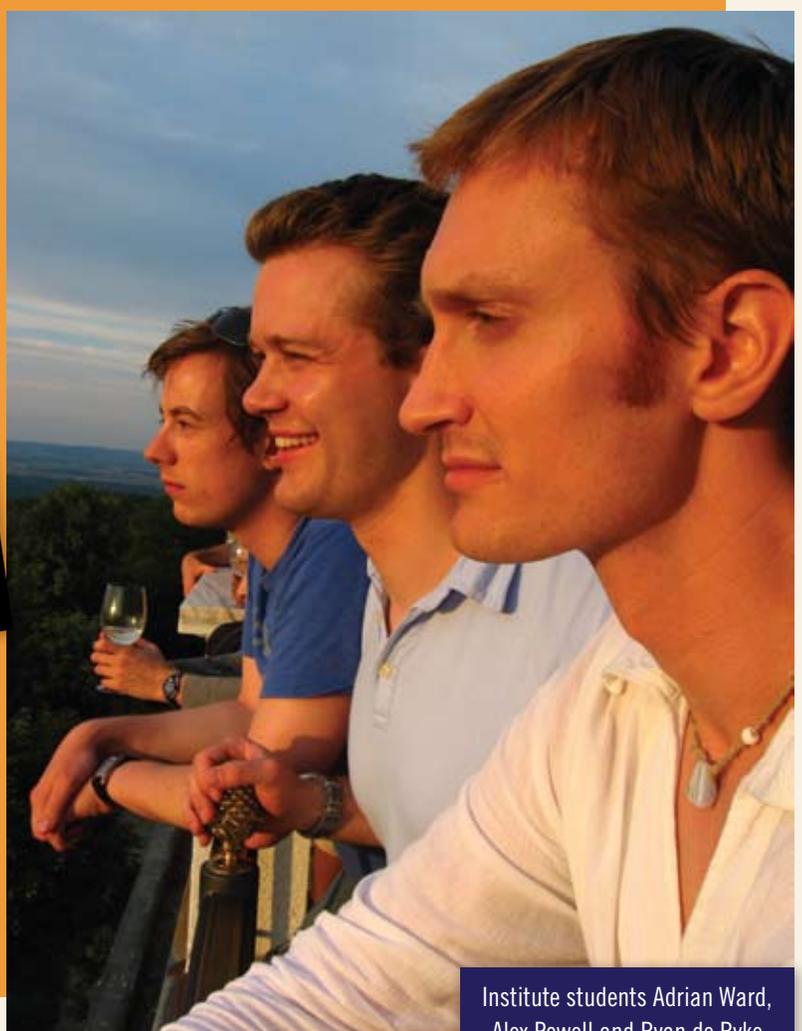


# Five Weeks

## to Mastering the German Lied

by Armin Zanner

*The Franz-Schubert-Institut turns 30 this year, and CS asked one of its recent participants to tell us about the program. From the beautiful Austrian town of Baden bei Wien to top-notch instruction on everything you need to know about Lied, this program has much to offer.*



Institute students Adrian Ward, Alex Powell and Ryan de Ryke enjoy the sunset over Göttweig

photos courtesy of Franz Schubert Institut

Dip into the guidebooks and you will learn that the town of Baden bei Wien has for centuries tempted the elite of Austrian society. They come to take the waters in the thermal baths, trusting that the minerals—which on warm summer days give the local river its distinctive odor—will help cure their ailments. They come for the wine: Baden lies surrounded by some of Austria’s most celebrated vineyards and the town is packed with *Heurigen*, traditional wine bars that spill over with tourists and natives alike every night. And they come, wrapped in their finery, to gamble at what Baden proudly boasts is the largest casino in Europe.

For lovers of German art song—the Lied—Baden has an attraction that is altogether more invigorating than the spa, more intoxicating than the wine, and more profitable than the casino, for this small town south of Vienna is also home to the

Franz-Schubert-Institut.

Summer after summer over the past 30 years, singers and pianists from all around the world have made the pilgrimage to Baden and the institute, ready to immerse themselves for more than a month in “Poetry and Performance of the German Lied.” Most, I expect, were drawn first by the starry roster of master teachers. Names such as Elly Ameling, Wolfgang Holzmair, Rudolf Jansen, Helmut Deutsch, Wolfram Rieger, and Julius Drake are near-synonymous with the Lied today. Students flock to work with each of them wherever they go. So the Schubert-Institut’s offering of no fewer than eight such luminaries in one extended course is as rich an opportunity as the copious cakes in which every visitor to Vienna must indulge. Yet the masterclasses are only one aspect of what, for many participants, is the most intensive, exhausting, and enlightening period of study they will experience.

The Baden day begins early. Just before 9 a.m., two-dozen bicycles carrying the student musicians crunch their way noisily over the gravel outside the institute’s adopted home, an elegant villa appropriately called the *Haus der Kunst*. Singers can forget song texts, fingerings, vocal niggles, and nerves for the next hour as Dr. Deen Larsen, Goethe guru and founder-director of the institute, leads the daily deliberations on German literature.

The group might mull over and deconstruct a Mignon poem, comparing its vocabulary with other key texts by Goethe, its mysteries set out and discussed. Or the students might enjoy a presentation on German Romantic writing in general, on its predecessors, its place in history, its various movements, and its connections with other arts. Some days will feature Heine, Eichendorff, Mörike and all the greats, and others the likes of Hölderlin, Claudius, and Klopstock, whose verse is now

Founder and director Dr. Deen Larsen with institute students Annabel Thwaite and Debra Stanley



best remembered through the masterly musical settings of Schubert, Brahms, and Strauss.

No matter what the subject, however, one theme dominates these sessions. Nature and landscape are, for Larsen, the crucial influence on Romantic poetry. Mankind, his destruction of nature on one side and his impotence in the face of it on the other, was the obsession of the Romantic Age. For their symbols and metaphors, these writers almost always looked to the natural world, to the forests, meadows, rivers, and valleys around them. The landscape of daily life became the landscape of the heart.

To understand this literature below the surface, Larsen would contend, the reader—and, of course, the musical interpreter—must experience this landscape, too. So, in 1978, he founded an institute that could bring Lied performers into contact with what is left of the environment Schubert and his poets would have known. Skeptics can scoff at such idealism, but few of the students who have spent a summer in Baden will, I think, leave without taking their memories and experiences of the town and its surroundings with them and allowing those memories and experiences to influence their approach to the Lied.

Coffee time provides a brief respite—a chance to dash to the local bakery for pastries if you missed breakfast, for a rapid warm-up if you are first on the day's performance roster, or for a quick gossip about the latest master teacher's mantras and mannerisms.

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By 10:30, though, the pastries are gone, the hall is full, and the music making can begin.

A student might be expected to sing twice for one teacher, with intensive work and longer sessions on two songs, while for another teacher the prepared repertoire may be divided between three shorter classes on each day the teacher is in town. At the end of five weeks student singers have covered around 24 songs (some pianists, if they play for more than one singer, cover twice that number) by the preeminent Lied composers Schubert, Schumann, and Wolf, along with a smattering of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Liszt, Schoenberg, Strauss, and so on, depending on the particular interests of the master teachers. It is not a course for the faint-hearted or for those without a passion for this music. Instead, it is a forum for honing your craft by opening yourself to criticism from an array of experts.

This variety of teachers—and the stu-

dents staying while the teachers come and go—gives the Franz-Schubert-Institut what, in my experience, is a unique advantage. Each master has only three days in which to make his or her mark, knowing that as soon as he or she leaves another will turn up, quite possibly with very different interpretations. They have to be as much on their toes as the students, so the intensity and pace never dip. Call it value for money—which, I would argue, it certainly is—but I see it also as valuable training for the life of a musician. Five weeks of trying to keep in good voice, of struggling for ever-better performances, of trying to ingrain one crucial piece of advice while staying open to a flood of new ideas is tiring, stressful, and at times disheartening. But it only mirrors in the risk-free environment of a summer program the world of the musician on the professional circuit. And often—as Larsen insists—the most profound achievements can occur from feeling at your most vulnerable, your most

weary, and your most unsure. So the pressure is to be expected and embraced.

Lunch and dinner are communal affairs for most, paid at a bargain price in advance of the course. The morning's work done, students pile out of the *Haus der Kunst* and head on their bicycles through the lazy streets of Baden, racing—if they have the energy in the midday heat—to be the first served. If poetry and landscape belong together, then I am sure there is a connection between music and food, so *Wiener Schnitzel* or some *Knödel* (those dumplings that seem to be served with everything) are the perfect traditional preparation for more Schubert and Wolf in the afternoon.

The most keen will be in the practice rooms again before long. For others, a leisurely lunch break means wandering through one of Baden's elegant 19<sup>th</sup> century parks or ambling in the pedestrianized center, window shopping and building an appetite for just one more visit to



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everyone's favorite ice cream shop, *Eis Peter*. Since the majority live in the town, either in rented rooms or with a host family, a cycle home for a nap might even be possible—but proceedings begin again at 2:30 p.m. and the institute encourages everyone to be back to support their colleagues and to learn by observation.

Whether the master teacher is a singer or a pianist—there are generally four of each—should make little difference to the student. Elly Ameling may be unlikely to dissect the art of piano pedaling and Helmut Deutsch might shy from demonstrating a *pianissimo* top C, but this is a course on vocal chamber music—on the Lied—and as such you are working in a duo. Advice for one member will inevitably impact upon the other.

A number of students apply as pairs, ready to work exclusively with their regular song partners. The advantages include knowing beforehand you are compatible, familiarity with each other's approaches

to the songs, and preparing repertoire together in advance. Many are happy to let fate find them their duo partner, however, perhaps in the hope that a long-term pairing will result. This may mean extra rehearsals early in the course, but can prove refreshing and inspiring, both in social and musical terms.

The masterclass at the end of the afternoon does not mean the end of the working day. Evenings are set aside for the background activity that is so essential to a successful interpretation and meaningful performance, so after dinner the individual coachings begin. You might be booked for a session with the resident piano coach, then have time to catch your breath and revise your text before spending the last hour of the day with an Austrian actress to work on presentation and the search for emotional truth in what you do. You could be focusing on problems of technique with the voice tutor, squeeze in a rehearsal with your duo partner, and

finish by reading and performing your texts with one of the three diction experts. Or you might spend an hour analyzing a poem with Larsen, leaving precious time for some sunset practice. Only as the light fades and the church bells next door strike nine does the day wind down, and winding down means a group visit to one of the *Heurigen*.

Within a week of arrival the Franz-Schubert-Institut crowd will have found themselves a *Stammtisch* (regular table) at a favorite winery. When house red is cheaper than bottled water and the alluring clink of glasses in secluded courtyards is one of the few sounds to disturb the mellow evenings, you have little excuse for an early bedtime. In any case, the *Schubertiade* is the authentic venue for the Schubert songs you have spent the day studying, so this music and socializing belong together. With luck, too, the shared experiences of an institute course result in lasting friendships. They certainly lead to an

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Students begin a trek by the Mill Stream in Baden out into the neighboring woods and vineyards.



Franz-Schubert-Institut teacher Helmut Deutsch with his ten student pianists.

international network of friends and colleagues with whom to stay in contact, to meet and to reminisce about Schumann, *Schnitzel*, and ribald evenings around the *Stammtisch*.

Those reminiscences doubtless will also include the days off, those precious and memorable song-free days dotted throughout the course when landscape becomes the sole focus of attention—or at least landscape and lunch. So there is a group hike through the Vienna woods, along footpaths beloved of Beethoven, beside streams that in ages past might have inspired Müller’s miller boy to *das Wandern* and lured Goethe’s *Fischer* into their depths. The animated conversations that pierce the forest calm early in the walk ebb away as the climbs get steeper and limbs weaker, leaving footsteps, birdsong, and the breeze to cast their timeless spell. But where the protagonist in Schubert’s *Winterreise* is compelled to wander with no end in sight, for the students of the Franz-Schubert-Institut, a midday feast in one of Baden’s neighboring villages is compensation for a morning of exercise.

Vienna, of course, is compulsory on any Lied-enthusiast’s itinerary, so another of the excursions that punctuates the schedule

offers a selective tour of the Austrian capital. One of the Schubert houses, where pairs of the composer’s glasses are on show along with manuscript facsimiles, contemporary furniture, and paintings, is a must-see. There might also be a visit to the Belvedere art gallery, the imperial palace at Schönbrunn, or the new *Haus der Musik*, with its quirky exhibition of all things musical. To round off the trip, the Schubert Institut hoard descends en masse upon one of Vienna’s small but abundantly stocked music shops, just in case their wallets are overfilled with Euros.

Last on the list of outings is a journey along the Danube by boat and by bus. A tour of the giant baroque monastery at Melk, stopping point for Austrian emperors on their way west from Vienna, starts the sightseeing. Later a clamber up to the elevated ruins of the fortress at Dürnstein, where Richard the Lionheart spent a year imprisoned, is rewarded with magnificent views along the river and its vineyard-covered banks. In the village below, the lazy have a chance to sample apricot jams, juices, and liqueurs, all local specialties. The less lazy might opt for a paddle in the Danube to build an appetite for dinner, a meal enjoyed in the evening on



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Institute students Alice Turner, Abigail Richards, Armin Zanner, and Debra Stanley pose after the gala concert.

the panoramic terrace of another monastery, Göttweig, as the sun goes down on this landscape of the Lied.

A monastery features once more on the Schubert-Institut's agenda. Not for tourism, though, but as the venue for one of the course concerts. These are spread over the five weeks, allowing participants to present a selection of their songs in a more formal public context. As a warm-up the Opening Concert gives the students a chance to introduce themselves to invited supporters of the institute and Baden's music lovers. A week or two on and the nearby monastery at Heiligenkreuz plays host, in its sumptuously decorated hall, to the next lineup of increasingly skilled interpreters.

Purists who want their Lieder performed in an intimate, even Biedermeier space, can enjoy the recital in Baden's *Beethoven-Haus*. The composer lived in the town in 1822-23 and the forte-piano now housed in the little museum that was his residence is

reputed to have belonged to him. Myth or not, the instrument is contemporary with much of the repertoire that the students cover. Despite all the difficulties today's pianist face—adapting to an unfamiliar touch, coping with a temperamental pedal that tends to fall off, and rediscovering the effects that seemed so easy on a modern Steinway—the opportunity to perform on an early 19th century keyboard is one to remember. For the singers the magic lies in the small room, once occupied by Beethoven, where projection and power can be sidelined in favor of subtlety and simplicity, attributes that are the essence of the best Lieder singing.

The *Schlagobers* (dollops of whipped cream accompanying every Austrian dessert) that rounds off a Schubert-Institut course is the glitzy Gala Concert, on the final night in the grand hall of the casino. Hiking boots give way to high heels, the cyclists' windswept mops are now styled to perfection and, true to Austrian custom, the *Heidenröslein* are cut, ready to hand out as a parting gift to every participant.

It is a glamorous end to a five-week experience that has tested and expanded musicianship, stamina, literary awareness, and cultural appreciation. Five weeks that already, for a whole generation of singers and pianists, have had a profound impact on their understanding and performance of Lieder. Five weeks, too, that should appeal to anyone who values and hopes to master the poetry and performance of the German Lied.

*Armin Zanner is a baritone based in London, where he is a professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He is a recent graduate of the Franz-Schubert-Institut. Zanner read music at the University of Cambridge, studied singing at the Guildhall School, and this year was awarded the scholarship of the Academie musicale de Villecroze, France, to continue his studies with Tom Krause.* 



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