

The month of January went by so fast – "kaum zu glauben" (hard to believe).

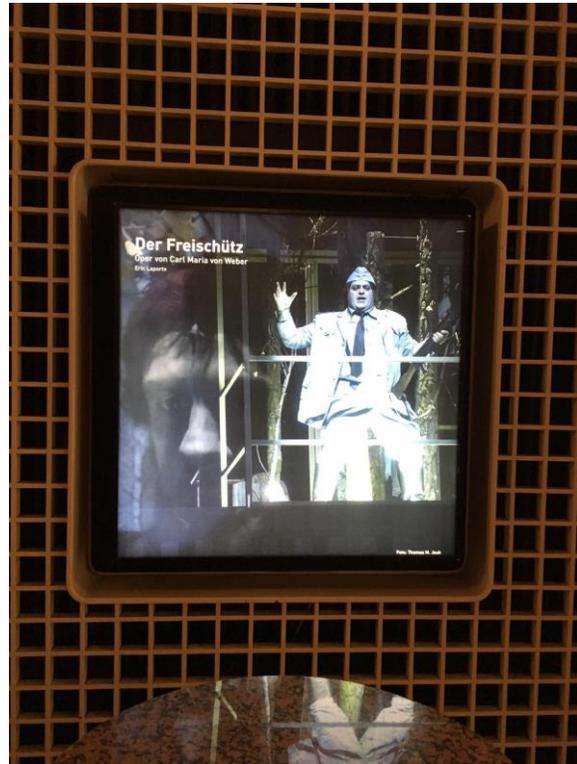
The year started with a big "Silvester" (New Year's Eve) celebration on Dec 31. Here are a few facts about "Silvester", which is the name day of Saint Silvester who became Pope on January 31, 314 CE, the first pope NOT to be a martyr, and who died 21 years later on December 31. According to a legend from the early Middle Ages, Pope Silvester healed Emperor Constantine the Great from leprosy and then baptized him. Well, we ourselves did not heal any emperor when we celebrated the end of the old year and the promising beginning of the new one. Instead we met with friends, enjoyed good food, loud music, and played many games. Just before midnight, we turned on the radio (a rare occasion) to listen to the national countdown. At the stroke of midnight, we all went outside and set off bottle rockets (legally). Unlike in Las Cruces where we have a public fireworks display on the Fourth of July, in large and medium-sized German cities there are huge fireworks on Silvester and people go to great expense having Silvester parties in restaurants. In the small village of Estorf everything is more low-key.



Through an extracurricular program during the school year, Simon and I are able to enjoy a total of six plays or musicals and one opera, all staged in Hannover, Niedersachsen's (Lower Saxony's) capital. A subscription costs only 60 €, which is a real bargain considering it also includes train travel to Hannover. I love it that the arts are subsidized in Germany.

As a Christmas present, Wolfgang, an opera aficionado, had given Simon and me tickets to the opera "Der Freischütz" (often translated as 'The Marksman' or 'The Magic Bullets'), first presented in 1821 by romantic composer Carl Maria von Weber. It is considered to be the first truly German opera, sung in the German language. It is said to have captured a patriotic German feeling in the 19th century and established the national opera culture in Germany. In the original version, huntsman Max loves Agathe, the head forester's daughter, whom he can only marry if he is the best marksman at a contest. So he strikes a deal with the devil who gives him seven magic bullets in exchange for his soul. Max can direct the bullets any way he wishes; however, the devil reserves the right to direct the last bullet. Well, you can guess what will happen to Agathe... Wolfgang had already seen this opera in its ultra-modern production at the Staatsoper Hannover on opening night in December, was totally fascinated by it and saw it a second time with us. This is no longer the romantic opera from 1821 but the most disputed

production in all of Niedersachsen. The conservative CDU party (Christian Democrats) has publicly condemned this opera and decries that it strays too far from the original intent, focusing too heavily on the present problem of refugees. However, the director has wanted this version to reflect our modern times. The dynamic set includes a house, a forest, a diner, and a house of ill repute; it can be lifted or sunk during the production. Big screens project pictures, for example the nightmare scenario that Germany might build fences to keep refugees out. Who knows? Might this turn into something like the Nazi times? On opening night last year, half the audience booed because they felt that their beloved opera had been misinterpreted and ruined. It set the other half to thinking, though. – Many of the arias are wonderful to listen to, but I learned that everyday German is a lot easier to understand than German sung in an opera.



During this month, I've been very busy with various school projects. The semester ended on January 27 when we received our report cards. Mine presented a pleasant surprise. Despite the load of 13 weekly subjects at Albert-Schweitzer-Schule, an academic college-prep high school, and despite being an exchange student who is considered (much of the time) a regular German student, I received really good grades. It has been new for me and to my advantage that 60% of a grade in any subject is oral class participation. There are special conference days (no school for the students) when teachers discuss the evaluations of the students they have in common. The "Klassenlehrer", similar to a homeroom teacher but with more responsibilities and access to students, records and types up the grades in all subjects. Now we have "Zeugnisferien" (report card vacation), two extra school-free days, January 28 and 29 - before the weekend. And then it will be the "Praktikum", a two-week internship at a business of the Industrial Park in Nienburg. This can be stressful, especially when one takes into account it will be my first internship ever and it will be in a foreign language. Wish me "Glück" (good luck)!

I finally have to get used to cold weather. While many Germans were disappointed that we didn't have a white Christmas – again, we certainly got much snow and ice later. I woke up one morning to fog that froze to all surfaces available, including trees, lampposts, my bike, and even spider webs. However, the landscape was just beautiful.

