

# Studying Abroad

By Schuyler Thornton

**M**y undergraduate years were transformative for me as a person, student and musician. One of my most influential experiences was the time away from campus during my study abroad semester in Milan, Italy. Living abroad presented countless challenges and opportunities and helped me learn more about myself than I ever could have imagined. Going to school in a small town in Wisconsin, it was during my time abroad that I realized my desire to live in a large city, preferably with access to other major cities. Upon my return to campus, I also was able to more clearly see the opportunities available there, and was inspired to re-immense myself into my university for the remainder of the program.

## Benefits of Study Abroad

One of the best parts of living abroad, especially in Europe, was the ease with which I was able to travel around Italy and the surrounding countries. I learned how I like to travel and navigate cities. Musicians often travel for work, and studying abroad is a great way to become a travel pro. I quickly gained the confidence to explore my new neighborhood and beyond. I was able to hear, meet, and work with many teachers and performers who are not often in the United States. Likewise, I attended many concerts and operas in beautiful venues and hearing orchestras in their home halls. Most countries are extremely supportive of students interested in the arts and offer discounted or free tickets to events.

I also met students from various institutions in the United States who were part of my program. The friends I made while abroad are people I still regularly keep in touch with.

While the music events and networking were a large component of my experience, equally meaningful was

understanding the importance of the arts in the overall cultures. Museums and concert halls were regularly packed, and it was incredible to see how residents of the different cities and countries valued the arts. Their cultures were intertwined with the arts which motivated me to bring a similar appreciation to every aspect of the arts when I returned home. I have made an effort to visit new museums, hear more performers, and travel as much as possible.

Additionally, my time abroad has continued to assist me academically. As a third year DMA candidate facing language proficiency exams and comprehensive exams, I feel I have a huge advantage over my classmates who did not study abroad. My basic understanding and immersion into Italian has greatly aided me in preparation for language tests. Likewise, visiting places that I had read about in my music history textbooks helped put everything into context and brought them to life.

## How to Apply

Each school has its own process for applying, and most have a director of study abroad programs who will help you navigate the process. There are usually meetings during the school year that introduce the process and programs offered. At my school, students had to get approval, which meant being in good academic standing and talking to your advisor to make sure you were making satisfactory progress in your degree requirements. After gaining approval, I applied to my study abroad program with help from the coordinator. Many schools will have pre-approved or school-run programs. Other decisions to make include deciding how long a program you want. There are many options ranging from semester- and year-long programs to shorter stays over winter, spring, or summer breaks. If you do not

want to go to another country, there are options for programs run in various cities in the United States.

While my school was extremely supportive and encouraged my study abroad endeavors, it can be more difficult to study abroad at other universities. If this is the case at your school, I suggest investigating options that take place over the summer, either in an academic program or with a music festival. There are many ways to experience study abroad, so do not be afraid to be creative.

I chose to use a semester-long program in Italy so that I would have the opportunity to be in a new culture and experience a new university while not missing out on an entire year at my school. The program was not run by my school, but was pre-approved by them. This was critical to me because as a double degree student, I needed to be sure that my coursework would transfer back to my university.

As a musician, I also had to make the decision between studying abroad in a music or a gen-ed program. I chose to study abroad for music as I wanted the experience of working with a new flute teacher and collaborating with other musicians. My teacher at my university helped me find a local teacher to work with, along with suggestions of other teachers I should try to have a lesson with.

The process of applying for a non-music study abroad program is relatively straightforward. It generally involves submitting letters of recommendation, an essay explaining why you would like to study abroad, and your transcripts. Applying for a music program involves all of this plus submitting an audition, much like one for a summer festival.

After being accepted by the program, my study abroad advisor assisted me with choosing classes along with the process of applying for a student visa. I also had to make the decision about where I would like to live. Most programs offer the option to live in apartments or with a local host family. While I originally wanted to live with a family, I ultimately decided to live in an apartment so that I had a guaranteed practice space. I had many friends who were able to practice at home if they lived with a family, so do your research to see if this is a possibility.

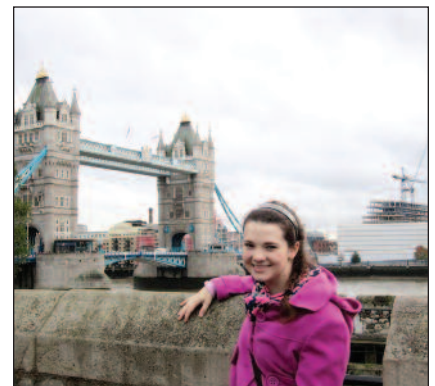
To ensure that my credits from Italy would transfer back, I was told to keep copies of all syllabi and coursework completed. I also had to make sure to do well in my classes as they fully transferred back with a letter grade. Be sure to check and see if your credits will transfer as pass/fail or with a letter. My advisor also helped me apply for scholarships and grants to aid with related expenses. Many colleges will offer financial support, along with websites like [www.scholarships.com](http://www.scholarships.com), [www.niche.com](http://www.niche.com), and [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com).

### More Tips

**Packing:** Try to bring an empty bag or suitcase for the many things you will want to bring back with you. (*Be sure to check airline weight allowances for your specific ticket type and flight and weigh your bags before you get to the airport.*) Many friends had to leave behind clothes, shoes, and other souvenirs as they did not have room in their luggage. You generally will be able to find almost anything you need in your new city, so only bring the necessities. Bring some local currency to help you get through the first few days. Try to have bills of various amounts as well as coins. To save space and weight, scan any music you plan to use and save it online.

**Practice your language skills:** You will likely be exposed to a new language during your program. I highly suggest practicing the language before you go, as well as when you return home. The old saying “If you don’t use it, you lose it” holds true. There are many language learning apps such as Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, and Babbel that can aid with learning and retention. You can also look for opportunities at your university to maintain your new language. Many schools have language immersion houses or language immersion meals and round tables.

**Stay in touch with your university:** While it is extremely important to immerse yourself in your new city, I found it helpful to be in contact with friends and professors at my school. I regularly Skyped friends and family at home to stay up to date, which aided with my transition when I returned. Additionally, I had Skype lessons with



my professor about once a month so as not to fall behind.

**Give yourself musical goals:** Many music students are hesitant to study abroad as they fear falling behind their studies. If you plan carefully, you can still get in fantastic practice sessions. My time abroad was one of my most musically productive semesters. Find ways to stay motivated in your studies, whether it is scheduling lessons, preparing a recital, or creating specific technical milestones you hope to reach.

**Blog:** You may think you will remember all of the little details, but sadly, things do slip away. I studied abroad six years ago and still reference my blog – whether it is to remember which painting was at which museum or to give a friend a restaurant recommendation in the middle of Tuscany.

**Take lots of pictures and videos:** I am so glad I have pictures that allow me to reminisce about my experience. I also made a scrapbook online. It not only serves as a nice memory and a way to share your trip, but it can also be a great present to give to family. Make sure to not only take pictures of the places you visit, but also have people take pictures with *you* in them!

Additionally, I wish I had taken more videos. Even the minute things such as your commute to school or videos of your accommodations are fun to watch later.

**Mail yourself postcards:** Many people send friends and family postcards to let them know they are thinking of them, but have you ever mailed yourself a postcard? I liked to write down everything I had done in each city I visited, and mail it to my address at home. It was a great souvenir to come home to and also served as a fun way to decorate my dorm room.

**Get advice from the locals:** Some of my favorite activities were things I found off the beaten path that I heard about from locals or friends who were studying in that city. There is nothing better than having a someone show you around to truly experience a city.

Going in to college, I knew that I wanted to study abroad. Living out my dream was extremely fulfilling and one of the highlights of my undergraduate experience. If you have even the slightest desire to study abroad, I could not encourage you more strongly to take the leap and go for it! It will be difficult to find any other time in your life when

you will have the ability to put life on hold to explore. Take this opportunity to grow, discover, and reflect.



*Schuyler Thornton is a candidate for the DMA in Performance at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts. A graduate of Lawrence University (BM Performance, BA Government) and James Madison University (MM Performance), she serves as Treasurer of the New Jersey Flute Society and performs with the Ohio Light Opera.*