

Sarah Wilson Final AIR Report: April-May 2023 Residency

May 28, 2023

How was the residency? Advantages and disadvantages of AIR Niederösterreich.

My residency was productive, stimulating and restful. I managed to achieve a balance of composing productivity combined with professional growth through outreach and networking while also having the space and time to contemplate and rest from all of those activities. I felt creatively stimulated and supported by the residency and the opportunities it fostered. I never felt any pressure imposed by the residency, but instead found my own path and formed collaborations leading to an extremely productive time. At any step I took, I felt like the residency staff, Klaus Krobath and Lisa Saahs, gave me full access to contacts and wholeheartedly encouraged me to go for it—there was an openness and excitement that was palpable and fueled me to think and act creatively. I felt an expansiveness not only in my work, but in all of the professional relationships I formed while at AIR.

I also found my studio and residency location suited me well. I could have solitude in my wonderful, spacious studio in a small town yet have cultural access at my fingertips in Krems. I also took advantage of my urban proximity to both Vienna and Salzburg to make trips there focused on musical outreach and research. All of the art exhibitions and music festivals in Krems were also phenomenal. In Krems, I attended three museum/gallery openings and made connections there (eg. filmmaker Eve Heller at her Gallery Stadtpark opening) and concerts at festivals including Imago Dei Festival and Donaufestival which inspired me and informed a collaboration with fellow AIR artist, Brazilian composer Manual Lima de Pessoa, newly delving into electronics and more experimental sound/music treatment.

I also met important Austrian music connections at Krems concerts including Martina Laab, Festival Director of Salam Orient World Music Festival and Artistic Director of ORF RadioKulturhaus in Vienna and Austrian musician/drummer Lukas König. I made those connections in advance through US connections, but met them both at Donaufestival concerts.

Similarly, through an introduction from Klaus Krobath, I also met Slovenian artist Eva Petric who lives in Vienna. Eve and I connected and are now pursuing a future collaboration together building on her visual art projects, *Human Cocoon* and *Human Butterfly*, which were displayed as separate installations at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna during February-June 2023. I will work with her to compose new original music to accompany a future iteration of these installations and a future performance developed in phases.

For me, there were only advantages to AIR. I had the necessary resources, tools and financial assistance I needed. The only minor disadvantage was having to bring a keyboard for composing due to the heavy luggage weight, but I knew I needed to be self-sufficient for this residency so wasn't expecting to have a keyboard or even speaker monitors so that was a bonus. Even this keyboard disadvantage wasn't an actual problem.

What did you realize during your residency period?

I went into the residency wanting to find Austrian contemporary art that would fuel new music compositions. Amazingly, I discovered the paintings of Austrian artist Thomas Reinhold within my first residency week on display at the State Gallery of Lower Austria. AIR staff member Lisa Saahs obtained permission for me to compose on-site in the gallery which I did for four consecutive days setting up a mobile studio in the gallery space. She also connected me with the artist himself and I met him at his studio for a few hours the following week and we discussed our work processes and developed a wonderful creative synergy. I was deeply inspired by his work and the conceptual framework for his work, which resonated with my own artistic experiences and creative process.

I wrote 6 compositions on-site in the gallery inspired by his work, which have resulted in a selection of these new pieces to be performed at the *Monterey Jazz Festival* in the US in September 2023 and then recorded later in the fall. I also finished additional new compositions started in the fall of 2022 at Djerassi Resident Artists Program, the US program which recommended me for an AIR residency, for inclusion in these above programs as part of an entire new body of music.

Similarly, I met the Brazilian composer Manuel Lima de Pessoa who was also in residence. AIR had asked me if I was interested in performing a “tiny desk concert”, which fueled a collaboration with Manuel. We talked early in April at an Imago Dei concert reception about informally playing music together as an experiment. A couple of weeks later, we began a series of improvisation sessions for trumpet and piano finding a common vocabulary and conceptual approach to performing and recording a new piece for trumpet, piano and electronics, which resulted in “streams”. This experience was very exciting for me because it pushed me into a new musical/sound realm. Another goal of my residency was to explore a non-narrative approach to composing achieved with this project. Manuel and I were so happy with our 12-minute piece that we will pursue working remotely on an album together over the next couple of years possibly creating three additional 12-minute pieces.

In addition to my above creative projects at AIR, I also completed two grant funding applications for a future vocal song cycle collaboration in the US in 2024 while in residence, and most importantly, made critical Austrian professional connections to inform possible future performing in Austria. I have connected with a few Austrian jazz musicians based in Vienna who will be able to help cement an ensemble in Austria for potential performances in 2024. Note: this is a strategic idea to bring touring costs down by working directly with Austrian jazz musicians performing with them in Austria instead of incurring the high costs of touring American musicians.

I also met a number of important Austrian jazz connections. My friend and colleague, pianist Myra Melford, performed at Porgy & Bess on May 18, 2023 while I was in Vienna and introduced me to Christoph Huber, the club owner, who expressed an interest in my reaching out to him about possibly performing there next year. Earlier in April during my residency, I also

met Anna Takats and Jakob Flarer from Saudades, an Austrian booking agency that books top American jazz ensembles. Many of my colleagues work with them. I met both of them at a dinner preceding Swiss pianist Sylvie Courvoisier's trio's concert at Jazzit in Salzburg and attended the April 20, 2023 concert with them. These introductions were made through my close association with Sylvie's group, including her drummer Kenny Wollesen, a close US musical colleague of mine for over 25 years.

In summary, my AIR creative work and networking completed while in residence with current and upcoming recordings will inform pivotal career steps toward an international foothold in Austria and Europe. I am thrilled to have a new collaboration beginning with the artist Eva Petric based in Vienna and to potentially perform with my ensemble, Brass Tonic, in the future with Austrian musicians. Working and performing regularly in Europe has been a life goal since I started working professionally as a musician. I am extremely excited about the prospect of getting my music further out into the world to gain more access to residencies, commissions and Austrian/European projects & touring.

What did you miss at the residency?

I formed two friendships with fellow AIR residents, Brazilian composer Manuel Lima de Pessoa and Swiss writer Patrizia Parolini, and engaged in social activities with them, which was great. I think it would've been wonderful to also have had a couple of more AIR organized social activities with resident artists.

It's important to have gatherings on both sides of the residency to meet/greet each other and then to say goodbye or talk about our creative process/work during our AIR time. As a note, informally, in both April and May, we did have impromptu gatherings with artists who were on site before departures. Maybe informal, self-organized gatherings work best and feel organic, but a formal event might have given artists more structure & expression to talk about their work at AIR.

What do you appreciate at AIR Niederösterreich?

I appreciate the wonderful studio spaces, inspiring roster of resident artists, artistic/living autonomy with the right combination of support and access to free museums and festivals, and amazing staff, Klaus Krobath and Lisa Saahs. I also deeply appreciate the residency's emphasis on building Austrian collaborations, connections and international outreach.

This has been one of the most important residencies in my career. It's a remarkable program and the more it builds upon the spirit of collaboration and opportunities to continue to build professionally with Austrian connections and relationships formed while in residence, the better. I love that feeling of possibility and imperative exists, that this residency isn't about coming and leaving, but growing and developing further work through connections made in Austria into the future

List of AIR projects:

- **Thomas Reinhold project:** composed six new compositions for my jazz ensemble, Brass Tonic, inspired by Thomas Reinhold's paintings on display at the State Gallery of Lower Austria in April 2023. These works were composed on-site in the Gallery and then further refined in my studio at AIR. A selection of these works will be performed with my ensemble, Brass Tonic, at the [Monterey Jazz Festival](#), Monterey, CA, USA on September 23, 2023. These works will be also recorded with my ensemble in November 2023 and released on a new album under my ensemble name, Sarah Wilson's Brass Tonic, in 2024.
- **"streams":** 12-minute experimental music/sound composition for trumpet, piano and electronics in collaboration with Brazilian composer/pianist, Manuel Lima de Pessoa. This composition was created, performed and recorded at AIR in April 2023 and can be viewed on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/822259762>

Photos attached to this email:

1. AIR resident artist Sarah Wilson composing on-site during Thomas Reinhold exhibition at the State Gallery of Lower Austria
2. AIR resident artist Sarah Wilson composing on-site during Thomas Reinhold exhibition at the State Gallery of Lower Austria
3. Composers Sarah Wilson and Manuel Lima de Pessoa at AIR Artist-in-Residence Lower Austria

Photo credits: Lisa Saahs/AIR Artist-in-Residence Lower Austria