

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by Georgia Hawes

2009 Churchill Fellow

The Peter Mitchell Churchill Fellowship to study with leading experts in the field of operatic/vocal interpretation and performance- USA, Germany.

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Signed.....

Dated.....

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INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember, the desire to perform and move people through the medium of opera has been a vitally important aspect of my life. I've been studying opera and classical voice since 2000 and like many musicians, I find endless pleasure and beauty in my chosen discipline. As my technique has evolved and my voice has matured, it has become more and more obvious that, ultimately, I will be best suited to performing roles from the dramatic mezzo-soprano repertoire.

The sheer vocal strength, stamina and technical security that is required for studying and singing these roles takes years to cultivate and master. As Australia is a comparatively young country to say Germany, or any other country in Europe for that matter, there is a trend within our cultural society to stage operas that often showcase a lighter or more lyrical voice-type. While these works are an immensely important part of the operatic cannon, they do not comprehensively represent all that the compositional masters of the past few centuries had to offer.

As an artist, I feel that one of my chief responsibilities is to ensure the survival and relevance of my art form. The world of dramatic opera provides the listener with a rich and sumptuous musical feast. Sublime orchestration, luscious musical texture and epic librettos are but a few of the delights that this genre has to offer. Thus, with the generous help of the Peter Mitchell Churchill Fellowship, I travelled to Washington D.C., New York and Berlin to study with leading experts in this field, and to develop and enhance my instrument; an instrument that I hope will one day earn the respect of both the

opera world and my country.

Without the benevolent sponsorship by bequest from Mr Peter Mitchell, this amazing opportunity would not have been possible. I will also be eternally grateful to The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for providing me with such a fantastic and once in a lifetime experience. Before leaving for my fellowship, I read the 2008-2009 Annual Report and looked at the Trust's website to get a better understanding of the projects and experiences of previous Churchill Fellows. I was inspired to say the least, and I feel most privileged to be in the company of so many brilliant and ground-breaking Australians. It is truly an honour!

I would like to acknowledge the two people who served as my referees during the application process- Margaret Schindler, Senior Lecturer in Voice at the Queensland Conservatorium and Opera Queensland's Artistic Administrator, Brad Jarrett. Without their glowing recommendations and belief in my vocal ability I may not have been selected for such a wonderful opportunity.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this report to the brilliant coaches that I worked with throughout my trip and to the many young opera singers in this country who work tirelessly at their craft and without resentment or complaint. It is a long and difficult road towards vocal recognition, but the end result is a thing of complete and unparalleled fulfilment!

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Peter Mitchell Churchill Fellowship to study with leading experts in the field of operatic/vocal interpretation and performance- USA, Germany.

Highlights:

- Intensive coaching and tuition with Maestro Giovanni Reggioli, Neil Semer and Philip Mayers.
- Vocal Consultations in New York with renowned Scottish Soprano Catherine Mazzone and one of The Metropolitan Opera's principal baritones, Mark Oswald.
- Vocal Consultations in Berlin at the Gesangsstudio of German voice teacher and Neil Semer's pedagogical counterpart, Roberta Cunningham.
- Being given tickets to the General Rehearsal of The Metropolitan Opera's recent production of Verdi's *Stiffelio*, starring José Cura and Julianna Di Giacomo- conducted by the internationally revered tenor, Plácido Domingo.
- Attending operas at The Berlin Staatsoper (Unter den Linden), The Deutsche Oper and The Komische Oper, in Berlin, Germany.
- Being an invited guest of my friend and colleague, Mirusia Louwerse, to André Rieu's Berlin O2 Stadium Concert.
- Meeting with Wagnerian tenor, Paul McNamara about the audition circuit in Europe and the protocol involved in finding representation/management.

Knowledge Obtained and Conclusions:

- The importance of interpreting the composer's wishes, whilst still performing a role in a fresh and innovative way.
- How to maximise vocal strength and endurance, when performing an opera that is especially long and physically taxing.
- Choosing appropriate audition and competition repertoire: selecting repertoire for these facets of the profession is often an art form in itself. In particular, one must be familiar with the upcoming seasons, future casting requirements and musical tastes of the different Opera Houses, both at home and internationally.
- That, as a performer, it is vital to be both physically and mentally fit. As a singer's instrument is inside their body, any physical and/or emotional hindrances can be most detrimental when performing.
- Knowing when to accept a role and if you are vocally/technically ready for what that role requires. The voice is a delicate thing and can be irrevocably damaged if you take on work that is beyond your current level of ability.
- Studying and perfecting the languages required for singing opera (namely German, French and Italian) is an imperative tool for the industry.

Implementation and Dissemination:

- Discuss my experiences with colleagues, teachers and professionals within the Australian Operatic Community.
- Encourage young singers to apply for bursaries like the Winston Churchill Fellowship, so that they may broaden their perspective on opera performance and interpretation.
- Continue to refine my craft as a dramatic mezzo-soprano, so that Australian opera companies feel that they can viably stage productions that utilise larger voices.
- Become a champion for furthering Australia's reputation on the global operatic stage.
- Dispel common misconceptions that opera is an elitist and esoteric art form reserved only for the bourgeoisie.
- Promote the 3 A's: ACCESSIBILITY, ARTISTRY and ASSISTANCE. Greater financial assistance for both opera, and the arts as a whole, is an **essential** factor in ensuring its survival. I believe the 3 A's will keep opera relevant and alive in Australia!!!

PROGRAMME

12th-17th of December 2009

Washington D.C., USA

- 4 vocal coachings with Giovanni Reggioli at his home studio in Kensington, Maryland.

17th of December, 2009- 9th of January 2010

New York, USA

- The remaining 2 vocal coachings with Giovanni Reggioli at his Chelsea Studio, NY.
- 8 vocal lessons with Neil Semer also in Chelsea, NY.
- 2 additional vocal consultations: one with Catherine Mazzone and the other with Mark Oswald.

10th-31st of January 2010

Berlin, Germany

- 6 vocal coachings with Philip Mayers: 4 at his home studio in Kreuzberg and 2 at The Berliner Kammeroper.
- 2 additional vocal consultations with voice teacher, Roberta Cunningham

(N.B. Any additional vocal lessons or consultations that were not part of my original fellowship study itinerary, were arranged and paid for independently of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust).

MAIN BODY

When it came to selecting experts to work with from the field of operatic/vocal interpretation, the criterion was simple: find and work with the best of the best!! Luckily for me, three of the most knowledgeable and successful coaches in the world were available and willing to make my Churchill Fellowship experience a truly inspiring one. Giovanni Reggioli, Neil Semer and Philip Mayers were each chosen for their unique and specific areas of expertise: Italian and French repertoire coaching, vocal pedagogy and training and German repertoire coaching. My Fellowship began in the USA with Maestro Giovanni Reggioli at his studio in Kensington, Maryland, just out of Washington D.C.

I first met Giovanni when he came to Brisbane in 2007 to conduct Verdi's Nabucco with Opera Queensland. I was in the chorus for that particular production, as well as studying for my Masters of Music Degree at The Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Griffith University. I was already immensely impressed by what Reggioli had brought to the Chorus as an ensemble and was therefore eager to sing for him as a soloist. As fate would have it, I entered the **2007 Dr Francesco Castellano Italian Operatic Prize**, for the Best Performance of Italian Vocal Works and was awarded first place by the Maestro, as well as an invitation to fly to Melbourne later that year and work with him privately. Our work together in Melbourne, whilst inspiring and productive, was limited to 3 coachings, due to Giovanni's hectic conducting schedule. Thus, the ability to work with him at his home and during a time of the year when he was not engaged with an International Opera Company was

a golden opportunity. We had 6 sessions together during my stay in the USA, 4 of which were in Washington and 2 of which were in New York. After first hearing me in Australia, Giovanni felt that my voice possessed a naturally dramatic quality and encouraged me to learn an entirely new list of repertoire. While the works of Handel, Haydn and Mozart have their place in every young singer's vocal development, he felt that it was time to start focusing on arias and roles from the romantic period of composition.

I'd prepared a large selection of the repertoire that he had suggested and so we spent our first few sessions together reviewing the music and listening to how comfortably it sat within my voice. Thankfully the Maestro has an amazing ear and, while many of the pieces were both technically and musically challenging, they more than suited the range and timbre of my voice.

Although Giovanni conducts operas in a variety of languages and in countries all over the world, he is renowned for his genuine love and mastery of French and Italian repertoire (He was born in Italy and has studied French extensively). His knowledge of these languages, and their many colloquialisms/idiosyncrasies, helps to bring a whole new level of meaning to the text of an aria and/or section of recitative. Combine his flair for linguistic interpretation with a wealth of performance, conducting and coaching experience and you have a truly gifted musician!



Giovanni Reggioli coaching at his Chelsea Studio.

Together we worked on pieces by some of the most prolific and revered composers in history, including Massenet, Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Tchaikovsky, Donizetti, Rossini and Verdi. Although his chief purpose, as a coach, is to work on the stylistic and textual properties of the music, Reggioli does, like many of his contemporaries, favour the *Bel Canto* technique of vocal production. Literally translated as ‘beautiful singing’, *Bel Canto* is “a term generally understood to refer to the elegant Italian vocal style of the 17th to 19th centuries, characterised by beautiful tone, florid delivery, shapely phrasing and effortless technique.”¹ One of the finest opera singers in our country’s history, Dame Joan Sutherland, is a wonderful example of a performer who had mastered the *Bel Canto* technique. During her illustrious

¹ Stanley Sadie, ed. *The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1994), 75.

career as a coloratura soprano, Sutherland neared perfection in her ability to deliver both heavily ornamented and sustained phrases alike with seamless precision and a beautiful vocal line. Obviously, the Bel Canto school of thought cannot be applied to every role and voice-type, however, it does provide most singers with a wonderful basis for shaping a solid and sustainable singing technique.

Having worked with such renowned opera singers as, Renata Scottò, Plácido Domingo, Cecilia Bartoli, Carlo Bergonzi and Jennifer Larmore, Giovanni more than understands the demands and requirements of pursuing an operatic career. Through our sessions together, I became acutely aware of how essential physical fitness is in my profession. The popular music industry has always placed a great deal of importance on physical appearance and now that same preoccupation with looks has spilt over into the classical arena as well. Gone are the days when a singer was assessed purely on the beauty and ability of their voice. Today marks the beginning of a new breed of opera singers who are expected to look as gorgeous as they sound. It seems that companies, both in Australia and around the world, have taken to casting less-talented, physically appealing singers over those with better voices, who don't necessarily fit the director's mould of 'aesthetic perfection.' Many would argue that finding the most talented artist for the job should always be the primary focus when casting an opera. However, in a world where the opera-going public is no longer satisfied with suspending belief for a few hours, singers must strive to become 'the package' if they wish to be gainfully employed. For this reason and for the sheer strength and stamina that is

required to sing music from the dramatic repertoire, I now realise just how crucial exercise, sufficient sleep and a balanced diet are when training to become an elite performer.

With renewed artistic inspiration fuelling my thirst for more vocal knowledge I left Washington D.C. and flew to New York, where I began lessons with renowned singing teacher, Neil Semer. I first met Neil in 2009 when he came to Brisbane on a 3-day, whirlwind teaching trip. I was immediately intrigued by his pedagogical methods and found his direct approach to discussing vocal obstacles both refreshing and efficient. At the core of his teaching philosophy is the belief that a more balanced and holistic approach to vocal training will yield the most productive results as a performer. Incorporating an innate awareness of one's physical, emotional and spiritual self into everyday practice and/or vocal exercise is, in Semer's opinion, the most effective way "to find the real sense of control (freedom, not tension) that can result in great artistry."²

Like Giovanni, Neil's "teaching combines the old Italian School of *Bel Canto*, as expounded by Giovanni Battista Lamperti, with scientific understanding of vocal function."³ Thus, his pedagogical practices could be best described as a dynamic hybrid of traditional Italian singing instruction and modern, holistic vocal ideology. A devotee to the work of philosophers like Eckhart Tolle (author of *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth: Awakening To Your Life's Purpose*) and Neale Donald Walsch (author of *Conversations With God*),

² Neil Semer, "What Is Control?", *Classical Singer* (January 2010): 84-86.

³ Neil Semer, *Home: Biography* available at <http://www.neilsemer.com> ; Internet, accessed 21 March 2010.

Semer also believes that nurturing the spirit is a vital step on the road to artistic fulfillment. The premise of these books is that focusing on the negativity of the past and the fear of the future, will only cripple you in the present. Over-analysing, perpetuating destructive thought patterns and approaching singing from a place of ego-driven, self-fulfilment are all examples of counter-productive behaviour in a performer.

Neil sums up this propensity to self-sabotage our craft in his article, "What Is Control?" In it he cautions singers that "fearing (being oriented in the future)-not creating art (in the present)-has become your operative principal. The direct and inevitable result of performing that is not based in "the now" is physical tension that impairs the function of your instrument. Often, this tension is irresolvable because the negative basis for it (the singer's attempt to control the future) is disguised in cloaked positive language-in terms such as "technique," "support," or "control." Any action based on fear of any sort will lead you in exactly the opposite direction you wish to go as a singer."⁴

In my case, every lesson with Neil brought about new insights into my emotional and technical journey as an opera singer. We addressed many important issues that I, up until that point, had avoided or placed into the 'too hard' basket. Namely, choosing repertoire that I can perform and audition with now, as well as repertoire that I will sing in another 10-15 years. So often in this industry, a singer will tackle a role that over-extends them, which ultimately leads to vocal fatigue, and in some cases, long-term vocal damage.

⁴ Neil Semer, "What Is Control?", *Classical Singer* (January 2010): 84-86.



Neil Semer at his home studio in New York.

Other singers will choose an obscure or musically challenging piece to audition with, simply because it stimulates them as an artist. Semer's main concerns when advising any of his students on repertoire is relevance (are you auditioning with in aria from an opera that the company in question will realistically stage?), appropriateness (does the aria and/or role suite your vocal ability and would you be physically believable as the character?) and

creating the right impression (does the piece that you're performing show what you **can't** do, instead of what you **can**).

Together we worked on every aspect of my voice and identified what was on track and what needed improvement. Upon following his guidance and techniques, I found that my voice had a more focused and thrilling quality, particularly in the upper passaggio (N.B. The term 'passaggio' is "used to describe the transition area between a series of notes, usually occurring between registers of the voice (i.e., between the chest voice and the head voice or middle to the high notes of the vocal range)".⁵ Thus, the aforementioned improvement in my upper passaggio resulted in stronger and more vibrant high notes).

Whilst in New York, I was fortunate enough see to The Metropolitan Opera's 2010 Production of Verdi's *Stiffelio*. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity and one that I will never forget. Neil Semer's student and renowned bass, Phillip Ens, was singing the role of Jorg in the opera and I was given a ticket to the final dress rehearsal, a preview that is usually reserved for sponsors, patrons and the media. Regrettably, Mr Ens was indisposed on the day, but I still attended and sat a mere few feet away from the maestro and one of my operatic idols, the incomparable Plácido Domingo. Having followed his career from an early age, it was a true honour to witness one of the world's finest tenors now channelling his musical brilliance into conducting. With a stellar cast, including Sondra Radvanovsky and José Cura, the performance was

⁵ *Passagio- Introduction To Vocal Transition Points*, available at <http://www.vocalist.org.uk/passaggio.html> ; Internet, accessed 28 March 2010.

nothing short of breathtaking. In fact the sheer beauty, majesty and acoustic magnificence of The Metropolitan Opera House left me speechless, which for a singer is a very rare thing indeed!!

With the excitement and artistic prolificacy of the 'Big Apple' still coursing through my veins, I boarded the plane for Berlin where I would begin the European component of my fellowship. Now the East Coast of America had been unusually cold for that time of year, but nothing prepared me for what I was about to encounter in Germany. Constant snow and sleet, combined with successive daily temperatures ranging between -7 and - 21°C were a shock to the system to say the least. I feel, however, that having to acclimatise to such a dramatic change in weather, as well as the vocally and physically exhausting effects of jetlag, was useful in preparing me for a career that will inevitably involve a lot of travel.

Once I'd settled into my new surroundings, it was time to begin work with vocal coach, lieder accompanist and concert pianist, Philip Mayers. Born in Brisbane, Philip has lived in Berlin for over 20 years and is a respected colleague and close friend of my Brisbane singing teacher, Margaret Schindler. In 1986, Philip Mayers won the ABC'S Young Performer of the Year Award and in recent years he has worked closely with the Berliner Kammeroper (The Berlin Chamber Opera) as an arranger and composer. The combination of both his professional performance experience and his thorough knowledge of the various vocal *Fachs*, makes Mayers one of the most sort-after vocal coaches in Germany. (N.B. "The German *Fach* system is a method of classifying singers, primarily opera singers, according to the

range, weight, and colour of their voices. It is used worldwide, but primarily in Europe, especially in German-speaking countries and by repertory opera houses”).⁶



Philip Mayers in concert with the Sheridan Ensemble, Berlin.

Working around Philip's gruelling performance schedule was difficult, but we managed to fit in all 6 coachings and split our time between his home studio in Kreuzberg and his rehearsal space at *The Berliner Kammeroper*. Our time together was wonderfully productive and, as I expected, his mastery of the German language and its pronunciation, was comparable to that of a native speaker.

Following one of our afternoon sessions, he arranged a coffee meeting with professional tenor, Paul McNamara, who offered me some invaluable advice for auditioning and performing in Europe. We discussed the demands of the

⁶ *Fach*, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fach> ; Internet, accessed 2 April 2010.

industry, the importance of being semi-fluent in German and the protocol that one must follow when seeking management or representation. This meeting was immensely important, as it gave me an honest and candid glimpse into the life of a working opera singer. Many of the issues and concerns that I will face in the next ten years, Paul is facing now and so I was able to make use of his wealth of experience and wisdom. I only hope that someday I will be able to mentor and inspire a young singer in the same way!!

Another unexpected benefit of my trip to Berlin was the chance to meet and sing for Roberta Cunningham, Neil Semer's counterpart in Germany. I had not planned on working with Roberta, yet when I told Neil that I would be in Berlin for 3 weeks, we both saw a wonderful opportunity to continue the progress that we'd made in New York. As these were additional vocal consultations and were not covered by my Fellowship tuition budget, I could only afford a couple of sessions with Roberta. However, they really helped to reinforce my work with Neil and to harness my technique for my repertoire sessions with Philip.

When I wasn't singing, I took every opportunity to immerse myself in the German language and culture. I had studied German for five years during my secondary education, and had completed intensive courses throughout university, but to converse in the language all day for 3 weeks was surprisingly challenging. I had retained a fair amount of vocabulary, verb forms, sentence structure etc., but I found myself longing to express things in a more sophisticated and less methodical fashion. Although many Germans speak English as a second language, conductors and directors will often only

use their mother tongue during a production. Therefore, a more thorough and comprehensive knowledge of the language is essential if I wish to work in Germany in the future.

Some other highlights from my time in Berlin were hearing my friend Mirusia Louwerse sing with André Rieu and seeing productions at the city's three most prominent opera houses: *The Berlin Staatsoper (Unter den Linden)*, *The Deutsche Oper* and *The Komische Oper*. Musical elitists often regard the phenomenal success of André Rieu as nothing more than commercially driven and overly sentimental froth. I, however, disagree and am extremely proud of Mirusia and all that she has achieved under his auspices. Admittedly, I am pursuing a slightly different path artistically, but the joy that his music brings to an audience, is a moving and meaningful thing to behold.

In stark contrast to the traditional beauty and romantic opulence of Rieu's concert, was *The Komische Oper's* staged adaptation of Mozart's *Requiem*. I had already been spoilt for choice by the operatic offerings of *The Berlin Staatsoper (Unter den Linden)* and *The Deutsche Oper* (namely some stirring, yet relatively conservative productions of such classics as *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini), *Die Zauberflöte* (Mozart) and *Tannhäuser* (Wagner) and so I thought that I would treat myself to a performance of one the most beautiful pieces of oratorio in musical history. To say that it was like nothing I had ever seen before would be an understatement!!

A common trend amongst “avant garde” German directors is to conceptualise a kind of theatre that appeals to the most esoteric and obscure facets of the imagination. This production, however, was on an entirely new and somewhat disturbing level. The singing was, for the most part, quite beautiful. Although, having Mozart’s sublime music interrupted by dour and macabre vignettes on death and terminal illness was a little too much to bare.

Even now, it is difficult to pinpoint the most horrific moment of the evening, as there were just too many to choose from. I had planned on leaving when the chorus entered the stage in body bags, by means of a large industrial conveyor belt that lead to an incinerator or when the lead actor began coughing up blood, as he was force-fed boiling hot water by his co-star. Yet, I’m thankful that morbid curiosity prevailed, as the piece de resistance came at the end of the night, when the chorus re-enacted the mass-suicide of the Heaven’s Gate Cult, whilst performing the penultimate movement of the Requiem, the *Agnus Dei*. Unfortunately, the imagery of silver tracksuits, individual handguns and a stage painted with fake blood and brain matter resounded in my mind long after the triumphant brilliance of Mozart’s final cadence.

CONCLUSIONS

The Peter Mitchell Churchill Fellowship has provided me with a once in a lifetime opportunity that I shall never forget. Through the benevolence of both Mr Mitchell and The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, I was able to travel to

the USA and Germany, where I studied with leading experts in the field of operatic and vocal interpretation and performance. The people that I met, the places that I saw and the music that I heard have inspired me to become the kind of performer and human being that is worthy of such an amazing honour.

Through working with some of the finest voice teachers and singing coaches in the world, I have gained a true awareness of what it means to be an artist and to create music that is relevant and exciting. Together we discovered the strengths of my instrument, as well as the areas that need some improvement. On the whole, I feel that this experience has given me the confidence, knowledge and renewed vigour to pursue a career as a dramatic mezzo-soprano and to highlight the importance of staging larger repertoire in our country. I would strongly encourage other singers to apply for a Churchill Fellowship, as it has afforded me an array of opportunities that would not have been possible without the Trust's generous support.

I look forward to sharing what I have learnt with my colleagues so, that together, we can forge a new chapter in the Australian Opera Industry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- I firmly believe that the Australian government needs to set aside more funding for the performing arts (specifically opera) in this country. I'm aware that sport plays an important role in both generating national wealth and in strengthening the camaraderie that typifies the Australian

spirit, however, the ratio of funding for sports versus that given to the development of artistic excellence is decidedly imbalanced. Injecting more financial support into Australia's opera companies and classical music festivals is the only way to ensure the preservation and continued interest in this art form. In Europe, and to a lesser degree the USA, opera is a vital and significant part of their cultural identity. As we are a younger country, this affinity for opera is not as prominent. Many Australians see it as an archaic artistic medium and one that is no longer accessible to the masses.

I would argue that through education and an increase in government and corporate funding, we can resurrect Australia's interest in opera and make it more appealing to the future generations. The key to this lies in staging productions that are both relevant to today's audience and respectful to composer's original concept. To 'dumb down' or simplify a production to the point where it loses any semblance to the original libretto or setting, is to assume that the Australian public are incapable of appreciating the musical traditions of other cultures. This is simply not the case. Let's stimulate interest in opera by making it a priority in our society. Increased financial assistance will also ensure that productions from the dramatic opera canon can be staged on our shores. The music of Verdi, Wagner and Strauss deserves to become a more permanent fixture of our country's repertoire and by encouraging singers, like myself, to cultivate their dramatic voice-types, we are securing a group of artists who'll be well equipped to perform it.

- As mentioned above, I feel that education is an essential part of maintaining opera's relevance in Australia. Part of this responsibility lies with our secondary school music departments and part of it comes down to the individual. If high school teachers devise a curriculum that highlights opera's significance in musical history then we have a better chance of encouraging young people to come to live performances. A wonderful tool that is available to music educators is The Metropolitan Opera's HD Live Series on DVD. Playing excerpts from these productions is a great way to spark an interest in opera from an early age. The next step would be to arrange a class excursion to see a live opera performance by a local company. Opera Queensland offers an under 30s evening and they also offer discounts for large group bookings.
- Finally, I plan to share my Churchill Fellowship journey and experiences with singers from the Australian Opera Community. Receiving this fellowship is an immense privilege and I feel that by being an ambassador for the WCMT and encouraging others to apply, I am helping to make somebody else's dream become a reality!!