

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by - Sally McHugh - 2002/2 Churchill Fellow

The Dr Iain C. Medgett Churchill Fellowship
to undertake intensive vocal
study in the U.K, Italy and U.S.A

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Index

1. Précis

2. Executive Summary

3. Programme

4. Summary of Trip

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

1.Précis

This report details a 2002/2 Churchill Fellowship visit to the U.K, Italy and U.S.A for an intensive period of vocal and language coaching for a classical opera singer. Specific areas of study included:

- Role preparation

- Musical / Dramatic conventions

- Current performance practices in Opera Houses throughout the U.K and U.S.A

- Intensive Italian language study

2.Executive Summary

Name: Sally McHugh
Position: Young Artist, Opera Australia

Fellowship objective:

To undertake intensive language and voice studies in the U.K, Italy and U.S.A

Fellowship highlights:

1. Vocal Coaching in London – David Harper, Jean Mallandaine
2. 3 Week language course – Florence, Italy
3. Vocal lessons, language coaching and performance observations in New York – Joshua Hecht, Marlena Malas, Nico Castel, Metropolitan Opera

Findings

Undertaking study in some of the major musical centres of the world gave me a greater perspective on how the knowledge and skills I have now relate to the international operatic scene. Potential benefits include:

- Increased awareness of musical styles and conventions
- Greater understanding of linguistic challenges
- Importance of dramatic realisation of text/music

3.Programme

London **15 October 2002 – 27 October 2002**

- Vocal Coaching – David Harper (International Vocal Coach)
- Role Preparation – Jean Mallandaine

Florence **27 October 2002 – 16 November 2002**

- 3 week intensive language course – Istituto Italiano

New York **16 November 2002 – 1 December 2002**

- Vocal Lessons – Joshua Hecht
- Language Coaching – Nico Castel (Language coach – Metropolitan Opera, New York)
- Vocal Lessons – Marlena Malas (Voice Teacher Julliard School of Music, Manhattan School of Music, Curtis Institute)
- Observation of performances at Metropolitan Opera

4.Summary of Trip

London

Vocal Coaching – David Harper (International Vocal Coach)

The Vocal Coaching with David Harper involved in depth analysis of language, vocal approaches and musical interpretation.

David has a specific set of tools he uses for approaching the singing aspect of each piece. These standard tools do not vary between German, French and Italian repertoire. The tools include:

1. Vocal onset of consonants at the laryngeal level for consonant clarity and connection
2. Simultaneous onset of vowels connected with air flow
3. Initial onset of sound without then adding air to ‘beef’ sound up
4. Very open vowels – eg: [ɛ], [a] for vowel clarity
5. Slower Vibrato in upper register when achieving ‘floating’ sound.

David’s musical approach involved specific details of tempi, colour of each piece and breathing indications.

Vocal Coaching / Role Preparation – Jean Mallandaine

Coachings with Jean Mallandaine involved in depth analysis of the musical approach to each piece. Delving into the character singing each aria, tracing where the character has come from, what has happened to them and who and what around them affects their mood at this point. Musically she concentrated on phrase shaping and musical contour – achieving true legato. She also focused on ornamentation.

Florence

3 week intensive language course – Istituto Italiano

This three-week semi-intensive course involved classes in grammar and conversation and tours of Florence's historical monuments. The course is geared toward increasing your vocabulary and conversational skills. The classes are conducted completely in Italian.

Week 1:

- ❑ Basic Vocabulary
- ❑ Pronunciation
- ❑ Numbers/ Alphabet
- ❑ Use of Adjective (agreeing in number and gender)
- ❑ Verbs in Present Tense
- ❑ Basic Phrases for everyday use

Week 2:

- ❑ Further vocabulary
- ❑ Verbs in Recent Past Tense
- ❑ Prepositions

Week 3:

- ❑ Vocabulary
- ❑ Continuation of Verbs in Recent Past Tense and introduction of Near Future Tense
- ❑ Extensive conversation
- ❑ Writing. Skills

New York

Vocal Lessons – Joshua Hecht

Joshua Hecht had a very relaxed approach to voice lessons. This involved listening to at least one piece, then asking what I felt I needed for that piece. We then set to work trying to achieve results and along the way he would include things that he felt needed attention. He had some specific tools he used. They included:

1. Full connection from the bottom to the top of the voice through increased energy
2. Bright and focused tone in the top of the voice (upper register) through physical gesturing
3. Clean and clear movement through the passaggio (involving some vowel modification)
4. Changing of mouth shape to facilitate rapid coloratura
5. Vowel Onset preceded by small amount of air flow for clean fold approximation

Language Coaching – Nico Castel

Mr Castel is one of the leading language coaches in the operatic field. He has written a series of books which convert complete operatic librettos into English translations and phonetic transcriptions. The sessions with Mr Castel involved correction of pronunciation in arias from the German, French and Italian repertoire. This was aided by use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). A system of symbols where each sound is assigned a particular written character. The sessions also involved discussions on language pronunciation at the Metropolitan Opera where Mr Castel is a resident Language Coach.

Vocal Lessons – Marlina Malas

Ms Malas is considered one of the leading American voice teachers. My session with her involved singing 2 arias and then working technically on breathing, vocal production, tone quality, air flow, registration issues, interfering external factors such as mouth, jaw, tongue etc. Her exercises were quite specific, but there was not a lot of time spent detailing exactly why each exercise was necessary.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This intensive period of vocal study has highlighted several necessary additions to my vocal training:

- The importance of text study in not only creating a character, but also colouring the music so it becomes a believable vocal realization of a specific character.

- The importance of receiving input from several different sources and making a choice technically about how to approach certain pieces. From this also came the valuable lesson of trusting your own instincts and realizing that no-one knows your own voice better than you!

- The necessity of being able to sing with correct pronunciation in any given language. Also the importance of understanding what you are singing about and the ability to converse in foreign languages.

Undertaking study in some of the major musical centres of the world gave me a greater perspective on how the knowledge and skills I have now relate to the international operatic scene. Potential benefits include:

- Increased awareness of musical styles and conventions
- Greater understanding of linguistic challenges
- Importance of dramatic realization of text/music

To maximise the benefits for all young operatic performers in Australia it is recommended that companies and organizations endeavour to bring reputable and experienced international artists to Australia for Masterclasses, individual sessions and specialist courses. This would enable a broader spectrum of young artists to be exposed to the conventions of the international operatic world. The opportunity to work with these international coaches/teachers etc is often accessible to established artists working within opera companies. If such opportunities were extended to promising young artists/students, the awareness of ‘what it takes’ to become a professional singer would be increased.