

# THE WINSTON CHURCHILL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

## REPORT BY DAVID ALEXANDER BARNARD – 2015 CHURCHILL FELLOW

*The Mr & Mrs Gerald Frank New, Churchill Fellowship to undertake professional development  
as a Head of Music and Opera Répétiteur.*

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Date: 13<sup>th</sup> April 2016

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*[The] truth is incontrovertible. Panic may resent it, ignorance may deride it, malice may distort it, but there it is.*

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- *Winston Churchill, Speech in the House of Commons,  
May 17, 1916 "Royal Assent".*

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## INTRODUCTION

I set out on this adventure with three main objectives: To develop as an opera répétiteur and vocal coach, to acquire knowledge and insight into the training and development of young artists through programs or academies and draw comparisons the opera industry in Australia under the current model. My travel across three countries over two months was certainly one of new discoveries, increased perspective and reassurance that I was indeed doing all the correct things with regards to my own training of others and my own personal professional development. After the initial assault on the senses that is Paris, I threw myself into the city and attended Rossini's Barber of Seville – performed at the Opera Bastille. However, my experience of the Paris opera scene is one of mixed feelings. I found it very difficult to extract information from the Opéra national de Paris, maybe, like the rest of Paris, they are understandably grieving after recent events and have hardened in their demeanour. None the less, I pressed as many as I could to grasp a snapshot of how opera functions and thrives. I also learned about possibly the greatest young artist program that exists at present in Europe.

In Berlin, I had the great fortune to be immersed into the life at the Deutsche Oper. Backstage experiences, rehearsals, coaching and of course, attending performances. What a truly remarkable two weeks it was. A glimpse into how energetic an opera industry can be and how the culture of attending the opera is the same as attending the football. It was an accepted part of everyday life and something we should all be striving for as Australians, to help balance out our sport obsession and balance us culturally.

Italy was a feast of rich experiences, a homemade Tiramisu, liquored with many different experiences to those of Berlin and Paris. I witnessed the exceptional *bel canto* private teaching of Sherman Lowe in Venice as well as meeting one of the world's leading vocal coaches and opera répétiteurs from Teatro la Fenice, Joyce Fieldsend, which gave me a superb insight into the Italian way of life along with ample advice to pass on to others wanting to pursue a career as a pianist/conductor in the Italian opera industry. I was unsuccessful with Teatro alla Scala, as they did not wish to discuss their young artist program or indeed how the opera house functions. Maybe, I should have offered large sums of money in exchange for the information, however, I did meet with one of the vocal coaches from their Academy off-site, who gave me all the information I needed. In Florence, I observed the next generation of opera professionals learning life changing skills and techniques as part of their everyday study life at the Academy of the Opera di Firenze. It was a privilege to observe the level of coaching and teaching in this opera company as well as being shown around a superb purpose built modern opera house, complete with a roof amphitheatre for the summer productions.

This adventure and experience will have an immediate impact on colleagues and students, across all stages of development, which I come into contact with on a daily basis in Australia.

In acknowledging those people who have helped me to where I am today, I cannot forget the staff of the now closed Flinders Street School of Music in Adelaide, notably Diana Harris, Elizabeth Koch & Carl Crossin, who opened an alien door to me as a 15 year old and nurtured me towards the beginnings of a career in classical music.

My Churchill Fellow sponsor, Mrs P D New, without whom this whole Fellowship and energising adventure could not have existed.

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for seeing my passion and care for my industry and a desire to breathe fresh inspiration to those with whom I work closely with and those who have placed their development as artists into my care.

My unwavering and kind partner, Nigel Emms who gave up his own incredible career in the northern hemisphere, to allow me to work back in my home country to truly make a difference to others and bring informed change and renewal into my own industry.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - DAVID BARNARD

Freelance Opera Répétiteur & Collaborative Pianist

Teaching Associate, Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music, Faculty of Arts, **Monash University**, Melbourne

Casual staff member, Faculty of the VCA & MCM, **University of Melbourne**

Former Head of Music, **State Opera of South Australia**, Adelaide

### Highlights of the Churchill Fellowship Tour: 15th February – 7th April 2016

#### France:

- ☐ Opéra National de Paris

#### Germany:

- ☐ Deutsche Oper, Berlin

#### Italy:

- ☐ Teatro alla Scala, Milan
- ☐ Opera di Firenze
- ☐ Joyce Fieldsend
- ☐ Sherman Lowe

In implementing and disseminating the best of the experiences above, I will reach out to the state & national opera companies with training and a development opportunities for their artists, as well as devising a triannual group tour to Europe, for colleagues to meet my contacts, so that they too may benefit first-hand from the knowledge I have gained on this Churchill Fellowship tour. Continuing to guide, nurture and support those who come to me for advice and coaching, through my own coaching roster, based in Melbourne, which offers a series of Masterclasses and opportunities to connect with older, experienced colleagues who have widespread national and international success as performers or mentors. The implementation of the information I have learnt during this experience has already begun through this particular process. My own planned residencies and workshops in 2017, connected with visiting international opera professionals will be yet another way to assist my opera colleagues who wish to engage in continued professional development and refine their skills.

Among many of the technical, musical and teaching skills I have absorbed whilst on this tour, I have also been inspired to speak the truth about our own opera industry in Australia and offer comparisons as well express my own vision for opera in Australia. One major conclusion I have drawn from this experience, is the need for separation and accountability in artistic management structure, a dramatic increase in output of repertoire nationwide and a saturation of linguistic training incorporating technique and style at all times. Extreme care and a deeper consideration should be taken when appointing artistic leaders in the Australian opera industry – they must be professionals with proven international experience, who are without agenda

to promote their own discipline, and who have a genuine desire to lift the expectation, quality and integrity of the industry. We, the opera industry must reach out to the population and help change the general psyche of Australia and lift our expectation, in return for an increase in opportunities for Australian artists, so they are not forced to be based overseas for extended periods of time. Opera education and outreach programmes need to be drastically increased by the opera industry and these must be financially supported by large business, as well as the State and Federal Governments. They are investing in an industry that is primed for growth. There are hundreds of highly skilled workers in the opera industry, even before you consider the performers. This industry could grow to infiltrate into all levels of society. Think of the employment opportunities this would create nationally. For every opera performance, there is a group of highly skilled and motivated individuals behind the scenes from every walk of life. I would like to see the Boards of all the opera companies taking a much more active role in their governance with a stronger emphasis on accountability and better distribution of public funds.

I would strongly impress upon the Federal and State Governments, their need to recognise and fully support the importance of a cultural saturation, which brings opera, live music and theatre into the limelight. Bridging generational gaps, strengthening socioeconomic progress and using the abundance of talented Australian performers as the most powerful tool possible, to lead the way in cultural development, global trend setting and historic healing for a nation. Australia excels and leads in so many industries, supported by Parliament – so why not opera.

## PROGRAMME

### FRANCE: 15<sup>th</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> March 2016

- Performance: Opéra de Paris (Bastille) – Barbieri di Siviglia (Rossini)
- Performance: Opéra de Paris (Bastille) – Il Trovatore (Verdi)
- Performance: Heine Lieder Recital, l'Académie de l'Opéra de Paris
- Interview: Giacomo Sagripanti – conductor, l'Opéra de Paris
- Interview: Myriam Mazouzi – Directrice de l'Académie de l'Opéra de Paris

### GERMANY: 2<sup>nd</sup> March – 14<sup>th</sup> March 2016

- Performance: Deutsche Oper, Berlin – Rienzi (Wagner)
- Performance: Deutsche Oper, Berlin – I Capuletti e i Montecchi (Bellini)
- Performance: Deutsche Oper, Berlin – Der Liebestrank (Donizetti)
- Performance: Deutsche Oper, Berlin – Die Liebe der Danae (Strauss)
- Performance: Deutsche Oper, Berlin – Manon Lescaut (Puccini)
- Observation: Rehearsal, Deutsche Oper, Berlin – Die Ägyptische Helena (Strauss)
- Observation: Rehearsal, Deutsche Oper, Berlin – Der Liebestrank (Donizetti)
- Interview: John Parr, Studienleiter, Deutsche Oper
- Interview: Nicholas Carter, conductor, Deutsche Oper

### ITALY: 15<sup>th</sup> March – 6<sup>th</sup> April 2016

- Lesson Observations: Sherman Lowe, Bel Canto specialist, Venice
- Interview: Sherman Lowe, Bel Canto specialist, Venice
- Interview: Joyce Feldsend, Répétiteur & Vocal Coach, Teatro La Fenice, Venice Italy
- Interview: Michele D'Elia, Répétiteur & Coach, Teatro alla Scala, Milan
- Interview: Luca Ioseffini, Direzione Generale, Accademia, Opera di Firenze
- Interview: Maestro Gianni Tangucci, Coordinator, Accademia, Opera di Firenze
- Observation: Workshop with young artists, Accademia, Opera di Firenze
- Observation: Maestro Errico, Repertoire coaching with young artists, Accademia, Opera di Firenze

### FRANCE

Attending the Opera at the Bastille in Paris was an easy, enjoyable experience in the middle of the capacity crowd on a Tuesday evening. Streamlined by the digital tickets and scanners and plenty of bar space in the interval, I was heartened by an average audience age more likely in their late 30's – 50's and a significant amount of people reading the synopsis on their digital device pre-performance. The young, 30 something couple sat next to me, doing just this, were regulars of the opera and were so excited to be seeing the 'next opera of the season'.

I was about to sit through Rossini's Barber of Seville for about the 25th time, so I was thinking, this had better be good. Not only was it perhaps the best overture rendition I had ever heard, it was a fine evening all round, characterised by the quality of everything, right down to the simple A5 free single sheet handout given to me as I was seated, by an usher dressed impeccably, sporting the Paris Opera badge on his lapel.

I paid €70 for my ticket, the lowest being €15 and highest €270. For €10 I purchased an elegant 160 page A5 programme which contained a full libretto and translation into French, essays, season information for 2016/2017 and so much detail about the Paris Opera, across its two venues, Palais Garnier and Bastille – you could see how easy it is to be captured by everything it has on offer.

The playing from the opera house orchestra was in itself, worth the ticket price alone. Nothing was harsh in tone, a sound from the strings I will never forget, impeccable phrasing, faultless handling of line from one section to the other, no balance problems with the stage, incredible attention to detail without losing direction and forward momentum. The singing was always clear, uniformed linguistically across the cast, plenty of fresh ornamentation in arias (with great consideration to the drama of the score), a chorus sound which was uniform, well-shaped and controlled, everything was integrated so that the drama aided the singing and vice versa. The secco recitative went at such a pace and with such flair, I was inspired by this alone.

A few days later, I had the pleasure of meeting the conductor, Maestro Giacomo Sagripanti, who conducted the performance, without a baton, and interviewed him about his experience at the Paris Opera.

M.Sagripanti is a regular season conductor at the Paris Opera, previously conducting Massenet's Werther in the same season.

He impressed upon me the importance of language and technical integration for singers. It's no good having French lessons for five years if you don't know how to apply that to singing the repertoire – it is vastly different. It's the equivalent of Australians speaking English and trying to sing opera, in English, without someone working the language so that it can be understood in the theatre. It's just doesn't work – there are muscular patterns to vowels and mouth shapes that need to be second nature in any language we work in, in order to achieve line, style and diction. This involves listening and immersing into the sound-world as much as possible for long periods of time. I asked him if he meant that in order for singers to achieve this, they will all have to move to Europe - his answer, yes...

We talked at great length of Rossini and the 'modern' way of interpreting his music. The most impressive part of this performance of 'Barber' was the way in which every ornamentation and '2nd time' decoration, was integrated into the physical staging of the character – EVERY time. There was not one bar left uncared for. M.Sagripanti explained to me that in order for Rossini to survive, this must happen – there is no time for 'stand and deliver' anymore. Therefore, it begs the question of the director and conductor relationship. They must be of the same mind all the time in order for this to happen effectively through the creative process.

I pressed him for his definition of the role of a *Head of Music* and what that person meant to him. His answer being, the head coach, the administrator of all the other répétiteurs and singers, the study leader, the person who has the final say on the linguistic and technical integration and orchestral balance in the theatre. This person must know the style and be able to demonstrate technically and linguistically, how to achieve the demands of the maestro, who ultimately carries the performance. This person will sometimes travel as a guest coach to an opera house and work with the maestro and cast prior season, to ensure consistency amongst the cast. M.Sagripanti sometimes conducts at the Bolshoi theatre in Russia. He told me that he always takes a guest répétiteur, a specialist in a particular language and repertoire, to work with him to knock the Russian cast into shape – they struggle with certain vowels in certain languages and the extra pair of ears and working knowledge is integral to the success of the process. At the Paris Opera, the standard of sung French is extremely high as it is in every language – German, Italian or even Czech. The expectation on the cast is such that they must spend months, years, preparing for work at 'this' level. Indeed, at this point I thought to myself, how many roles do my colleagues learn quickly – and in the long-term, for what gain? It made me re-consider my own preparation 'time scale' for each opera I have prepared as répétiteur and where I should have taken a more in-depth approach, saving time later on in life, when I had no time. It also made me think about students who learn 'showy' arias that sound impressive, but who may never be able to sing the whole role. Presenting *Vissi d'arte* from the opera Tosca is a perfect example. It bears no

relationship to the rest of the role but sounds impressive in concert, and in most cases, add the orchestra and young singers are lost straight away. What's wrong with preparing roles suitable for your current stage of development and embracing the *here and now* rather than trying to make yourself into a Maria Callas or Tito Gobbi at the age of twenty?

In conclusion, M.Sagripanti left me with quite a few contacts for Italy and some suggestions of auditions I should hear for summer classes and young artist programmes – simply to hear the standard of the next generation of singers and to have different options to bring back to Australia for singers to apply for. At this point, I certainly looked forward to my time in Italy a great deal, particularly as I will be teaching an Italian Module for Monash University later in the year.

I was invited to a song recital by Christian Schirm, the Artistic Director of the Academy at the Paris Opera. This 80 minute recital was one of two in a series showcasing the poetry of Heine's text with compositions by Strauss, Wolf, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Liszt and Brahms. Three pianists and four singers from the Academy, presented to a packed audience in the Amphitheatre – a smaller concert hall under the Bastille opera house. The 300 strong audience was again averaging on 35-55 in age and there were not many empty seats left. A quality program, with full texts and translations, was a free handout for the €25 ticket general ticket price. For me, I was encouraged by the range of development that each of the artists were at technically, however, one thing they all had was refinement of style and language. All of their language delivery was clear and communicated the text superbly. They all had immaculate concert etiquette and there was not one weakness in their delivery or presentation. The concert had been a culmination of workshops, held on site, with chamber musician, Philippe Cassard. Artistic Director, Christian Schirm stressed to me the importance of song recitals, not only for developing artists, but for established professionals too. They are an opportunity to keep the voice focussed technically and to work closely with your pianist or coach and find new colours and reasons for performing. He also stressed that audiences love the intimacy of the setting and enjoy seeing the vulnerability of the performer in this situation minus an opera-set. The audience certainly enjoyed the evening judging by foot stamping and cheers. According to Mr Schirm, the Academy performances and events were always well patronised and supported with many events sold out or near to capacity.

Due to the difficulty I had with the Paris Opera cooperating and their closed-door policy, the real highlight of my visit to Paris was to meet Myriam Mazouzi, Director of the Academy of the Paris Opera. As we walked to her office, via two lifts and several corridors, she informed me that there is 35 kilometres of tunnels and

corridors under the Bastille Opera House. Such is the density of the rehearsal studios, orchestral studios, smaller performances areas, administration, productions and of course the main opera house.

Myriam and I talked at great lengths about the need for real artistic training and development, not just for young artists, but for professionals to maintain their 'edge'. The Paris Academy takes, pianists, singers, directors, choreographers and some instrumentalists - usually strings. It is part of the general Paris Opera budget, coming under education but also receives great support from the Friends of Paris Opera. It is currently in its first year as an Academy and they will be adding additional disciplines, such as design and costume skills in the second year. The annual budget for the program is currently €4 million. There is no real philanthropic culture in France, but in Paris, the education element attracts many private individuals to give to the Academy and support their cause.

Myriam gave me a 66 page booklet outlining their course structure and events – the Academy yearly artistic public output alone, is in fact greater than that of each of the state opera companies in Australia. I was embarrassed by this and I strongly felt the need for change in Australia. Why do we accept that at the state level, CEO's, Artistic Directors and their admin staff, are paid full time salaries, yet only seem to produce two or three main stage events a year that benefit the public. 365 days a year is the same wherever you are in the world.

The Academy's most impressive part, is the structure of the teaching, in that it is all cross-discipline and with lots of cross-creativity. In other words, the singers watch how the dancers work, the singers sit in the orchestra pit, the dancers sit in on music calls, choreographers learn what the instrumentalists do at orchestral readings, the instrumentalists play for dancers close up and of course the pianists are involved in everything. The program is so busy in fact, with their own productions, showcases, recitals, coaching, repertoire learning, language tuition etc, there is little time to be involved in the main stage productions. There are opportunities for singers to perform very small roles and small covers for main stage in their second year, but two years immersed into a dense program such as this – there isn't a lot of free time. The instrumentalists are also used when there is a need to augment the main orchestra, for which they are paid additional to do so. Per month, those fortunate to be a part of the Academy are paid a salary of €1080 for 10 months of the year – purely to cover their living costs so that they can be 100% involved on a daily basis. I guess many of them would be involved in the many summer courses or festivals available across Europe or the USA in the months of July & August.

Going deeper into the program, I discovered that the Academy isn't just for the developing young opera or ballet professional. As it falls under the general Paris Opera budget of EDUCATION, I learnt that there is a whole another department devoted to a much younger generation with school workshops, a junior strings

program, choirs, junior theatre – all with a strong emphasis on bringing those young people to the opera and giving them opportunities to perform in a special place and inspire them that one day, they too could be working for the opera. Yes, they physically reach out and travel to a whole range of communities, but their ultimate goal is to bring them to the Paris Opera, to break down the fear of the opera world and inspire them to be involved – in some cases, giving them a much better start in life. Asking many questions about Myriam’s own career path and background, I discovered that she has spent time as an orchestral manager, executive producer for French TV, worked closely as artistic liaison and company manager for the Paris Opera before being given the brief to create the Academy program. She was an incredible inspiration to me and a perfect example of thinking outside the square and then making it happen.

My closing question to Myriam was: “What chance does an Australian have to get into the Academy?”

Her reply;

“None – there are so few places and the standard is so high across Europe, why would we even consider looking to Australia. In Europe, Australia is not regarded as a country for opera and we would most likely spend the whole time bringing the Australian artist up to standard in the basics of style and language first – we don’t have time for this.”

## PARIS OPERA SUMMARY – SEASON 2016/2017 (not including the Ballet)

- 11 New Productions
- 8 Repertoire Productions
- 5 Concert Performances
- 2 Concert Performances on Tour to Vienna
- 5 Guest Artist Recitals with Voice & Piano
- 5 Chamber Music Concerts
- 5 Lunchtime Recitals
- 4 Weekend Concerts with Education Talks
- 11 Weekday Introductory/Education Concerts with Talks
- 45 Different Composers
- Opera shop selling DVD's and CD's related to the season
- Own Metro station on both sites
- Ample bar and cloak room space
- Countless rehearsal spaces, studios and multiuse rooms underneath the Bastille
- An Academy of Young Artists offering:
  - 10-month salaried program
  - Public Masterclasses
  - Workshops in Stage Craft
  - Showcases
  - Guest tutors
  - Repertoire coaching
  - Language tuition
  - Opera Productions
  - Lieder Recitals
  - Cross-discipline instruction
  - Recording opportunities
  - Cover small roles for Main Stage
  - Education department
  - Junior strings
  - Junior Choirs
  - Theatre workshops
  - School visits

## PARIS CONCLUSION

Paris is immersed in Opera and Ballet, dominated rightly or wrongly by Paris Opera across two venues. Opera and everything associated with it, is big business, with all performances very well patronised and there's no compromise on the quality of the performers and certainly none on the audience member's experience. Quality dominates despite the quantity and the audiences seem thrilled by this. The Paris Opera Academy can proudly boast by offering a truly remarkable, inspiring and original training program which is supported by the opera loving public. Opera exists in other theatres in Paris, (I am aware of three other companies) but not on repertory, rather, as part of a theatre season mixed in with other genres of theatre. I made some really interesting connections with the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and Théâtre du Châtelet. Neither of these theatres wished to comment regarding the domination of opera by the Paris Opera – the Châtelet now only performing musicals, when not so long ago, it created its own in-house opera productions, some of which have been seen in Australia.

*Annoyingly, I was struck down with sickness for four days whilst in Paris, so regretfully, unable to be as involved with the Opera as much as I had planned. In addition to this, most rehearsals remained closed due to recent security breaches in Paris – the building was fenced off and the main entrance and stage door were limited to entry via security screening only. There was a general ban on public access into rehearsals and the building in general.*

## GERMANY

If ever there was a blue-print for a building that simply works and an opera company to fit, then the Deutsche Oper is where Australia should look to for inspiration and use this as a starting guide for the national opera level in Australia. With approximately 35 operas a year, there's no time for anything other than working. I spent two weeks immersed in the life here; I saw how the workload affects personal lives, professional careers as well as seeing the full scope of live performance – some of which, will stay with me for life.

The Deutsche Oper is one of three main opera companies in Berlin working in repertory. I was there long enough to observe some highs and lows and also gain a better perspective on the company as a whole. I met many people, from the Musical Director, Donald Runnicles and everyone else from répétiteurs, vocal coaches, admin staff, assistants, the librarian, backstage crew, and of course lots of artists. The German government boosted their support of the three Berlin opera companies last year to the tune of €130 million, to help them maintain their 'edge' and attract the best directors, conductors and artists worldwide.

The first piano-only rehearsal I observed was the Donizetti's Elixir of Love. This rehearsal took place in one of two rehearsal stages (on site) and had three of the main roles in preparation for their respective role debut. This rehearsal was Wednesday and the first night was Friday of the same week. Yet, they only started rehearsals on Monday. This was because it was the second run of the opera and of course, a chance for three new singers in the main roles. Unlucky for them, it means that they would get 3-4 days studio work, no orchestral rehearsal and no technical time in the theatre. The set is changed Friday morning and they open with their role debut that night. This is their standard practice for the revival process. The chorus would get a refresher in their repertoire sessions, but wouldn't be back in the studio to re-stage a piece they have already performed.

The thing that struck me most about this crazy situation, was the need to have a strong vocal technique and to be physically in good shape, so that no matter what happens, the last thing that could wobble is the musicality and vocal power and therefore, the impression that you leave on an audience, who, let's face it, hear a lot of opera and will no doubt be very vocal about your ability or lack thereof. In an opera company such as this, there is simply no time for people to be 'working things out' or trying out different ways of achieving the same thing. You turn up knowing the role inside out and give your undivided attention to those around you who will help you get on stage successfully. I have never seen such efficient rehearsal techniques, ever in my life. Nothing was said or expressed that wasn't useful – none of the time wasted. The relationship with the conductor, always excellent, and director – impeccable. The rehearsal language ability of all of the artists, music staff, wardrobe, & crew, was excellent, with the rehearsal taking place in a mix of German and

English. The artists also all had excellent command of the opera language (Italian) and there was minimal correction from the répétiteur in this area. I was informed, that often, the rehearsal will take place in the language of the most highly profiled person in the room.

Think about this, you're a native Russian, you're singing in Italian, you're rehearsing in German and English and you have three days to learn the blocking and production which opens the same week. You have no stage time, and no orchestra time – you have to take the conductor's word – he is also in the same boat as it's not a revival for him, he is just allocated the opera for the remainder of the performances. This was the case for the soprano singing Adina (the leading soprano role). It was observing all of these factors that confirmed to me the importance of technique, physical fitness, language and your repertoire learnt inside out.

In contrast to this, I observed stage and orchestra rehearsals for *Der Liebe die Danae* (Richard Strauss), the first in a Richard Strauss opera festival, which includes, *Salome*, *Elektra* and *Die Agyptische Helena* (most performances taking place in April). As this was a new production for the Deutsche Oper, they allocated four weeks to get *Danae* onto the stage. I joined rehearsals in the last week and was able to see the opening night, with the conductor for this also being the current Musical Director for the Frankfurt Opera House.

It was great to hear the orchestra of the Deutsche Oper playing their own music, the music that they know so well. Richard Strauss is noted for the depth of orchestral weaving and dense internal intricacies, so we often hear it played without clarity and the overall shape gets lost, with it invariably becoming laboured. Naturally, the orchestra here just 'played it'. It was incredible really – quite a special moment for me to hear such clarity, shape, tone and maybe something closer to what the composer originally intended. It was worth coming to Berlin just to hear that – all opera music staff need to have this on their 'to do' list. The stage and orchestra rehearsals were not without problems, as any of my music staff colleagues will agree, these rehearsals are about balance in the theatre and ensuring that the orchestra doesn't play too loud and cover the voices. This is difficult when the singers decide to 'mark' and sing with half-voice for no reason (something that appeared to be really frowned upon in this opera house). The opening chorus of this opera is fiendishly difficult, and was initially a mess, despite the chorus master actually being on stage with them making sure that all of their vocal entries were present. I asked the *Studienleiter*, John Parr, about this and said it wasn't common practice as some conductors are quite threatened to have the chorus master on stage in rehearsals. The conductor of *Danae* had the attitude, well, if it helps get the ensemble together, then that's what needs to happen. I was inspired by his lack of ego yet impeccable rehearsal style. He was there for the music and nothing else. Just wonderful to observe at this level.

The Deutsche Oper doesn't stage all of their 35 operas, a small amount of them are concert performances, such as Bellini's *Capulets & Montagues*, which was the one I attended. This performance left me speechless for quite some time afterwards and it took me a while to process the quality and level of artistry I had just witnessed. I have never been seated in an audience that wanted to all but climb onto the stage with the artists at the end to express their thanks and what they just seen and heard. The performance was in the main house, but with the pit covered, the orchestra on stage and this placed into 'concert mode' – oak veneer panelling and removable acoustic walls were around the performance space. Again, I was impressed by the number of young people in the auditorium.

Joyce di Donato starred in the role of Romeo with a supporting cast of guest artists and house-singers (working throughout the season on contract). The chorus was placed on risers at the back of the stage and exited to sing the act with off-stage moments and returned accordingly. In front of the orchestra were music stands which made it initially feel like an *oratorio* but these were used in a subtle way and never interfered with the performance. They actually served as a useful prop on occasion to lean on, or move in frustration. Most of the artists didn't really need their scores. Romeo and Juliet certainly didn't.

It was a brilliant evening in which the immediate standing ovation lasted for at least 20 minutes. Such was the quality of the event and level of energy given by all artists at all time. It also made me think a lot about concert opera and what is left after the set and props have gone – quality singing and artistry. Communication coupled with technical brilliance, investing a large part of yourself, being truthful and trusting the work of composer. I feel that the results will always speak for themselves if everyone on stage is seeking the same end goal. There were no egos here, only a desire for excellence with everyone supporting each other at all times. It made me wonder if Australia should be doing more of these *concert versions* of operas with our symphony orchestras, in interesting and diverse venues around the country and not just in the concert halls of the cities.

## BERLIN CONCLUSION

I spent many hours with many singers and music staff in Berlin. I asked them a lot about their life as a whole and many of them seemed anxious, tired and in need of a good holiday. All seemed satisfied professionally and realised that they would not be able to 'ride the wave' forever. However, what struck me about everyone, was their desire to refine and grow despite the apparent lack of time for anything other than going from opera to opera, but what impressed me about all of the singers I met, was their routine. They were always in early, warming up, learning notes for performances at least 12 months away, practicing language, technique and keeping physically in shape. I sensed and observed that the opera has no time for overweight/unhealthy performers and with the manic scheduling, I can honestly say that you would most certainly need to be in great shape to keep up. Several of the singers I met all had partners, but they were living apart and saw so very little of them which I found very sad for them, however it is a truthful part of the job. It was suggested to me on more than one occasion and by several different people that all singers and répétiteurs need to disappear to a small house in the middle of Germany when they are younger and really find out if they have chosen the correct career path by immersing themselves into this odd life. It would give real insight and a realistic expectation for their career path. They say that immersion is the fundamental key to development, well, this is certainly one of those cities to do it in. I only wish someone had given me this advice when I was 20.

Over the two weeks, I met quite a few Australian singers – either working at Deutsche Oper, or in Berlin to audition or simply passing through to see what all the fuss was about. Every single Australian singer I met was disheartened by the opera industry in Australia and the lack of opportunity. They all shared the same passion – to make Australia an opera industry respected worldwide and to increase the level of contact with the general public through education, touring and regional seasons. Those who had been working overseas for a while were able to share their concerns over the limited individuals who are in charge of the state and national opera companies, having experienced real quality in artistic leadership, planning and vision of so many different opera houses and orchestras across Europe. This sentiment resonated strongly with me, but I was devastated to learn that it was shared by every ex-pat I met.

In Germany, if you are stood down from a major production because you didn't really 'prepare it' or it was out of your capabilities as a musician and conductor, you are not likely to be engaged for other opportunities in the future. In Germany, if you become an artistic director, you are content with that and your job is simply to explore other opera companies and discover talent or productions, forming the best teams possible for your opera house for maximum enjoyment for your audience. You create the most interesting season, lead

the artistic vision and above all, inspire your colleagues. You maintain distance and ensure that the team you have assembled is going to make your company blossom first and foremost. Meanwhile in Australia, for some peculiar reason, this position seems to warrant the remit of promoting your own discipline and to give yourself opportunities you would never otherwise get outside of your small pond or ability. In some cases, these self-promoters, even pay themselves a 'fee' in addition to their CEO or artistic director salary to do such a thing. I'd love to know how this is ethical business practice or the best use of our public money. It does not happen in Germany, so why do we have to put up with it in Australia – why should these much needed opportunities be snapped up and our opera companies be held back artistically while these individuals promote their own careers and take home a healthy monthly salary for an output of maybe 2-3 operas a year.

## DEUTSCHE OPER SUMMARY SEASON 2016/2017

- 35 different operas performed in repertory
- In-house conductors on full time contract sharing the repertoire
- No young artist program but an 'ensemble' of younger artists performing on contract and paid accordingly – learning many different roles.
- Guest artists engaged for particular principal roles
- Full time chorus & orchestra
- 2 full time dramaturgs who present the pre-show performance talks for every opera
- Full time crew and backstage staff
- 2 rehearsal stages
- 1 orchestral rehearsal studio
- Countless coaching and rehearsal rooms of various sizes
- Onsite canteen which doubles as the 'green room' with a formal public restaurant area for patrons at the front
- 3 large bar areas with ample seating or standing areas
- 2 large foyers, doubling as performance spaces for recitals or studio ballet
- Pop-up opera shop selling opera DVDs and CD related to the season
- Dedicated ground floor foyer serving as a cloak room with ticket inspection there only
- Own U-bahn station (underground railway, as part of the Berlin metro system) with composers and opera themed art work covering the walls
- Surrounded by restaurants offering pre-opera deals
- Easy parking as it is slightly away from the centre of Berlin in the suburb of Charlottenburg – boasting its own shopping mall area
- A season brochure in many different forms from folding pocket sheets, monthly calendars to a substantial 266 page A5 book with an English section for visitors.
- Mobile version website with easy access to the performance list and tickets
- Online ticket purchasing options with print at home feature or collect at box office

## ITALY - VENICE

People often talk about the administrative mess that Italy is. Well, I will concur, through my limited experience here, that below the surface, it is indeed a quagmire – yet the Italian people simply glide along and go about their daily life as if it isn't. Reflected entirely in the opera houses around the country, as well as the many charlatans that exist trying to claim that their bel canto school is the 'real deal'. I departed Australia with the promise of many things from Teatro alla Scala, yet, all these promises dried up – it was suggested to me, whilst in Milan, that it was because I wasn't paying large sums of money to the administration to extract information, or they were so afraid of an outsider listening to a class and writing everything down for use at a later date. In the end I abandoned La Scala, and focussed my attention on my other contacts with fruitful results.

I was privileged to observe eight vocal lessons in Venice – a soprano and tenor from Australia, an Italian soprano, a Russian tenor and two Italian tenors. All completely different and all at different stages of their career and development both technically and linguistically. Their teacher, Sherman Lowe, originally an American, but who has worked and taught in Europe for over 40 years. His students include many principal singers from major opera houses worldwide. He is a bel canto technician and exceptional teacher and mentor, who guides and nurtures his pupils through all aspects of their development and growth, no matter who they are or where they are singing. Quite simply the best vocal teacher I have come across in my career to date. In exchange for observing his teaching, I played for the singers who were preparing repertoire, meaning Sherman was able to stand back and observe what they do and assist with stylistic and linguistic anomalies during their arias. Of course, an incredible experience and opportunity for me. It made me think about how important the relationship is with our students – we are actually far more than just teachers. We need to be role models in so many ways – how we deal with colleagues, how we interact and just how much we are devoted to our own discipline.

Amy Corkery (soprano) and Thomas Birch (tenor) are two young Australian artists who left Australia quite soon after their initial studies in Australia. They are now working in Vienna, London and all over Italy. I would go as far as to say that they are both incredible talents and have a work ethic I rarely come across in general. They have been studying with Sherman Lowe in Venice for quite some time, Amy longer than Thomas, with their technical understanding and linguistic skills, quite frankly putting many principal Australian-based artists to shame. They live and breathe singing and have a routine to match, which of course pays off. During their lessons, I was delighted to see how much time was spent on the warm-up and warm-down. At lot of

Sherman's teaching is centred on evening out the voice from top to bottom, singing from one vowel to another and all the possible variations of that, body awareness – which part is vibrating, where the singer is focussing the sound, the flow of air and air pressure variances, identifying which notes are 'problem notes', which part of the voice needs careful management and just in general, getting to knowing their instrument inside out. Out of a 60-75 minute lesson, 60-65% of the time was spent on exercises to help build the above mentioned skills and awareness. The speed at which the exercises increase is so slow that you don't notice any gear shift in effort – each one is geared just that little bit more, so nothing is rushed or forced. The end result over a period of time is real muscular strength with an excellent technical foundation to rely on and of course, learning to make the correct clean vowel choice every time and integrating this into musical and stylistic understanding.

Lucia is a 20 year old Italian soprano, living in Venice, who has the talent and vocal power to go on and achieve many great things through singing. She is so frustrated however, by the Italian administration system, particularly at the University level, that studying in Italy is not an option for her. During the lesson she shared her frustrations on not knowing what to do to effectively start her career. She was being encouraged to go and study in London by friends and a pushy mother, but between Sherman and her vocal coach, Joyce Fieldsend, she was getting a combined standard of teaching that would be hard to find elsewhere and she was totally aware of this. Her next goal was to secure paid work with the chorus of Teatro la Fenice via an impending audition, although, we all know that she won't stay in the chorus for long. Lucia was recently sent to Sherman from a teacher in Milan – unfortunately, she was given too heavy repertoire too soon and this was demonstrated as she attempted to sing the *cabaletta* from a heavier *Verdi* aria. Sherman was so quick to impress upon her the need to not sing this repertoire at this stage – if anything, it was making her technique wild and uncontrolled as she didn't have the required skill to navigate such wild music. An important point – how can you possibly grow and develop as a singer if you are working on repertoire which you are unable to fully control and which forces you to make technical errors every few bars. Sadly, a simple mistake I see regularly by many at all levels of development in Australia and I certainly remember being aware of it when I lived in London. It will do nothing but undo all the progress you make and doesn't get you anywhere long term. The highlight of the lesson was working on an arietta, sung in Italian. I was really surprised to hear how sloppy the sung Italian was when the spoken Italian (the lesson was conducted in Italian) was so clear and easy for me to follow. We had a great giggle, with Lucia, over her double L's – they were all choked and too far back, creating a technical issue for her. She was also missing double consonants and needing to be guided on linguistic issues which as a non-native Italian speaker, I was delighted to discover. It made me think just how lazy we are when we sing in English and yet, who is teaching 'English diction for singers' these days? Where are the Gilbert & Sullivan societies when you need them!

Singing clearly in English is a real skill in itself, as is executing the spoken dialogue with humour and clarity and yet I don't feel that enough emphasis is placed on these works for the development of singers and as a whole. We are too quick to dismiss them in our struggle to learn that impressive aria by Verdi...

Two of the lessons I observed were amateur tenors, both of whom had incredible voices and technical ability but were happy to keep their singing purely for enjoyment and were not interested in pursuing a career in music. However, they were solvent enough to afford the very best teaching. Both lessons were excellent and there was no expectation level drop from Sherman just because they were amateurs. They certainly would put some of our Australian tenor talent to shame I am devastated to say and reinforced to me, the need for more linguistic and stylistic training and increased opportunities nationwide for our young tenors to *cut their teeth on* before the dizzy heights, possibly lowering the risk of failure or burnout. Both of these tenors are actively involved in operatic societies and theatre groups and are supporters of the opera, seeing as much as they can around Italy and beyond. As a tenor myself, I learnt a lot about negotiating the upper register and how to better warm-up and not over work the voice in an attempt to gain power or focus in the sound.

Through these lessons, I understood properly for the first time, in the very broad sense, how an operatic voice should best be guided and trained from the technical angle and I will now seek to find this clarity in singing teachers that I am in regular contact with in Australia. I have played for and observed countless singing lessons since the age of 15 but have been so confused by the all the over analysed technical information dumped on colleagues and students, most of which were not ready for such information, that it's no wonder I have seen many lose their bigger picture through not being guided properly. I can honestly say, that through Sherman's teaching method and demeanour, my own coaching and teaching has been rejuvenated with a much clearer understanding of what I am really aiming for in my role as a vocal coach and how best to enforce a singing teachers' technical work without conflicting or confusing. This process also unlocked my ears to other possibilities and showed me some different end results to aim for.

A few days later, I met Joyce Fieldsend, a vocal coach & répétiteur, who, until very recently worked as a chief at Teatro la Fenice for many years, as well as having had a distinguished career at *Glyndebourne Festival Opera*, *San Francisco Opera* and countless opera houses across Europe. She was for me, a perfect mentor and I loved every moment in her company, listening to her and how she approached music and her life. Before we were to meet, Joyce forwarded to me an essay which she wrote from a paper she once delivered at a conference - entitled "How to become an Opera Coach", this essay confirmed many aspects of my career to date and also reassured me on the path I have decided to pursue. It talked in depth about the progression of the pianist in the roles of rehearsal pianist, répétiteur and vocal coach – noting that Joyce differentiates

between the skill levels of each of these roles. The fancy word *répétiteur* being banded around too frequently and misused by pianists with no particular advance skill level – a view I shared in common with Joyce. Her essay is also explicit in her description of the role of the vocal coach – someone she feels the *répétiteur* develops into. There is a great knowledge and understanding required of the different registers of the operatic voice, all voice types and how to navigate these whilst paying homage to the composer, the style, language and period of opera repertoire. Understandably, when we met and I interviewed her, I had loads of questions about the paper and working in Italy in general.

When we met in person, Joyce was quick to dismiss the Italian system as a possible place to come and work for pianists – the *maestro collaboratore* are treated appallingly and are purely rehearsal donkeys. There is rarely any in-house coaching and the pianists engaged by the opera are there to simply play. They have no status and they are not likely to progress into vocal coaches, with most giving up or burning out over time. They are often locked into strong contracts and have very little contact with the outside world and singers outside of the opera house.

With regards to purely the vocal coach and the role that this persons plays in a singer's life, she summarised the tasks simply:

1. Basic coaching – notes and rhythms
2. Musical style – how to interpret the composers wishes and markings
3. Vocal registers – vowel rounding and brightening
4. Languages – correcting mispronunciations
5. Vowels – taking care of diphthongs
6. Consonants – location of these inside the mouth for best effect
7. Intonation – diagnosing the cause of the issue
8. Interpretation – dramatic intent
9. Posture – helping to create body awareness
10. Repertoire – advising on suitable choices

Joyce made a very valid and important point: Vocal coaches are not singing teachers, but their territory certainly does cross on occasion. She has made a point of observing the teaching of Sherman Lowe for many years, for example, so she can understand how he works and work effectively with his students who come for coaching. Joyce suggested that the ideal situation was for a vocal teacher and vocal coach to work together closely with the same students – each knowing what the other is aiming for.

## ITALY – MILAN

Trying to extract information from Teatro alla Scala was impossible. Despite contact with administrators, conductors, pianists, who were all terribly nice, they all eventually clammed up, but in the end, I was more than pleased when I found out why.

To my delight, one pianist came forward, associated with the Accademia del Teatro alla Scala and not employed on contract by la Scala directly. Michele D’Elia, a freelance vocal coach and répétiteur based in Milan, was quick to say “ah, you have discovered the great secret that is la Scala”. What he meant by this was, no one is generally allowed to observe lessons, coaching, rehearsals or anything behind the scenes. They are so protective of “the words spoken behind the scenes” and terrified that something will be taken out of context and passed into the wrong hands. I suggested to him, that perhaps I should have offered large sums of money to various individuals at the bottom of my correspondence, then maybe the doors would have been swung wide open. Michele smiled and said, ‘more than likely, unfortunately’.

Michele did give me fantastic insight into the Accademia of Teatro alla Scala as well as the main house also. At la Scala, there are 17 pianists on full time contract, who are there purely for production calls and have no say, no authority, no career progression – they are no one. There is no coaching allowed on site at all and yet the expectation is to have this all done away from the theatre and before production calls, at the singer’s own cost. So you can’t just nip into a coaching room between calls and work on your next impending role with a répétiteur/coach. In other words, the theatre functions purely as that with no support mechanism in place.

With regards to the Accademia del Teatro all Scala, there are 22 singers in total who are involved in many cross-discipline activities, but receive their technical, linguistic and stylistic teaching from only three distinguished singers – *Burso, la Serra and Dandini* – the latter for some stage craft. Also, Michele said that some of these lessons are closed even to him, and he’s employed by the Accademia to coach there! I asked about the expectation of the singers who are going through the two year course and he explained that you either ‘make it’ or ‘forget trying to have a career in Italy’. No pressure...

Michele went on to explain the need for young singers in Italy to have to study something else or hold down a job and do all their training privately in the hope they can push through the audition barrier or break into the Accademia system for the next opportunity to be noticed. He also made the point repeatedly about how lazy Italians are with their own language when it comes to singing. I thought this was just brilliant – based on my experienced with Lucia in one of Sherman’s lessons earlier in the week. He explained that they spent a

lot of time on the study of language diction for singers, he also suggested that many singers and pianists should learn their languages as soon as possible with constant reference to a technical and stylistic point of view.

As a closing discussion, I asked Michele about what he knew of Australia. He was quick to praise soprano Jessica Pratt, but also quick to applaud just how hard she has clearly worked in Italy to achieve the level of refinement and success she has. He said that many people regard Australia for sport, wildlife and sunshine and it is simply not on the radar for opera. When Australians have auditioned for the Accademia in that past, the biggest let down is the lack of style understanding and refinement of musicality. Therefore, they are not regarded as possible candidates and usually dismissed before the audition stage.

## ITALY – FLORENCE

They often say that the unplanned experiences are often the best and this was the case with the *Opera di Firenze*. Maestro Sagripanti had emailed after our meeting in Paris and put me in contact with the director of the Academy in Florence, as he understood my desire to see just what the standard was like at the young artist level in Italy and to gain insight into another young artist program. In complete contrast to Teatro alla Scala, I could not have asked for a more welcoming reception (complete with my very own official name badge), a guided tour of the opera house and free reign to observe the coaching and workshops over the two days I was around for.

Florence is a beautiful city but the main opera house and administration is not situated in the very centre as you perhaps expect with such an opera rich history – possibly the richest of them all in terms of originality of art form and certainly being the birth place of the Italian language as we know it today. The City decided that they needed a new opera house with many possibilities and which served as a concert hall and a public creative space - and so they built one! Luca Ioseffini, *directore generale* of the Opera di Firenze Accademia, took me on a tour of the building and explained how it is used; concerts, recitals, education workshops, teaching, coaching – a seemingly endless list of activities and this showed me just how ‘public’ the building was. I was inspired by his enthusiasm and love of the building, how it is used and just how busy it is all year round. The icing on the cake was the amphitheatre on the roof – yes, the roof. With stunning views of the City of Florence and the surrounding hills, this open-air theatre, is used for summer productions, drawing young and new crowds each year as well as the regular season subscribers. Just think how successful a building like this could be for our summer and autumn seasons around Australia.

Back in the main auditorium, a children’s matinee was in progress – a cut down version of *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (Rossini). The principal roles were being performed (incredibly well) by the artists of the in-house Accademia, the orchestra was a mix of conservatoire students and professional players, the conductor was a young professional talent from Florence and most impressively, the chorus was made up of 300 children chosen from schools all over Florence. The 1800 seat auditorium was full to capacity of their peers and teachers and who were also required to participate in the performance at various points – lead by a narrator who tied the whole story together.

The full version of the opera had just been part of the main house season and was now one of eight 'cutdown' educational operas that takes place every year, with a matinee season purely for children and an evening season for adults (presumably the parents of the children). How simplistic and brilliant – creating opportunities for the young artists to perform the roles they have just understudied, giving many children a wonderful opportunity to be involved and opening the theatre to young people and adults to support all of the above whilst keeping their opera-going tradition alive. The production had elements of the British 'Pantomime' style, with larger than normal costumes and really colourful, simple set design. There were still *surtitles* as it would be for a main house performance and the whole event lasted about 1 hour 20 mins with no interval.

Luca Ioseffini and I discussed many elements of the *Accademia* program and he was very keen for other opera houses and institutions to come and observe what they have created. Apart from the usual training you would expect aka, repertoire coaching, stage craft, vocal technique and improvisation, they pride themselves on the partnership with the *Società Dante Alighieri Comitato di Firenze*.

I will add briefly here, that a branch of the *Dante Alighieri* society exists in every capitol city in Australia.

Luca stressed the importance of language training above all else, but training which teaches the libretto and poetry of the opera repertoire and not just the generic Italian language. Teaching which explains the libretto and hidden meaning, the subtle nuances and developments of the language and culture over time. I have often thought at how ignorant our opera companies can appear when we don't extend the hand of collaboration and friendship to societies such as these in our cities and to the people that have a greater understanding of the Italian, German & French cultural teachings than we do.

The *Accademia* program offers 12 singers and 4 pianists a chance to work on eight productions purely for the Education and *Accademia* program, collaborations in the form of concerts with the Italian Youth Orchestra and the orchestra of the Opera di Firenze. The program is run to a budget of €400,000 which is purely for teaching, employers and scholarship costs. They accept singers and pianists from the age of 19 to 32. I expressed my concern over the artists 'post-accademia' and Luca was quick to explain where he felt the Opera di Firenze has more of a unique nurturing role in their mandate.

He explained that they profile their young artists online and in print publications monthly and form many joint productions and performances with other smaller houses and their respective young artist programs around Italy. Some of the in-house residencies that take place are so intense, that they will only tackle one role per singer for the entire three weeks and the artist is expected to have this role learnt and memorised

in this period. Luca said that the results were so impressive when the singers were given total immersion with their learning patterns. He then uses the results of these residencies to place his young singers into small houses who may be looking for a replacement at the last minute. Occasionally this has caused complaints from agents and intendants who feel that their role is being usurped. Luca made the point that many agents and intendants waited until singers were in work before they offered to represent them. In other words, the singer often does all the ground work first and the agent takes the credit and charges them commission to do so. He wanted to change this and give the signers on the Accademia something to work towards and target to hit constantly. I got the sense that the Accademia was always on the lookout for opportunities for their artists to get out and gain performance experience as soon as possible and maintain a good reputation.

Luca invited me to observe a workshop and the afternoon coaching sessions the following day.

Meeting Maestro Gianni Tangucci was almost like meeting *Verdi* himself. This gentleman, a highly respected artistic director, administrator and leader of the opera industry in Italy, started life as an opera répétiteur. He had no desire to become a conductor and yet, it is commonly known that most conductors tremble in his presence because of the knowledge of the repertoire and experience he carries with him. Maestro and I talked a lot about the journey a pianist can make in the opera world and offered some suggestions for my own current stage of development. He gave me many insights into how to achieve my dreams and goals and explicitly told me never to compromise on quality or stop listening and acquiring new information. M.Tangucci was brought out of retirement at the age of 70 to run the Accademia as the highly respected figurehead and artistic coordinator. In other words, Luca Ioseffini fulfils the business and administration requirements with a supporting staff, while M.Tangucci leads and inspires the Accademia singers and pianists with his coaching, invitations to visiting teaching staff as well as using his many connections to help the careers of the Accademia young artists and their first vital steps into the profession.

We walked into the first of two classes I was invited to observe. It was led by an opera director who specialised in improvisation, extended learning and cognitive behavioural pattern techniques. Maestro and I discovered the class making up a song to be sung in a 'round'. The 'director' was asking them to focus in on the other sounds that the 'round' created through repetition. Aka, allowing your ear to hear the aural patterns change over time. It was akin to African chant and certainly had a trance quality to it.

There were many meditation, breathing, humorous, energising and inspiring activities that took place over the three hours and which didn't have anything to do with singing practice or repertoire. The most enjoyable activity I observed was the young artists, tracing their body shapes in pairs, onto a floor covered in white card and then spending the time and care to paint the shapes with as many different colours and designs as

possible. During this, there was lots of classical music played on CD from all genres and styles and the young artists didn't make a sound for over an hour. I asked the director why she believed in the need for this process:

*It is really important that the artists are placed into their creative mode without the added pressure of learning their repertoire and feeling they have to please those around them. Therefore, they are now being given a chance to practice their creative mode so that the body embraces this along with the process of relaxation, meditation and the ability to observe the mind as a normal daily event. We paint and create images from our minds as children in school, why do we stop doing this as we get older? Why do we stop imagining and creating colour as we get busier professionally?*

The director gave me lots to process and certainly opened my eyes to other techniques and training ideas for our singers in Australia at all stages of development. At the conclusion of the class, there was much discussion amongst the artists about their paintings and they talked to each other a lot about how they perform and certainly how they deal with the adrenalin decline post performance. How many drink a glass of wine, how many feel empty or lost, how many feel great and positive but struggle the next day etc. I thought this was an excellent and mature topic to discuss with colleagues and should be opened up for discussion more in general across the arts. We can all learn from these discussions.

After lunch, I was invited to watch the repertoire coaching of Maestro Errico – a guest senior opera répétiteur who took no compromise. He was tough, grumpy, hard work, didn't smile and was awkward – until the singers showed their best effort then he praised them and encouraged them to continue in the same direction. One of the many things that surprised me about the students I was observing, the young répétiteur in particular, was the sloppiness with basics such as not having a pencil to hand, turning up late, talking back and not really listening to what the Maestro was saying. M.Errico did not tolerate this and told the répétiteur that it is not accepted in the main house, so it would not be accepted in the coaching. She was stood down from the lesson and the other pianist played for the remainder of the class. Similarly, the baritone who had poorly prepared an aria from *Judas Maccabeus*, yes, in English, was torn to shreds about his language and the fact he had learnt wrong rhythms and notes in the recitative. I can honestly say that his English was incomprehensible and M.Errico explained that it was offensive to 'our guest from Australia' to present an aria with such poor language skills. I can only hope that when we as Australians sing in foreign languages, we don't cause the same offence to those around us who know, but I'm afraid so many of us unintentionally do this and we must therefore always strive to improve and clarify our language skills, all the time. Ironically,

the same singer presented an aria in Italian, himself not a native speaker, and was praised by M.Errico on the clarity of the delivery.

I was seated alongside M.Tangucci and on four occasions, he chipped in with advanced language, and stylistic advice when the singers didn't produce what M.Errico was asking for. This difference in delivery of the same request eventually achieved what we were all looking for and even I was asked on several occasions which tone or stylistic nuance I preferred. We had a lot of fun in this area experimenting with possibilities – all highly valuable preparation for both singers and pianists who will work with a variety of conductors throughout their career.

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR SINGERS & PIANISTS

I offer this simple guide for singers of all levels – perhaps a friendly reminder for my colleagues and certainly a guide for undergraduates and those embarking on a career. Pianists who wish to train as opera répétiteurs can also learn a great deal from this process. Replace the singing teacher with a piano teacher who will give you a solid technique and find a répétiteur or an experienced opera conductor – someone who can show you the shapes of the operas and how to pace them. Everything else applies!

### LANGUAGE, BODY, TECHNIQUE, REPERTOIRE, STAGE CRAFT, AUDITIONS.

- 1. LANGUAGE:** Learn French, German & Italian. Do anything you can to learn how to converse in these languages cleanly and without an accent. Be able to communicate in written form also, such as email. Have a working knowledge of Czech, Russian & Spanish – you will sing in these languages too!
- 2. BODY & MIND:** Keep fit, exercise daily, eat well and identify anything that will give you indigestion, reflux or may be incompatible with your health. Take up basic daily routines such as Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique and meditation. Practise and refine these on a daily basis. Paint and draw for no other reason other than to let your imagination take over.
- 3. TECHNIQUE:** Find a singing teacher that you respect and respond to. Someone who is kind, yet tough and uncompromising with you. Someone who listens closely and carefully, who doesn't bring their own agenda into play and someone you trust. DO NOT compromise on this. Integrate the elements of your BODY & MIND routine into your technical work. Are you really singing using your whole body all the time? Are you really truly relaxed and working with optimum posture and awareness of yourself. Develop a slow daily routine of vocal exercises that help you strengthen your voice and train the muscles all over your body, so that it becomes second nature. Be aware of your bad habits and use the BODY & MIND process to re-program them over time. Nothing here is a quick process. Integrate your LANGUAGE knowledge at all times – make good vowel choices for every language, even in English. You are essentially training just as an athlete would – therefore, there should be absolute consistency in your approach to learning and development.

**4. REPERTOIRE:** Find an experienced répétiteur or opera coach with excellent pianistic skills and a good sense of humour. Work your repertoire with this person as much as you can and use them to help memorise and explore style and interpretation. Listen to recordings with this person and compare your thoughts and ideas. Discuss what worked and didn't work when you go and see an opera together. Get to know them – they are often very well connected people and will often suggest performance opportunities for you to explore. Learn as many roles as you can for your current stage of technical ability and development. Don't be eager to sing bigger repertoire too soon. It's simply not worth it and WILL NOT do you any favours. This person will become your 2nd pair of ears, therefore, they must be someone you respect and who is always refining their own skills and not resting on their laurels. Find a person who your singing teacher has a good rapport with. There must be no conflict between these two people or else you will be distracted and caught between them.

**5. STAGE CRAFT:** Learn Shakespeare monologues or sonnets from memory and workshop these with a director you respect. Let them be uncompromising with your presence and presentation. Get involved in theatre groups, Gilbert & Sullivan societies – learn your theatre craft in a safe environment where you can make mistakes without prejudice and fear. Practice some of your BODY & MIND elements above whilst wearing heavy costumes, boots, wigs, masks – try to negotiate steps or a raked stage with a dance instructor or Alexander Technique teacher as guidance.

**6. AUDITIONS:** Sing for everyone. Get your name in people's minds and keep it there. Arrange auditions with small companies, directors, conductors, répétiteurs, artistic directors and festival administrators. Don't crowd your CV – less is more. Send a clear message of who you are and what you CAN do all the time. Don't ever be vague but present yourself simply and honestly. Don't ever present two arias which mix voice types or confuse where you are technically – and nothing ever 'work in progress. Never present an aria from a role that you wouldn't be able to sing in its entirety for your current stage of development.

The most important bit of advice my piano teacher gave me at the age of 16 was, you NEVER know who is sitting in the room listening to you – it could be someone listening to your final rehearsal or in a performance that you don't feel is terribly high pressure. Only ever present your best work at all times.

Assuming you commence an opera journey at 21, you are aiming to be in your prime in your late 30's – late 50's. Yes, it's a slow process and cannot be sped up. It may take some people longer than others and there should be no rush – the quicker you get there, the sooner you can fall off if you are not ready. I have seen it too often and it's devastating to witness. As an opera répétiteur, the sooner you can learn your languages and disappear into a repertory house to learn as much repertoire as possible, the better. This may mean

leaving Australia for maybe many years and then you will hopefully be inspired to come back and impart this knowledge onto young singers whilst enriching the opera industry in Australia as a whole. I wish more pianists would see the long term benefits of this and stop striving to all be conductors – in my experience to date, there are far too many young conductors making enemies even before they have really gained any real pedigree or knowledge worth imparting. They are usually so focussed on being ‘in-charge’ that they don’t listen to those who may be sat at the keyboard who know the opera far better than they do. I come across so many young répétiteurs also, who see their job as ‘slumming it’ and because of this, they often destroy the rehearsal process for a cast because they haven’t prepared the reduction properly or taken the care to understand style and assist the singers, which is their primary focus.

All too often I sit on audition panels with singers presenting Verdi & Puccini arias and they are only in their early 20’s. They also often present only the well-known ones which suggests that they have been given limited repertoire information by their teachers or they are lead to believe that they have a technique and vocal power to match. There is SO much repertoire out there suitable for ANY stage of development. The following may helpful as a guide for your long term goals and assist in your overall progression as an opera professional:

| Opera Company Type:                   | Age:    | Example:                     |
|---------------------------------------|---------|------------------------------|
| 1. G&S Societies                      | 16 - 25 | Savoy Opera, Melbourne       |
| 2. Small Professional / Chamber Opera | 23 – 30 | Co-Opera, Adelaide           |
| 3. Large Semi-Professional / Oratorio | 25 – 35 | Melbourne Opera, Victoria    |
| 4. State Opera Companies              | 32 – 45 | Opera Queensland, Brisbane   |
| 5. National Opera Company             | 35 – 50 | Opera Australia, Sydney      |
| 6. International Opera Company        | 40 – 60 | Metropolitan Opera, New York |

## FOR THE OPERA INDUSTRY IN AUSTRALIA

Number six on my list previously is where I feel Australia currently falls short. I feel that importing unknown international artists will not make our national company into this either, particularly in respect of all the excellent Australian talent currently around without work. Employing a whole circus of students and artists for very little money and parading them around China for weeks on end, does not also warrant the title, *international*. In my vision for opera in Australia, I see the international opera company being one whose world famous presence in the Harbour is crowned by her content inside – I am suggesting that either our national company needs to expand more around Australia and give back to the people nationwide and year round, or it needs to truly become an international house which attracts the big directors and conductors to work alongside our own absolute best internationally *noted and celebrated Australian artists*, in casts with the opera stars that attract a global following, wherever they come from. At the moment we have a national company that is perhaps trying to fulfil too many different roles within Australia.

Therefore, maybe there is room for a new *national opera company* to fill such a void? Some incredible opportunities would open up for us all if this happened and it would certainly offer a greater scope for the Australian artist to strive for whilst maintaining their perspective.

My vision for the opera industry in Australia over the next five to ten years is:

1. The state opera companies merge with the state orchestras and ballet companies so that the duplication that currently exists in the roles of CEO, CFO and many various administration personnel is eradicated and these funds are directed back into an increased output of repertoire and regional touring.
2. A suitable venue is created for such a merger which is purpose built, based on the blueprints of say the new Florence Opera House and has multiple use functionality for the companies based there.
3. Greater accountability of artistic leadership and management with stronger, less socially aware boards of governance and artistic directors who are without agenda to promote themselves.
4. An increase of Federal and State funding specifically targeted to education programs within state opera companies, which allows for school opera projects, community operas, regional outreach and talent scouting opportunities, with a chance for long term relationships to develop throughout all regional centres as well as inner city suburbs.

5. A new national company to be formed, based in Melbourne, which serves the whole nation all year round, complete with a young artist program or academy on a par with those in Paris and Florence. It premieres and promotes the works of noted Australian opera composers and creates at least one indigenous opera per year, as well as promoting the indigenous operas of other nations amongst the standard opera repertoire.
6. Our current national company to be based entirely in the Sydney Opera House, moves into the casting circles of the Metropolitan Opera and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and is the pinnacle for our most treasured and prized internationally working Australian opera stars to mix with the absolute noted and celebrated international opera stars. It becomes one of Australia's calling cards on the international cultural circuit.

It is my vision that the opera industry in Australia becomes an inspiring, balanced, engaging, tiered and innovative leader for other industries and for those who wish to pursue a career in the arts. Broader, global perspective must be maintained at all times in our pursuit of uncompromising excellence. ALL of the opera companies must support each other and acknowledge the differing roles that they play in an artist's life-long career and training, as well as holding much of the responsibility of the Australian cultural awareness and education. Only the opera industry can be held responsible for the decline in audience numbers in Australia and only the opera industry can fix it. We must therefore steer ourselves and those around us well away from administrative politics and ego driven empires and look to those who inspire us and want to create opportunities.

## POSTLUDE

In closing, I finally have an appropriate opportunity to share *my* story, as it may help others in their pursuit of excellence. My own personal journey was such, that I left school at the age of 15 to pursue my passion and then found myself in receipt of a *Bachelor of Music Performance Degree* and an *Advanced Diploma in Accompanying* at the age of 18. I then left Australia, upon a successful application and audition, to study further in the UK, but I was held back by a lack of financial means, which meant I could not afford the \$50K a year international fees for the RNCM in Manchester – the only full time opera répétiteur course in operation at that time, or so I was lead to believe. I have often thought that I was perhaps misguided when I got to the UK, however, I held the magic *dual citizenship*, worth much more than anything money could buy for me at that point in time. This loss of opportunity spurred me on to develop and acquire knowledge myself, through as many exciting opportunities that I could afford to raise the funds for: yes, I worked as an office temp, taught music in schools, joined amateur operatic societies, ran choirs, and performed in nursing homes - until such a time as the balance of work & passion shifted and I began making music, as I wanted, full time. I was 25 before I really felt like I was on the right path – 10 years after I had begun as a first year at the Flinders Street School of Music in Adelaide. Through hard work, study and constant refining, I was able to push through into the stream I wanted to work at and by the time I was 30, I was able to look back and start to be proud of my achievements whilst acknowledging the trauma, accountability to others and tough times which got me there, all in pursuit of a career in music. I also had to learn to stop trying to create the career of others around me, thinking that I wanted what they had. I needed to learn that my own career path would be different otherwise it wouldn't last or be truthful.

These days, I long for a life without social media – my early struggle, set-back, disappointment, heartache, failure, rejection, were all unrecorded and not shared publically, as were all the good moments and first successes which also helped me learn and develop a strong foundation as an artist. We need time to find our true technical and emotional strength, we need years to form this, and only then, do we potentially emerge as someone with something *truthful* to offer, which allows our talent to flourish. I firmly believe that that the 'magic-box' and social media decade is slowly eating away at us and crushing our long-term focus. It is causing anguish within those who compare themselves to others daily and it is damaging the orbit of an artist's long term development. I meet so many artists who are constantly comparing themselves to others, committing the same innocent mistakes with repertoire that is too big and wanting success without years of training and refinement. Many of them have a false sense of where they are at, yet the social media world is guilty of promoting them as something they are not ready for. We must hold this caution close to the very core of our responsibility if we are in charge of teaching and mentoring artists in any discipline.

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*“Success always demands a greater effort.”*

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*- Winston Churchill, 13 December 1940 to  
Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies,  
Their Finest Hour, 1949*

