



Samuel McKeever

Mid-Year Report

Before the beginning of the study period proper, I began 2024 by playing the role of Mercutio in a production of C. Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* staged by Festival Opera in Hawke's Bay, which by special arrangement with Madeleine Pierard I was able to have assessed as part of my course load.

This was my most prominent role performance to date, and took me considerably out of my comfort zone as the character demands a boisterous, energetic presence and rapid French patter in his aria 'Mab, la reine des mensonges.'

I was very grateful for the support offered by conductor and director José Aparicio, and vocal coach/répétiteur David Harper during the production. This opera was also my first experience with staged sword-fighting.

I was pleased with how the performances turned out, and feel that the skills acquired will stand me in good stead for future roles. Festival Opera have engaged me to return for next summer's season of *Turandot* to sing the role of Lord Chancellor Ping.

Upon the start of the study period, I was able to begin twice-weekly voice lessons with Nikki Li Hartliep, and the improvement and vocal polishing that took place even just within the first few weeks was remarkable. Nikki Li works to improve technical efficiency and comfort, gathering the voice into a position which prioritises optimal sound production at all times. In my sessions with her, we have worked on repertoire at a level of detail which I have not experienced before, and her advice on presentation and stage deportment has also been significant in the development of my performing skills.

Our first guest tutors in 2024 were Australian mezzo-soprano Caitlin Hulcup, and vocal coach Caroline Dowdle from the Royal College of Music and the Verbier Festival Atelier Lyrique. Sadly, I was bedridden with a fever for most of the week, and so I was not able to work with Caitlin Hulcup, but I was at least able to have one coaching session with Caroline, in addition to attending a group workshop with her. I worked with her particularly on improving fluency in sung French repertoire.

I returned to Napier over Easter to compete in the Napier Aria Competition adjudicated by Conal Coan. I placed third in the aria finals (repertoire: 'Eri tu' from *Un ballo in maschera*, Toréador's Song from *Carmen*) and first in the German Lieder category ('Belsatzar' - Robert Schumann). The following week the TANZOS cohort presented our first public concert at the Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts, where I performed the Toréador's Song with a supporting chorus/ensemble of my fellow cohort members and Waikato University postgraduates, and the duet between Count di Luna and Leonora from *Il trovatore* with Katherine Winitana ('Udiste... come albeggi la scure al figlio'). It was at around this time that I also received news that I had been accepted as a semi-finalist in the 2024 Lexus Song Quest, which was my largest competition to date.

During May-June I was part of the production of New Zealand Opera's *Le Comte Ory* in Auckland as a chorus member. Travelling for the rehearsals was quite time-consuming, but as many Waikato-based students were involved in the chorus, we were fortunate to be granted the use of a university fleet van, which I drove for the most part. The opera was admittedly not to my taste, but working up close with Emma Pearson and Manase Latu was wonderful.

The performance weekend of *Le Comte Ory* coincided with the Becroft North Shore Aria competitions. I was awarded second place in the aria finals ('Per me giunto' from *Don Carlo* and 'Ya vas lyublyu' from *Pique-Dame*), and first place in English Art Song ('Channel Firing' – Gerald Finzi), German Lieder ('Belsazar') and Oratorio ('It is enough' – *Elijah*).

My 10th June recital was the longest and most demanding solo recital I have given, containing about 50 minutes of music including four arias. I feel that I was able to achieve in performance many of the technical goals towards which I had been working in my vocal lessons, and I was surprised at how I was able to handle the endurance aspect of the evening. I am especially pleased to have access to a recording with good-quality sound, which I intend to use for future competition entries and audition applications. My recital was shortly followed by the TANZOS 'Winter Warmers' concert in which I repeated some of the same repertoire.

The climax of the first half-year was our Sydney residency with Opera Australia. For two weeks, our time was spent almost entirely either at the Opera Australia headquarters building or backstage at the Sydney Opera House, taking part in coachings and workshops, observing rehearsals, and attending evening performances. Watching the way the company operated was eye-opening: there is nowhere in New Zealand that operates as smoothly or at the same scale.

There were five different operas simultaneously going on, of which we were able to see four: Puccini's *Il trittico* and *Tosca* both mid-season on the main stage (as well as from within the orchestra pit for *Tosca*), Brett Dean's modern opera *Hamlet* in the later stages of rehearsals, and Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (with Filipe Manu in the lead tenor role) in the very early stages of rehearsals.

The *Hamlet* production featured the same lead tenor whom the opera was written for, Allan Clayton, who has also sung the role at the Glyndebourne Festival in England and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York alongside baritone Rod Gilfry (as Claudius). Meeting Rod Gilfry, whose recordings of Mozart baritone roles I have listened to many times, was very exciting, as was watching him work in the rehearsal space.

Other high points of the trip for me included a workshop aimed especially at dealing with media interviews, and multiple coaching sessions with vocal coach and conductor Brian Castles-Onion.

My first trimester with TANZOS has been an ideal environment in which to polish my skills, and I am extremely excited for the next part of the course. I am especially looking forward to the intensive role study period in 2025, during which we will each learn three principal operatic roles with a view to performing them on the professional stage in the future. I have recently begun looking at certain repertoire in my voice lessons that I did not previously expect I would be capable of singing, and I have been surprised by the progress.

My plans after TANZOS are to travel overseas as soon as it is practical. I hope to take part in some summer programmes, and audition for longer, year-long young artist programmes, mainly in Germany. Currently, my long-term goal for the future would be to get into the German Festvertrag (fixed contract) system as a company artist with regular role performances.

Some highlights coming up soon for me include being understudy for the role of Angelotti in Wellington Opera's *Tosca*, the Lockwood New Zealand Aria competition, my TANZOS second-trimester recital, an engagement to sing Handel's *Messiah* with the Christchurch City Choir on the 7th of December, and the aforementioned *Turandot* over the summer.