Report to the Kiri Te Kanawa Foundation

Solti Te Kanawa Accademia di bel canto 2011

*“He ao te rangi ka uhia, he huruhuru te manu ka rere –*

*Clouds cloak the sky, as feathers cloak a bird, allowing it to fly.”*

*Tihei wā mauri ora.*

Tēnā koutou e aku rangatira. Nei rā aku mihi ki a koutou, mo tā koutou āwhina i ahau. Ma tēnei pūrongo e kitea ai e koutou I ngā hua I puta I taku haerenga ki Itāria. Tēnā koutou katoa.

I began in Māori by thanking the Kiri Te Kanawa Foundation for their unwavering support in providing me with the opportunity to attend the Solti Te Kanawa Accademia di bel canto 2011. The following report aims to outline, describe and report back to the Foundation on how the course went, some highlights and comments on what I gained by attending. Hopefully I will be able to communicate just how amazing an opportunity I found this to be, and how it has impacted my singing.

I was extremely excited at the prospect of attending the Solti Te Kanawa Accademia in the months leading up to the course. My expectation was that I would gain much in the way of advancing my singing technique; absorb the idiomatic flow and sound of the Italian language; practice the language in context; consolidate the five closed and two open Italian vowels, integral to bel canto singing; gain a deeper insight to the style of the bel canto repertoire; create networks and establish and international contacts; and learn more about the ‘baritone’ voice-type from the great Sir Thomas Allen.

As a voice student of the University of Otago, half way through my second year studying towards an B.Mus Hons in Voice Performance, I had been very well prepared by my singing teacher, Isabel Cunningham, and voice coach, Professor Terence Dennis, on the bel canto singing technique, style and especially on the Italian language. As a previous guest tutor of the Solti Te Kanawa Accademia, Professor Dennis’s wealth of knowledge and experience of the course itself, the bel canto repertoire, and the Italian language, was invaluable – and he shared it freely.  However, despite my exceptional preparation, I still had feelings of self-doubt about attending the course at such an early stage in my singing development - was I ready?

These feelings of self-doubt mingled with excitement unsettled me until I arrived into Tuscany, at Grosseto train station on Sunday the 26th of June. I remember waiting at the station, the gabble of undecipherable Italian being spoken all around me, trying to distinguish any ‘classical-singer’ type features on the passers by- not knowing what anyone from the course looked like. Suddenly a mob of multi-coloured, loud and boisterous people came into view, each with at least *three* suitcases trailing behind them. “Ah - opera singers” I thought. We represented many countries; Portugal, Armenia, Russian, Austria, Canada, Holland, Malta, Switzerland, Romania, United Kingdom, Scotland, Ireland, and New Zealand. In my view one of the great things that this course allows for are fantastic networking opportunities. From that point on I felt at ease, establishing long-lasting friendships with each singer in the group, helping me feel immediately comfortable to be myself and do the work that I needed to do.

Each singer had completed undergraduate degrees in music, and were either working professionally or studying towards post-graduate masters in singing. Many had sung in various operas, with whole roles prepared. Although I was the youngest singer on the course, I found that the preparation I had been given by my teachers, especially regarding vocal technique, Italian language pronunciation and understanding texts, and the ability I had already gained in performance stood me in good stead amongst them.

The course was held in the little fishing village of Castiglione della Pescaia, on the coast of Tuscany. We were hosted by the Hotel L’Approdo, with classes at various venues around the village, presided over by the most beautiful and ancient-looking Italian castle-city atop the town’s central summit. On our first morning Dame Kiri Te Kanawa gave us the opportunity to share a folk song from our own countries. I shared a traditional Maori *waiata tawhito* with origins from the East coast of New Zealand. Performing this waiata there showed me the uniqueness of being Maori New Zealander in an international context. As Dame Kiri said, the simple folk song shows the true essence of a people’s musical language and performing style, allowing a singer’s ‘true voice’ to come out. This opened my eyes to the importance of keeping things simple and being true to your heritage and own unique sound.

Dame Kiri gave master-classes for the initial week, which encouraged me to work hard and establish a consistent work ethic and good daily routine. This consisted of daily activities, i.e. morning swims, to activate the body, vocal warm-up before classes, and master classes that ran throughout the day till each meal break. These daily sessions started from around 9.45am through till 1pm, and resumed at 3.45pm through till 7pm. We would have a half hour each day with each coach, and in between times be working through the advice given in each lesson; language diction, interpretation, repertoire style, and vocal technique. One of the big things that Dame Kiri emphasised was breathing. She explained that it is what has lasted her through her long career, and is the most integral part of singing. She said that young singers need to consistently train to take in the proper amount of air for particular phrases or notes; whether long or short, high or low. Along with the intake of air, the exhalation must be correctly controlled, and this must be a daily practice- by taking deep breaths and exhaling on an even flow of air for up to 55 counts, then repeating but voicing those exhaled phrases on sound. Dame Kiri was a figure of support for me through that initial period of transition into the course, and I am so grateful for her words of wisdom, advice and aroha.

Other tutors and coaches on the course consisted of the artistic director, Jonathan Papp; voice coach, Paolo Speca; Alexander Zeldin, staging director; and Italian diction coaches, Emanuela Ferrari and Corradina Caporello. It was a great privilege to have had Sir Thomas Allen as guest tutor this year, who brought a wealth of knowledge and experience of the bel canto repertoire with him, for the baritone voice-type. Sir Thomas advised me to be disciplined when performing the aria “*Largo al factotum*”. He wanted me to focus the energy I was using back into myself, take the balance and poise of a dancer, and use that image to portray the character of Figaro, who, for him, is a person of considerable composure, self assuredness, balance and control. His approach was very much on the drama and interpretation of each character. I must always have a *reason* for singing something, to be both vocally correct and to properly communicate meaning. He stressed that we all had to explore the different colours and expressions of our voices - “*the dynamic markings on the page are more colours and expressions, relative to the whole piece, rather than decibels of volume that we must produce*”. As he said – “*We’re all just children here, let’s play – we’re all just playing*”. Sir Thomas’ attention to exploring the dramatic intricacies of each piece was an inspiration and showed me the importance of preparing the context to every song one sings.

Another truly inspirational tutor was Corradina Caporello, whose lessons I would look forward to with great anticipation. As Italian diction coach at the Juilliard School of Music in New York she has worked with the world’s top singers, and her wealth of knowledge, not only on Italian pronunciation but also on bel canto repertoire, was evident in everything she taught. Through working with her I was able to consolidate the five closed and two open Italian vowels; mimic the idiomatic sound of her Italian pronunciation and language; and absorb what I could from her understanding of the bel canto repertoire that I had brought. Every mealtime I would sit with her, and listen to how she conversed in Italian; this helped immensely to secure in my ears the idiomatic sounds of the language. Her encouragement, love and support and the openness with which she taught made the learning process for me so enjoyable. The tenacity and meticulous ear for detail was challenging, but good. She would correct even the slightest pronunciation mistake until I got it right! In my view this is the mark of a truly great teacher, and it served me well in the end. I was touched to be offered future help and support from her should I ever seek to apply for post-graduate studies in the USA, at any of the institutions at which she works.

The four concerts in which I was involved gave me the opportunity to showcase what I had learnt so far. These included an informal concert for Dame Kiri held in the first week of the course; the concert on the 2nd of July at the Castello di Colle Massari, Cinigiano, at which only five of us were selected to perform; the free public concert held on the 15th of July at the Piazza Solti; and the invitation only concert and dinner hosted by Alain Ducasse and Vittorio Moretti on the 16th of July at the Andana Hotel, Castiglione della Pescaia. These concerts were the culmination of everything I had learnt on the course, and challenged me to apply these in a performance situation. The concert at which I found it the most difficult to perform was the Piazza Solti concert, singing ‘*Largo al factotum’* from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. The scale of the audience was around 600 people, predominantly Italian, and at an outside venue nonetheless (my first outside concert!). This taught me the pressures of performing; being the opening act; wanting to do well in front of Dame Kiri, and all the other tutors who had helped me; and trying to remember everything that I had to do vocally as well as communicatively (not to mention having to run about fifteen meters to the stage!). My performance resulted in a determination to do better in the following night’s concert at the Andana Hotel – which I succeeded in doing. Being able to see what attentions were needed in different performance venues and having help from Dame Kiri the following morning on breathing (– and running!) was a good exercise for bettering myself from one performance to the next.

With the Kiri Te Kanawa Foundation’s help, attending the Solti Te Kanawa Accademia di bel canto 2011 has had an enormous impact on the way I sing, on my knowledge of the bel canto repertoire, and has hugely benefitted my singing career as a young opera singer in training. From the long-lasting international contacts made, to the fundamentals gained about singing bel canto music, I now have an increased understanding of singing Italian repertoire learnt from an immersion in a cultural context. I have grown a lot and my experience has taught me much about myself as a singer. My goals now are now to increase my musicianship and piano skills, continue to learn Italian, and work through the information that I have gained from the course with my teachers, in the lead up to the Gala Evening concert with the NZSO.

I cannot thank the Kiri Te Kanawa Foundation enough for this amazing opportunity, which has taught me so much. I also thank my singing teacher, Isabel Cunningham, vocal coach, Professor Terence Dennis; for all that they did to prepare me for the course, and for all that they continue to teach me now. It was a joy to have my first singing teacher and her husband, Joan and Richard Kennaway, there to watch my two final performances, along with the administrator of the Kiri Te Kanawa Foundation, Paul Gleeson, and his wife Helen. Thank you all for your support. I will endeavor to continue working hard to achieve the excellence for which I strive in my singing and to do the very best that I can.

E aku rangatira e mihi tonu ana i te mihi mahaki o te ngakau ki tena, ki tena o koutou. Nga mihi nui.

Kawiti Waetford.