

SOSA Friends report

Bel Canto in Tuscany, August 1st to 20th, 2016

In August of this year, thanks to Friends of State Opera, I had the wonderful opportunity to be one of the pianists at the inaugural 'Bel Canto in Tuscany'. This course for opera singers was held in Greve in Chianti, Italy, home town of its Washington-based director, Maestro Giovanni Reggioli. I first met Giovanni at the Lisa Gasteen National Opera School (LGNOS) in 2014 and then worked with him again at LGNOS 2015. It was during the 2015 school that he invited me to be a pianist at Bel Canto in Tuscany. I immediately contacted Pauline Brookes to see whether, as a 2015 SOSA Young Artist, I might be able to apply to the Friends of State Opera in order to fund my flights. She was most encouraging and I submitted a successful application in early 2016. (I've never before received a grant for *more* than I applied for, but thanks to the generosity of the Friends, I could also cover the costs of preparatory Italian lessons, which were invaluable!)

Giovanni Reggioli is a conductor and vocal coach steeped in the Bel Canto tradition. I often feel he must have a direct phone line to Rossini! In creating this opera course, he brought together his finest colleagues from the US, UK and Italy. These included Will Crutchfield, Richard Hetherington, Dona D. Vaughn, Elisabeth Bishop, Laura Pasqualetti and Francesca Giovannelli.

In addition to the exceptional faculty, the standard of the 40 participating singers was very high. They came from the US, China, Australia and Belgium and ranged in age from 20s to 40s. Many were already active professionals and there were some astounding younger voices.

Along with the two other pianists (both NY-based) it was my role to provide accompaniment for the coachings, master classes, rehearsals and three concerts that took place throughout the course. Given the number of singers, this involved a lot of work, in particular constant sight-reading and learning of new repertoire. There were numerous mezzo soprani, some singing the heavier roles, soprani of various Fächer, not to mention dramatic tenors, all allowing me exposure to repertoire I otherwise don't have the opportunity to play. Each day began at 10am and concluded at 8pm. I had to do any personal practice outside those times.

It's hard to pick highlights from such an intensive three weeks, but a number of aspects made a profound impression on me. I played for many hours of Elisabeth Bishop's voice lessons and these taught me a huge amount. An American mezzo soprano who performs regularly at the Met, Elisabeth is a humorous, warm and unfailingly positive teacher who has an extraordinary knowledge of vocal technique and anatomy, but manages to convey it in a strikingly accessible and efficient manner. It was a privilege to see her effect significant vocal improvements with many students of different voice types, ages and experience. I made many quick notes of her methods whenever I could throughout the lessons and my vocal coaching has already incorporated her ideas where possible. However, it's impossible to capture her ability to demonstrate. To hear a mezzo casually sing the conclusion of Musetta's Waltz while leaning back in her chair with her feet on a desk is a pretty spectacular event!

Dona D. Vaughn, who runs two opera companies, directs all over the US and teaches at the Manhattan School of Music, directed the scenes for the concerts. Throughout the course she also worked with groups of singers on their acting, presentation, and specific arias. The classes were

powerful and sometimes confronting. Dona acknowledged the deeply personal challenges of being an opera singer and never glossed over the difficulty of the career and the vulnerability it often entails. I felt it was a rare privilege to witness her work from behind the piano. A number of aspects she dealt with, particularly the need for bravery within an artistic and performing career, have very much stayed with me.

Will Crutchfield, conductor, coach and musicologist, gave numerous lectures throughout the course which contained so much information that I recorded them in order to listen back at a later date. One memorable afternoon he took us through numerous historical recordings and showed us how operatic technique has changed in the last century. He would slow excerpts to half speed so we could hear how the speed of singer's vibrato might change, how accurate their pitch might be and where they might use portamenti we otherwise wouldn't perceive. It was fascinating!

Knowing my interest in vocal coaching, Giovanni asked me on several occasions to play for his coachings or to simply listen while he worked with various singers. This is always an invaluable opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of style and technique. One morning I also had the privilege to observe Richard Hetherington coach a number of singers and to have a one-on-one session with him. I've worked with Richard at LGNOS in the last two years, but each time I feel like he offers a new layer of musical understanding. He has a particular approach to line and harmony that makes music a living, spinning creation, and to watch him coach allowed me to hear him convey that through his own playing.

The three concerts were very special events, if slightly pressured due to the compressed rehearsal time! The first was held in the Castello di Verrazzano, a castle overlooking Greve. We performed numerous operatic excerpts while the sun set over the Tuscan hills behind us. The second concert comprised sacred repertoire by Rossini, Puccini, Pergolesi, and Mozart. This was held in the Pieve di San Leolino, a Romanesque church dating from the 12th century. Performing this powerful and beautiful music in such a setting was a very special experience. The final concert was held on the steps of the church in the main square of Greve and attracted a particularly large audience of locals and tourists. It was a highly successful conclusion to a wonderful three weeks. I know we all left the course both inspired and exhausted.

Bel Canto in Tuscany taught me an enormous amount and gave me some very valuable contacts and experience. I gained a deeper understanding of the Bel Canto vocal technique and feel I've already been able to convey this to the singers I work with here in Adelaide. It was also very nice to receive positive feedback on my work; Giovanni has invited me to return to play for the course at any time in future years (he hopes make each of the pianists a paid role) and I was particularly delighted when Elisabeth Bishop said I would always be welcome to accompany her lessons in Washington.

I would sincerely like to thank all the members of the Friends of State Opera for your generosity. There are few opportunities and sources of support for Australian vocal coaches and répétiteurs wanting to develop their professional skills and I feel very privileged to have had this invaluable experience.