

Dear Dame Jenny,

It's difficult to narrow down my highlights of the recent TANZOS trip to Australia as the whole experience was beyond incredible.

Our very first day began with a full tour of the opera studio and then the opera house through all the nooks and crannies of the studio where they design and make their costumes from scratch and incredibly make all of their wigs and hats on site also. We were taken through the backstage areas at the Sydney Opera House and we were even taken onto the main Joan Sutherland stage. It's fair to say we were all fairly lost for words standing on the stage and looking out at where we would end up singing only a few days later. Katherine Wiles was an incredible host and made sure we were looked out for at all times, making sure we were introduced to as many artists and Opera Australia staff as possible.

The coaching sessions I was given were invaluable – I've spent a fair chunk of my jetlagged time upon my return (I didn't think 2 hours' time difference would wipe me as much as it has!) listening back to the recordings of our language session with Nicole Dorigo, our repertoire masterclass with Brian Castles-Onion as well as our other group sessions. Two absolute highlights of the coaching sessions for me were the audition workshop held by Stuart Stratford and Fiona MacSherry from Scottish Opera and my one on one session with Michael Black from Chicago Lyric Opera. Working with Stuart and Fiona was a whirlwind experience, Fiona was incredibly detailed in her feedback with me and I found her and Stuart's input universally useful and applicable to many of the other pieces I'm working on. Michael worked on a German aria with me and gave me insight into how it might fit on the stage with an orchestra as the orchestration can get incredibly heavy so he was sharing his tips and tricks of where I can lighten off and take a break through the piece and where it needed the full power of sound to carry through.

Watching the three different operas at their various stage of rehearsals was amazing. It was incredible to see the level of professionalism from the director and conductor with the artist as well as all the tech and stage assistants working so beautifully together. The 'pit and perch' experience for Rigoletto was also just insane, I've never had the opportunity to be amongst the orchestra before and to see how truly removed they are from everything that's happening on the stage but the conductor really is the light to carry the whole performance and connect the stage and the pit together. I already had a huge appreciation for orchestras and conductors but it's even bigger now!

The audition feels a bit like a fever dream if I'm completely honest. Having the chance to sing on that stage and feel as though that really will be me one day (in the not so distant future!) is bewildering and incredibly exciting. I had some wonderful feedback from Scottish Opera who said they'd be happy to hire me if I was ever over their way. The experience of singing on that stage was inspiring and just big enough to feel a little bit daunting but not overwhelming. I don't often say that I feel like I sang well but I am incredibly proud of myself for what I gave on that day. It felt like my voice could bloom in the space and I felt very in tune with the stories I was telling, I can't wait to be back there one day, hopefully performing a role for Opera Australia.

There aren't enough words to describe my gratitude for being able to take part in this experience and the invaluable teachings I'm able to take away from it. I feel incredibly privileged to have been supported in participating and these are memories and experiences I'll refer to and hold close for many years to come.

Ngā mihi nui,
Rhiannon Cooper