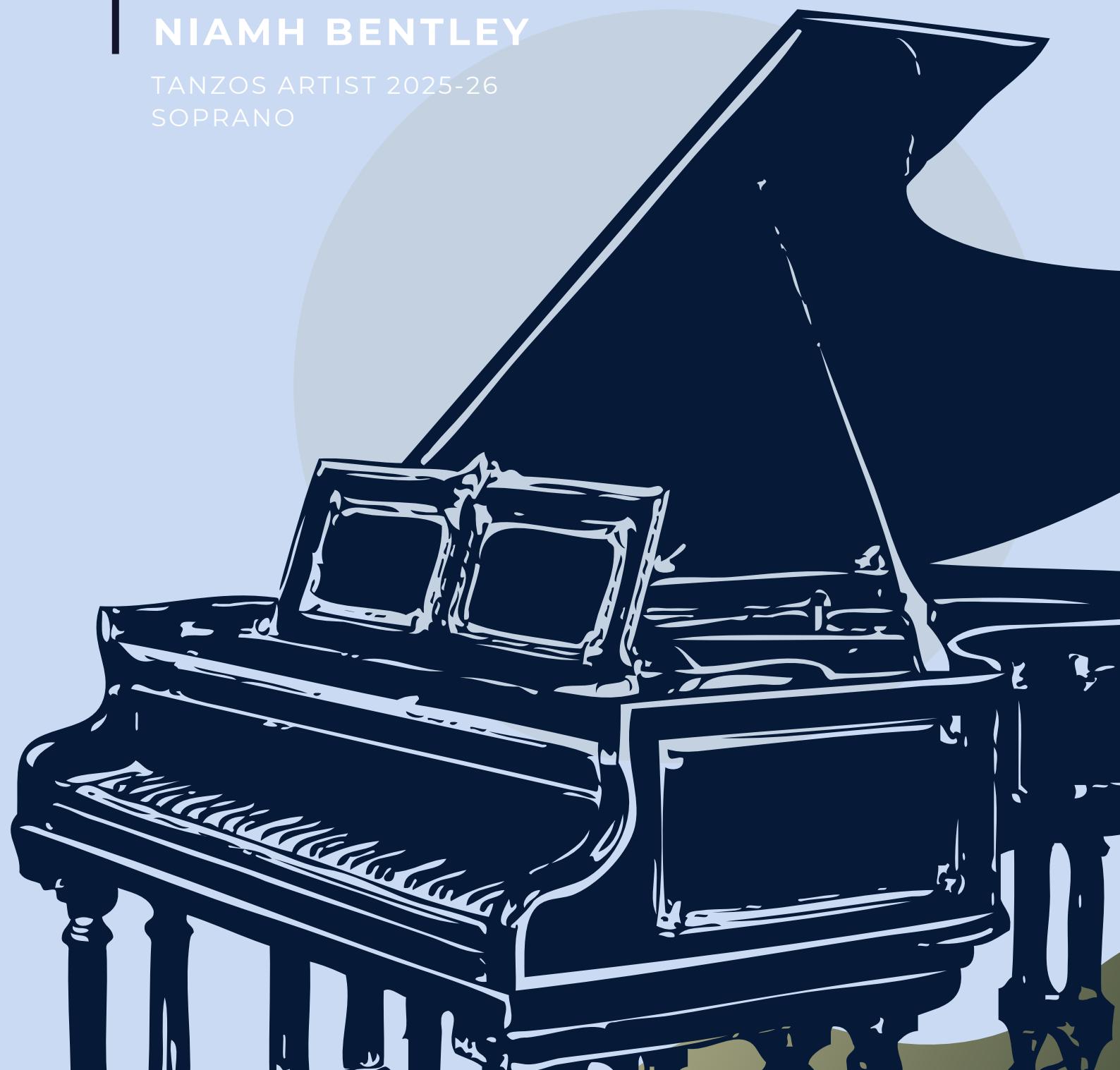


AUGUST- DECEMBER  
2025

# END-OF-YEAR REPORT

**NIAMH BENTLEY**

TANZOS ARTIST 2025-26  
SOPRANO



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## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Niamh Bentley is a 24-year-old soprano from Hawke's Bay. Her journey with opera and classical singing began in 2016 when she joined youth opera initiative, Project Prima Volta, which sparked her passion for opera. Niamh is a graduate of the University of Waikato Conservatorium of Music, where she gained her Bachelor of Music and recently, her Master of Music under the mentorship of Kristin Darragh and Francis Cowan.

Early in her career, she made notable debuts, including the role of 'Flora Bervoix' in Festival Opera NZ's production of *La Traviata* and the 'Queen of the Night' in *Die Zauberflöte* by Mozart. In 2019, she portrayed 'Olympia' in The University of Waikato's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, and in 2022, she took on the role of 'Lauretta' in Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* at the University of Waikato Conservatorium of Music. Niamh has also been the primary set painter for operas such as *La Traviata*, *Die Zauberflöte* and *Roméo et Juliette*. Niamh attended the New Zealand Opera School in 2023 and 2024. In 2024, she was awarded the Merle Higbie Award for Most Potential.



# AUGUST - SEPTEMBER

## GETTING INTO ROUTINE

"Fantastic show.  
Great soloists, chorus and orchestra  
and such an engaging story."



"Worth coming from Christchurch to see.  
Absolutely world class!"



These two months were particularly important, as they marked a key period for researching new repertoire and creating a draft outline for our recital in early November. Although the schedule was relatively lighter following the break, this time was crucial for planning and preparation, as vocal stamina plays a significant role in recital performance. I find that learning the music earlier allows for greater freedom and enjoyment, as it creates more space to explore technical and expressive elements.

During this period, I especially enjoyed working with Donna Balson. It was a joy to have her return and work with us again. She helped me develop a smoother transition between emotional expression and vocal delivery, which in turn contributed to a more legato and connected sound.

My scheduled coachings, musical context classes, German and Italian language classes, and movement sessions remained consistent. However, I noticed a clear improvement in my fitness and confidence across all areas of my training. Compared to the beginning of the year, I now feel less fatigued by the end of the week, which reflects the progress I have made in building both vocal stamina and overall resilience.

A particular highlight during these two months was attending Wellington Opera's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. It was deeply inspiring to see our team leader, Madeleine, take centre stage. Her singing was shimmering and expansive, filling the theatre with energy and presence. I was also especially drawn to Natasha Wilson's portrayal of her character. Sam McKeever's performance in the dual soldier roles, alongside Jasmine Jessen covering Natasha Wilson's role, made it a proud moment for TANZOS.

Another highlight was performing in Libby Montgomery's farewell concert in support of her move to the UK. The concert on the 31st of August was a wonderful evening and I received very positive feedback from audience members who have been following our opera journeys. For me, it was also a special milestone, as it marked my first performance in the Auckland Opera Studio.



# PRACTICE & PREPARATION

# OCTOBER



## Simon Manns

During the month of October, the primary focus of the TANZOS programme was consolidating repertoire off book, building vocal stamina, and maintaining physical wellbeing in preparation for our final showcase. Alongside intensive musical work, participants were given valuable opportunities to develop their physical and dramatic skills. To begin this demanding month, we worked with Simon Manns in stage combat and physical acting. Through this engaging and practical training, we learned effective performance techniques including kicks, punches, knife fights, and impact falls. While some movements can feel exaggerated in practice, it was fascinating to discover how convincing and persuasive they appear from an audience's perspective. Although our time with Simon was limited, the skills gained were highly valuable, and we hope to work with him again in the future, as these techniques are an important part of an opera performer's professional toolkit.

## John Wilkie

For several weeks, we also had the privilege of working with stage director John Wilkie. John emphasised the importance of deeply understanding a character's context within an opera. By exploring even the smallest details, such as a character's habits, daily life, or personal motivations, we were encouraged to find greater humanity and authenticity in our performances. A particular highlight was hearing John share insights from his work with other opera companies. His experience offered us a clearer understanding of professional rehearsal environments and collaboration with a wide range of creative teams, helping prepare us for future careers in the industry.

## Yelena Kurdina

As part of our recital preparation, TANZOS organised one-on-one coaching sessions with the wonderful Yelena Kurdina for both Tomairangi Henare and myself, as we were performing Russian repertoire. This was an incredibly special opportunity. I had heard so much about the incredible singers Yelena has worked with, as well as how generous and supportive she is as a coach, and she more than lived up to that reputation. Working in Russian took some getting used to at first, but the more I practised, the more I fell in love with the language, especially through the music of Rachmaninoff. Yelena's focus on long line, romanticism, and the close relationship between the voice and piano really resonated with me, and it deepened my connection to the music.

## David Harper

It is always such a joy to work with David Harper, and during such an intense month of preparation, his support was very much needed. He was a huge help for me while working on my French song cycle by Ravel, offering both musical clarity and encouragement. David has followed many of us throughout our singing journeys, often from our high school years. I first worked with him when I had just turned sixteen, and every time I coach with him there's an unspoken reminder of how far I've come on this path. That sense of continuity and support has been incredibly meaningful.

## All Recordings

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Yesterday

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### New Recording 217

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### New Recording 216

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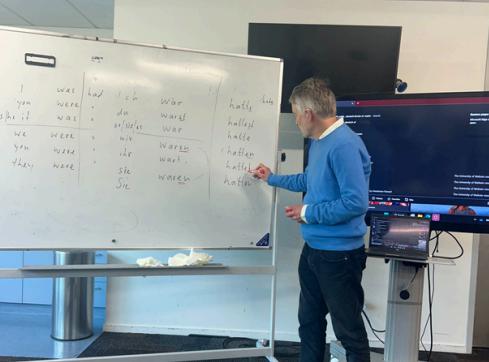
Monday

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Monday

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# NOVEMBER

THE BIGGEST TIME OF THE YEAR

## New Zealand Aria

Stepping into the month of November, I knew what I was getting myself into; however, by the end of the month there was so much to be grateful for. We began November with the much-needed arrival of Glenn Winslade, who came to work with us. He offered many valuable tips and techniques, particularly around keeping the voice as free and relaxed as possible. One of my favourite pieces of advice, especially going into recital season and the New Zealand Aria, was his suggestion to gently bite down on the tongue if the room feels dry and the throat begins to dry out. Glenn's guidance greatly supported my confidence in preparing for the recital.

Competing in the New Zealand Aria this year in Rotorua was a meaningful step in my return to singing competitions. Prior to this, my last competition was the North Shore Singing Competition at the beginning of last year. As competitions have been a challenge for me in the past, this experience marked an important milestone. Although I did not receive an award, the competition was a valuable and encouraging experience. I received positive feedback, gained confidence, and felt more prepared for my solo recital. Much of the repertoire performed at the New Zealand Aria also featured in my recital programme, allowing me to develop and refine this material in a performance setting. The most important takeaway was recognising how far I have come. I experienced clear growth in confidence, learned to recover when mistakes occurred, and felt a strong sense of gratitude for being present in the moment. Overall, the New Zealand Aria reinforced my trust in the process and in the broader journey of my development as a singer.

## Final Solo Recital

For our final solo recitals, we had the opportunity to work with the wonderful Nick Fletcher, who accompanied all of the performances. Nick is a senior member of staff at the Royal Opera House in London, and it was a joy to collaborate with him. He is an exceptional teacher, and during the recital it truly felt like two colleagues working together to create music and share stories with the audience. Looking ahead, an important next learning step in my preparation for future recitals is to give each language the time and care it deserves. In particular, I aim to deepen my work with the French language, which can be especially challenging for singers due to its seven distinct vowel sounds. Overall, I was very happy with the outcome of my recital. I made new technical vocal discoveries that allowed for a more natural and authentic emotional response to the music. This felt like a significant step forward in my artistic and vocal development.



## DEBUTING IN WELLINGTON

**UNA SERENATA ITALIANA**  
A TANZOS SHOWCASE OF ITALIAN OPERA FAVOURITES



1/2



## LATE NOVEMBER/EARLY DECEMBER

### Caroline Dowdle/ Elaine Kidd

In the final two weeks of TANZOS for the year, we had the privilege of working with two exceptional guest staff members from the Royal Opera House, UK director Elaine Kidd and coach/repetiteur Caroline Dowdle. Caroline shared countless valuable tips and techniques, one of which was particularly memorable: she had me sit on a medicine ball and bounce while singing to help loosen my lower abdominal muscles. She also introduced an exercise where I walked on the words that were emphasized in the text. This was more challenging than it initially sounded, as it required coordinating with the music while simultaneously working against it, definitely a “pat your head, rub your belly” situation! While Caroline’s coaching focused on the more technical aspects of singing, we also had the opportunity to work on the dramatic elements with Elaine in the directing space. Elaine’s approach reinforced the importance of emotional intent behind every phrase, breath, and pause, a discipline that is both demanding and enriching.

It was an amazing experience to work with Elaine and see the characters I’ve been developing truly come to life. Equally rewarding was the chance to collaborate with my colleagues again on ensemble work. Every moment spent in this environment is an incredible learning opportunity and a joy to be part of.

### Una Serenata Italiana - Our Final Showcase

On the 29th of November in Wellington, we had our final showcase, and it was incredible to see all of our hard work come together. It was truly satisfying to witness how Elaine directed each scene to flow seamlessly, creating a powerful and cohesive performance. However, the highlight of my year was undoubtedly the feedback I received from Dame Malvina. She expressed how proud she was of the work I had done, and she became emotional as she shared how she could feel my soul in the music. That moment was incredibly special to me. It reminded me that singing is a gift, one that I must share with others. It’s moments like these that make this journey so meaningful and important.

### Masterclass

In the same week as preparations for our final showcase, TANZOS hosted a masterclass with internationally renowned mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato. Four current participants and alumni of TANZOS were selected to perform an aria: Ridge Ponini, Jasmine Jessen, Tomairangi Henare, and Sarah Mileham. One particularly memorable moment was watching Joyce work with Jasmine Jessen on the aria “O quante volte.” Having recently studied this aria myself, I found the session especially insightful and took many notes. Observing Joyce’s detailed and thoughtful approach was both educational and deeply inspiring. It was incredibly moving to see the care and generosity Joyce brought to working with my fellow colleagues. Her genuine heart for people was evident throughout the masterclass, and this was further reflected in her concert the following evening, where her artistry and emotional depth felt even more expansive.

# NEXT STEPS



## GOALS

One of my current short-term goals is continuing my work on vocal freedom and consistency. The refinement and re-energising soft palette space, and developing greater ease in coloratura.

After gaining confidence in my previous Opera School, I am now focused on owning the space on stage more, strengthening characterisation, and communicating more persuasively through aria work.

For me, in this new year, it marks an important step towards clarifying voice type and shaping audition and competition repertoire.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Dame Malvina Major Foundation. I feel truly grateful to be supported on this journey as a young singer. Your generosity is making a meaningful difference in my development, and I look forward to sharing further updates on my progress.

*Thank you very much,  
Niamh Bentley*

