

TE PAE KŌKAKO TANZOS 2025

Sarah Mileham End of year Report



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TANZOS

THE AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND OPERA STUDIO

Kia ora koutou,

The second half of the year with TANZOS has been an incredibly formative period in my development. It has been filled with performance opportunities, exposure to world-class artists, technical and musical work, and great outcomes that affirm the training and support provided by the programme. I have grown not only as a singer, but as a performer. With all the support I have had this year, I believe I have a clearer artistic identity, stronger technical foundation, and increased confidence stepping into professional spaces. Thank you for your ongoing support in my journey, and I am delighted to share some of the notable events that happened since the last report.

Early in the semester, TANZOS travelled to Wellington to attend Wellington Opera's production of Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*. Observing the singers at this level was really educational! Madeleine's performance in the leading soprano role was a particularly strong example of refined vocal technique, elegant phrasing, and expressive musicality. Her control and clarity across the role demonstrated all the work she has done across her career. I was also excited by Natasha Wilson's portrayal of Oscar.



Her singing was exceptionally clean and precise, with a vocal colour and agility perfectly suited to the role. Seeing these performances live really highlighted how technical consistency is important to bring a role to life. ■

In mid-September, I travelled to Whangārei to compete in the Northland Competitions, adjudicated by Rachel Fuller. The competition spanned several days and was a great opportunity to present both new and established repertoire in a high stakes performance setting. I was thrilled to place first in the aria finals, singing *Donde lieta uscì* from Puccini's *La Bohème*. This was the first time I had performed this aria in competition, and it marked an important milestone in my relationship with the role of Mimi. I felt as though I could really be vulnerable with the piece and felt quite connected to the music. Thanks to all the work that Nikki and I did, I felt more confident in presenting this piece.

A major strength of the TANZOS programme is its ability to bring outstanding artists and teachers to work closely with us. Throughout the second half of



the year, I learned a lot from coachings and sessions with David Harper, Donna Balson, Glenn Winslade, Thomas Johnson, and John Wilkie. Each brought so much insight and experienced knowledge to my pieces, and the cumulative impact of this work has been a huge factor in shaping my musical understanding. I will carry so much of what they taught with me for many years. I feel incredibly fortunate to receive this level of guidance within a supportive and focused training environment. ■

This year, I wanted to record and submit some audition videos. I wanted to see what the reception would be like from the overseas young artist programmes. I ended up sending out a few, and I am delighted to have secured live auditions in February with Mascarade in Florence and Opera Australia in Sydney. These opportunities will be great learning opportunities for me, and I am excited to see where they go!

In October, I was hired by the Marlborough Opera Festival to sing the title role in *RED!*, a children's opera by Lucy Mulgan.



This project was an absolute joy and provided valuable experience working with approximately 25 young performers. Their enthusiasm, openness, and engagement reminded me that opera can be for all ages. ■

The opera is a New Zealand retelling of Little Red Riding Hood, tailored specifically for Kiwi children. Performing this role was a great opportunity to be silly and work on relaxing when playing a younger character.

The NZ Aria Competition in November was a major highlight of the year. This competition carries significant anticipation for us all, and it was an honour to take part. I sang *Deh vieni, non tardar* from *Le nozze di Figaro* in the preliminary rounds, and was thrilled to progress to the finals.

The day of the finals was an extraordinary experience. I worked closely with Maestro Giordano Bellincampi and rehearsed with the Auckland Philharmonic Orchestra.



For the finals, I chose *Song to the Moon* from Dvořák's *Rusalka*. Although I had never performed this aria in a competition setting before, my teacher Nikki encouraged me to take the risk, and she was absolutely right.



The experience of singing this aria with full orchestra was magical. The orchestration is breathtaking, and the rehearsals leading up to the finals — including orchestra sessions and a private rehearsal with the Maestro — went very smoothly. ■

The finals evening itself was deeply special. Sharing the stage with nine other exceptional young singers in such a supportive and uplifting environment was a privilege, and it was particularly meaningful that seven of the ten finalists were connected to TANZOS.

I was incredibly grateful to place first in the competition. This achievement felt like a culmination of the year's work and growth, and it was really special to have my family present to watch the finals. I am deeply thankful to God for this opportunity and outcome. I recognise that this success would not have been possible without the training, encouragement, and resources provided by TANZOS, and I am so thankful that I could be a part of this cohort.

Shortly after NZ Aria, I presented my Final Recital. We were fortunate to work with pianist Nicholas Fletcher, who travelled from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in London to coach and perform with us.



Collaborating with someone of his calibre was so inspiring. Nick offered invaluable guidance on shaping phrases in art song and engaging more deeply with text in my operatic repertoire. His insights were the perfect final touch for a recital that I am very proud of.

One of the most extraordinary opportunities of the year was being selected as one of four singers to participate in a Joyce DiDonato masterclass in Wellington. It was my first time singing solo in the Michael Fowler Centre, and the experience was unforgettable. Joyce was warm, generous, and deeply inspiring, and I found myself completely captivated by her presence and artistry.

I sang *Donde lieta uscì* for her, and she commented that the aria suited me well. She observed that I could keep my throat more open at the ends of phrases and encouraged me to work on avoiding closing off phrases prematurely.

Although challenging in the moment, her belief that this was something I could master within a few months was empowering and motivating.



We also attended her concert with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, where her world-class artistry was undeniable. Following the masterclass, she invited us to sing the chorus during her first encore, the Habanera from Carmen, an opportunity we eagerly agreed to. She concluded the first half with a beautiful arrangement of Somewhere Over the Rainbow, which was profoundly moving. This experience is one I will treasure for the rest of my career.

TANZOS's first Wellington concert, Una Serenata, was presented in collaboration with the Italian Embassy and featured an all-Italian programme. Italian opera is particularly close to my heart, and performing in this concert was a joy. Held in the Public Trust Hall, the intimate setting allowed for a strong connection with the audience. The concert was directed by Elaine Kidd from the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at the Royal Opera House. Her direction encouraged a freer, more relaxed physical presence and helped me move away from overly formal operatic presentation when performing arias outside their full dramatic context. I performed Donde lieta uscì and O soave fanciulla from La Bohème with Ridge. Singing this duet publicly for the first time was the highlight of my evening, as the music so

beautifully captures the feeling of falling in love. Following our return from Wellington, working further with Elaine Kidd and Caroline Dowdle provided a great conclusion to the year.



Caroline, in particular, offered practical tools for troubleshooting vocal challenges, and I felt my voice begin to release and free up through her guidance. Her advice will remain central to my practice moving forward. ■

In 2026, I look forward to my live auditions in February, performing the role of Barbarina in New Zealand Opera's production of *Le nozze di Figaro* mid-year, and learning the three roles required for our final assessment. I am excited to continue my work with our wonderful teacher, Nikki Li Hartliep, and to build on the strong foundation established this year.

Thank you for the continued support that makes this training possible. I look forward to sharing how the new year unfolds and wish you a wonderful 2026.



[Here is the link to my finals performance from NZ ARIA this year!](#)

