



Samuel McKeever

Final TANZOS Report

Following my 2024 end-of-year recital, in December I was engaged to sing the solo part in Handel's *Messiah* with the Christchurch City Choir and Christchurch Symphony Orchestra. Unexpectedly, the very next weekend I travelled to Wellington at short notice to sing the *Messiah* again, this time with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, to substitute for the previous soloist who was unable to perform. It was my debut with both orchestras, and the NZSO concert was also broadcast live on the RNZ Concert radio programme.

In January of this year I attended the New Zealand Opera School in Whanganui. Alongside my usual teacher, Nikki Li Hartliep, I was able to have some vocal lessons with Australian voice teacher Glenn Winslade during the school, whose detailed technical approach helped me on the way to achieving a bit more vocal clarity and efficiency.

Unfortunately, this year's Opera School cohort were hard-hit by an illness going around, and I was among those bedridden for about half of the programme, though I recovered just in time to be able to perform Germont's aria 'Di Provenza il mar' in the final gala concert.

To me, the highlight of the summer period was returning home to Hawke's Bay to perform the title role in Festival Opera's production of Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*. This was my most significant stage role to date and I would count it the highlight of my singing journey so far. The production was fully staged with a vibrant set and costumes, and I had a great time working with conductor José Aparicio and director John Wilkie.

The last event of the summer was performing the baritone solo in *Carmina Burana* with Hamilton City Brass for the Hamilton Arts Festival. The music for this work is written to be very demanding for the singer, with extremely high and forceful passages. I was happy to be able to sing such difficult music, which was the most vocally demanding work I had ever performed, and which I would not have been comfortable performing before my time with TANZOS.

After a full summer, I returned to the Waikato for my third trimester of study with TANZOS, and began work on my three role studies for my core role study assessment. During this time there were fewer special events to speak of, and my time was mostly spent studying behind closed doors with the exception of a few small concerts (a highlight being singing Stanfords 'Songs of the Fleet' with the Tauranga civic choir) and a very interesting masterclass with French baritone André Heyboer. Also notable were the North Shore Aria competition, where I placed third in the finals, and the Sydney Eisteddfod competition, my first international competition, where I was named a reserve for the finals.

It was during this time that I and two other TANZOS students were invited to attend rehearsals for New Zealand Opera's *La bohème* in the capacity of rehearsal covers. I was to be the rehearsal cover for Marcello.

In practice, we simply observed the rehearsals three times a week. This was useful in helping me memorise the role of Marcello for my core role assessment, but I was otherwise disappointed by the lack of participation or inclusion that the company offered us, not letting us fill in when one of the principal artists was absent despite purportedly being 'rehearsal covers'.

The core role assessments themselves consisted of three forty-five minute sessions, each dedicated to singing a separate role in its entirety. My roles were Marcello (*La bohème*), Escamillo (*Carmen*), and Germont (*La traviata*). The ensemble-heavy, chattery role of Marcello came easily thanks to all the time I spent observing, and the smooth, swaggering role of Escamillo is brief but impactful. My third role, Germont père, offered the greatest vocal challenges, as it is an extensive and dramatic role for a mature voice. I am on the young side to be singing such a role, but my teacher and I agreed that it was valuable for me to begin studying now for the sorts of roles that are a few years down the line, especially as we expect Verdi baritone roles like Germont to be where my voice type will end up being at home. Singing the whole role in one session was challenging but not exhausting or straining, and I was amazed to discover at the end of the assessment that I felt like I could sing the whole thing over again a second time without issue.

Outside of my role study preparation, I have also been working on new repertoire with Nikki Li Hartliep and my vocal coaches to prepare for future auditions. Chief among these are Eugene Onegin's aria 'Kogda by zhizn domashnim krugom' from Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*, a smooth and lyrical number which I find much easier to navigate now than a year ago; and 'È sogno o realtà?' from Verdi's *Falstaff*, a dramatic and character-filled monologue which I feel well-suited to. I sang both of these arias in the final 'Winter Warmers' concert for TANZOS which marked the end of my time studying for the programme.

There has been no time to rest on my laurels, however, as immediately following the end of my studies I travelled to Wellington to rehearse and perform the role of Ribbing in Wellington Opera's production of Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* ('A Masked Ball'). The role was one of a melodramatic, murderous villain who is present in the ensemble throughout most scenes in the opera and is notable for the ironic laughing scene that marks the finale of the second act.

Now back in Hamilton, I am currently in the 'applications' phase planning my next steps. Having completed TANZOS, I intend to audition for opera studios (young artist programmes) in Europe, particularly in Germany. If I am successful with my online applications, I intend to travel to Europe for three-to-four weeks in November to tour and audition in person. This is a daunting prospect but I am pleased to have the support and assistance of my teacher and the coaches and other contacts I have met and worked with during my time at TANZOS. This programme has greatly improved both my vocal ability and my confidence to take the next step into the profession outside of New Zealand.

Warmest regards,
Samuel McKeever