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Tertiary Opera Training in Australia and UK: Ethnographic Perspective

Maria Briggs (née Okunev)

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Sydney Conservatorium of Music
University of Sydney
2015
**Declaration**

I, Maria Briggs (née Okunev) hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that it contains no material previously published or written by another person except for the co-authored publication submitted and where acknowledged in the text. This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of a higher degree.

The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee gave the ethical approval for this project on the 2nd of August, 2011 under protocol number 14028. The HREC was a fully constituted Ethics Committee in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans-March 2007 under Section 5.1.29.

Participants were required to read an information sheet and to sign a consent form. Informed consent was given individually prior to the collection of data.

Signed: ______________________________ Date: 30th October, 2014
Abstract

Tertiary Opera Training in Australia and the UK: Ethnographic Perspective

Current formal research into the way institutions and opera companies train their opera singers is virtually non-existent. Paul Atkinson’s (2006) *Everyday Arias: An Operatic Ethnography*, is an informative but lonely example of otherwise neglected area. Atkinson proposes that while popular culture receives extensive research attention, the “high” culture suffers from a so-called academic “inverse snobbery”.

This thesis surveys some of the complex issues specific to operatic training and performance. The ethnographic survey draws on observations and comparisons of production rehearsals, private lessons and personal interviews of participants in a professional Australian opera company, an Australian tertiary institution and a UK tertiary institution. Two professional and two student productions are used as case studies to highlight the emergent themes.

This research aims to better understand the unique nature of the operatic training and rehearsal process, as well as investigate the relationship between institutions and the contemporary opera industry.

Keywords: opera, ethnography, tertiary opera training, opera rehearsal, Australian opera training, opera industry
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Introduction

“The best books…are those that tell you what you know already”¹

While agonising over the choice of my project for the Doctor of Musical Arts candidature, I knew two things: it had to be about opera and it had to be about opera now – real, vibrant, alive. Not some abstract analysis of a score or an obscure opera composer that had somehow escaped musicological attention, but a study that would put me in the middle of the actual opera rehearsal production process. With that in mind I started searching for relevant literature or similar studies. I was surprised to see that field research into opera production was very limited and field research into opera training was even less apparent. There were several reasons for this state of affairs...

Why opera field research is rare

Firstly, the shift to field social research is a relatively recent phenomenon. James Clifford describes it as a post-modern hybrid that blurs the “boundary separating art from science” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Gay McAuley further attributes this new surge in the field study of rehearsal to our contemporary desire to observe the dynamic process of creation of the performance rather than studying it as a reified object (McAuley, 1998). It is an interesting thought since it was certainly my desire even before I was consciously aware of any post-modern research trends or otherwise.

Secondly, gaining access to professional or even student opera rehearsals is notoriously difficult. The rehearsal world of not just opera, but theatre as a whole, is traditionally hidden and protected from outsiders. Many cultural ethnographers like Paul Atkinson (2006) on opera, Gay McAuley (1998) on straight theatre, or Helena Wulff (1998) on ballet – discuss difficulties with access and various strategies they have to employ in order to gain it. While all social researchers discuss their struggles with access, gaining trust or even maintaining a professional observer – participant relationship (Bryman, 2012), in the world of theatre rehearsal the access is a particular privilege. In The Art of Rehearsal, George Bernard Shaw gives several stern warnings against outside observers:

¹(Orwell, 1961, p. 267).
Remember that no strangers should be present at rehearsal [...] Rehearsals are absolutely and sacrely confidential [...] No direction should be given to an actor in the presence of a stranger 2

When I approached one of the UK tertiary opera programs in London, the administration turned me down. They thought it would be inappropriate for me to watch their opera students in rehearsal as “some of them may become famous” and it was the school’s responsibility to protect the confidentiality of their future stars. 3 Why the secrecy? Because the magic of the performance is being laboriously, painstakingly created in the rehearsal. It is in the rehearsal that the performers learn their craft through failure, crisis and triumph and therefore asking to be admitted, to observe, to analyse and present the findings, is an equivalent of asking a magician to reveal his secrets, write them down and divulge them to the world. For this reason a field researcher such as myself is always aware of the privilege and the generosity of those who break the tradition of secrecy and open their doors. As observers we use and manipulate experiences of others to create our work. To that end Kirsten Hastrup views ethnography as an act of “symbolic violence”:

The drama of fieldwork, as played out on the stage established between ethnographer and informant 4, implies a degree of violence on the ethnographer’s part. Because any scientific discourse must make claims to speak over and above the acts observed or heard [...] there is an inherent hierarchy in the relationship between the interlocutors. To deny this is also to remain insensitive to the violence inherent in fieldwork. Both parties are engaged in a joint creation of selfness and otherness, but the apparent symmetry at the level of dialogue is subsumed by a complicated asymmetry: the ethnographic project systematically violates the other’s project [...] while perhaps enshrined in mutual friendship and even affection, the ethnographic dialogue is twisted by the fact that the ethnographer’s questions are unsolicited, and that they will of

2 Quoted in (Cole, 1992).
3 It has been explained to the school that all participation in the study was confidential, still my reassurances failed to convince the administration. On the other hand, the school where I ended up doing my project declared that they were very proud of their opera program and “had nothing to hide”.
4 “Informant” is an out-dated term for “participant”, meaning someone we are observing. Although Hastrup does not attempt to do so in any way, today the old terminology seems somewhat disrespectful and condescending.
necessity shape the answers. The ethnographic material is doubly mediated by our own presence and the informant’s response to that (Hastrup, 1992, p. 122-123).

Thirdly, there is something imposing and intimidating about the opera genre itself. The so-called Gesamtkunstwerk (complete work of art) is awesome and overwhelming. It may be a lot easier to imagine oneself researching a group of high school children or a rock band, rather than a production of Aida. The amount of money and talent involved in creating an opera production is unparalleled in the performing arts. It is the epitome of high culture and artistic achievement. Opera tests the limits of human capability in vocal production, dramatic interpretation, orchestral sound and not to mention - musical composition. As an art form it aims so high, it is bound to alienate. In his ethnography of Welsh National Opera Paul Atkinson reflects:

Despite the fact that sociology has experienced a remarkable surge in interest in culture [...] Popular culture has received much more extensive and systematic attention than so-called serious or high culture [...] This inverse snobbery is [...] a reflection of a wider sociological culture that treats the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia as negative reference points rather than subjects for empathetic research (Atkinson, 2006, p. 40).

There may be other reasons for a relative lack of interest in opera training, rehearsal and performance, but whatever they are, the time has come to rectify the dearth. As Atkinson points out, even sociological writings about opera like The Sociology of Opera by Martorella are not derived from any first-hand knowledge and “pay very little attention to the everyday realities and social interactions.” He writes further: “In reading about opera and its analysis by many cultural commentators, one is struck by the absence of two things: music and performance” (Atkinson, 2006, p. 33).

In fact, all researchers investigating any aspect of operatic training and performance discuss the

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5 It is for this reason that so many ethnographers advocate quoting the participants as much as possible in order to give them a prevailing voice, particularly in an instance when no question was asked at all, e.g. an overheard comment or interaction.

6 Although it is true that initially in a rehearsal the behaviour of the participants may be altered due to the presence of an outsider such as the ethnographer, they quickly get used to it and “forget” that he/she is there. Even more so in an opera rehearsal, where large numbers of people are involved in the process - one can argue that most of the time presence of the ethnographer has virtually no effect. In my experience of observing the opera rehearsals, many times the participants did not even realise that I was an outsider – instead they usually thought that I was one of the personnel or an understudy.

7 Term created by Richard Wagner to describe his ideal process of creating an opera through unification of three sister arts: music, dance and poetry (Barry, 2014).

8 (Martorella, 1982).
lack of available field research on singers or research that is concerned with holistic view of the operatic training and profession. In her qualitative study on collegiate-level opera programs in the US⁹ Carleen Graham writes: “The documentation on pedagogical aspects of collegiate opera training programs is extremely limited” (Graham, 2009, p. 27), and in her mixed-methods study on voice, soma and psyche, Maria Sandgren remarks that “very little research attention has been paid to opera singers” (Sandgren, 2002, p. 11).

**Ethnography as process of participant observation**

Atkinson speaks of the importance of observing the day-to-day opera rehearsal process in order to really understand what is going on. He emphasises the physicality of singing, gesture and movement: “The performance is therefore an intensely physical experience for performers […] To see and hear a performer “in the flesh” is to share in the physicality of the enactment” (2006, p. 56).

Hence we don’t just observe the rehearsal - we experience, embody and participate. This is something that is impossible to achieve outside the fieldwork setting. Ethnography has been increasingly employed by researchers as a valuable tool in investigating the rehearsal process in live theatre, dance or any other genre that requires a process of preparation/development or “rehearsal” (Maxwell, 2001; McAuley, 2008). Ethnographic methodology with its use of a fieldwork approach can help us observe and experience the world of the rehearsal (Rossmanith, 2009) that is ordinarily hidden from the uninitiated public (Cole, 1992). In her 1998 article Gay McAuley also propagates the “ethnographic model of participant observation” (McAuley, 1998). She argues that “participant observation” borrowed from ethnography is an invaluable tool that allows researchers to be immersed in the process of rehearsal and facilitates a deep, intimate understanding of how the participants went about achieving their goals (Conquergood, 1985)¹⁰.

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⁹ This is the only field study of opera training that I am aware of.
¹⁰ Like Atkinson, Conquergood speaks about the “embodied experience” of conducting participant observation. He argues that the researcher cannot be a detached observer, on the contrary he/she hears, sees, smells, feels and embodies what is going on in a very sensuous way.
Limitations of ethnography

McAuley discusses several inherent problems with leading a field investigation. Some of the challenges include: editing of acquired data, researcher’s level of familiarity and involvement with the genre\(^\text{11}\), and complexity of presenting video and written accounts to various types of audiences. The problem with editing ethnographic data such as observations and interviews stems firstly from the sheer amount of data generated and secondly because it is up to the ethnographer to see what gets left out. In my own work NVivo software was used for coding all the data, which created a more reliable editing tool, ensuring it was easier for all the emergent themes to receive an equal amount of attention. My familiarity with the genre, while enabling easier access to the field on the one hand, also created its own biases. As far as presenting my findings to different types of audience, it certainly created challenges and affected the content of conference papers dealing with this data on a number of occasions.

Clifford maintains that any culture is a semiotic web that cannot be analysed in terms of universal laws, but rather should be understood through the search for a meaning (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). In his view all ethnographies are fictions or “partial truths”. The goal is to be as meticulous and observant as possible through employing “thick description”\(^\text{12}\) analysis of what is being observed. In the world of performing arts, however, partial truths can tell us much more than detached generalisations. Opera does not get created in a controlled laboratory environment. In order to study it we need to be in the rehearsal room, at the audition, at the opera agency, or at a private coaching. We need to record in detail what and how everything transpired to the extent that the reader can also experience an equivalent of our participant observation.

Ian Maxwell further investigates the idea of partial truths. He draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “critical reflexivity” (Maxwell, 2001) to draw attention to inescapable personal biases.

\(^{11}\) McAuley and others like Clifford (1986) and Geertz (1973) argue that there is no such thing as a neutral, objective point of view and every observation is always an interpretation. This interpretation is largely affected by how much of the “insider” or part of the researched culture the researcher actually is. The level of “outsideness” and “insideness” is not a fixed concept and can change depending on a situation.

\(^{12}\) “Thick description” is a term coined by Geertz (1973). It refers to describing observed occurrences in detailed terms that explain not only what appears to be happening on the surface, but also what various implications and subtexts are at play: “setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found”
biases of ethnographers: their social status, academic position in the field and intellectual bias.\textsuperscript{13} The data analyses or “truths” will therefore be further skewed by the researcher’s personal biases and it is his/her responsibility to acknowledge and reveal those to the reader, e.g. be self-reflexive: subject themselves to the same amount of scrutiny as the subjects they observe.\textsuperscript{14}

The postmodern concept of a responsible researcher\textsuperscript{15}, aware of his/her biases and limitations in the field, led the new generation of theorists like Geertz, Clifford and Hestrup to advocate the use of personal pronoun “I” in their accounts. The use of “I” makes it easier for the author to remain accountable for any biased opinions, misinterpretations or possible mistakes. In the effort to minimise the ethnographer’s overwhelming presence in the account, Clifford also advocates giving the subjects as much voice as possible; he calls it “polyvocality”: using direct quotations, letting the participants speak for themselves. All theorists cited above advocate a new “humble” ethnographer. In order to better recreate the ethnographer’s experience in the field, they also celebrate a style of writing that is personal, poetic and evocative. There is, however, no consensus on what tense should be used: past (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), or ethnographic present (Atkinson, 2006; Okely & Callaway, 1992).

Accounts uninformed by ethnography, while interesting and helpful in their own way, invariably become self-absorbed or wrapped up in personal agenda. A good example is Selbourne’s account of Peter Brook’s influential production of the Midsummer Night’s Dream (Selbourne, 1982). Selbourne’s strong negative feelings towards Brook’s methods and the production concept at the time were such that he felt it necessary to address them in his introduction:

I have also lost some of the arrogant political dogmatism which led me, in the weeks and months following the rehearsals, bitterly to reject their validity almost entirely: it was a privileged theatre for the privileged, the work of an autocrat with exploited actors, a pseudo-intellectual form of show-biz, and so on (Selbourne, 1982, p. xxxi).

\textsuperscript{13} Intellectual bias is academic tendency to fit the observed experience into a known framework, therefore limiting or even distorting possible data interpretation.

\textsuperscript{14} See “About the researcher” for the full description of my biases.

\textsuperscript{15} A traditional anthropological account would be written in an impersonal style (no “I” used), advocating the interpretation as the absolute truth with pretentions to objective writing. The new generation of ethnographers suggest that an objective account of anything is not only impossible, but also undesirable, since it seeks to generalise and strip what we observe of all its’ detail and nuance.
Lack of holistic approach to opera training research

Another benefit of field research is that it is able to provide a good perspective of the whole. While there is a large body of recent literature covering separate aspects of operatic training like diction (De’Ath, 2002, 2003, 2006; Goodman, Scatton, & Ernest, 1978; Jensen, 2003), vocal studio pedagogy (Barnes, 2009; Hollien, 1993; Mackie, 2004; Midgette, 2004; Miller, 1996; Robinson, 2001; Salaman, 1999; White, 2007; Williams, 2000), voice science (Barnes-Burroughs, Lan, Edwards, & Archambeault, 2008; Callaghan, 1998a; Fink, 2006; Sapis, 1993) as well as stagecraft and role preparation (Brennan, 2005; Lewis, 2000; Ware, 2001), there is a lack of literature attempting to look at the profession as a whole or literature that investigates the institutions aiming to synthesise all of the above areas into a comprehensive tertiary program. In her study with undergraduate singers Latukefu also remarks on the research into singing that tends to be far too detached from the overall process, to the point where singers are conveniently dehumanised and are classed together with musical instruments:

A lot of research in vocal pedagogy is scientific and quantitative with a tendency to focus on singing as a biochemical process. Other music education research has focused on instrumentalists or has included singers as a category of instrument (Latukefu, 2007, p. 10).

Firstly, although it is important to know what happens biochemically during singing, it does not necessarily help in learning how to be a singer. Just knowing how a bicycle works, does not make one capable of riding it. In fact, thinking about various muscle groups operating the pedals, maintaining the centre of gravity, the construction of the bike, etc. is far too much unnecessary information for someone learning how to ride, it will distract and hamper the process. In singing so many muscle groups are operating together (most of which cannot be directly controlled) that thinking about the biology can distract, confuse or even create vocal tension in the singer. That is why voice teachers use a lot of metaphorical language in their teaching. As Burwell discovered in his investigation on the difference between approaches to vocal and instrumental teaching:

The singer is her own instrument; the instrument is human, and therefore more sensitive and vulnerable than others, to change; the instrument’s mechanical apparatus is largely hidden from view; and the art of singing typically involves, in addition to musical and technical issues, a poetic or dramatic text which must be understood, internalised and

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16 See discussion on page 55.
communicated. These unique traits would seem to make a metaphorical vocabulary indispensable to teachers and students (Burwell, 2006, p. 345).

Secondly, as Burwell and others also point out - expression, characterisation, movement, tone colour, use of language, face and gesture are all inseparable from the process of vocal production and separating them into discrete elements is not really viewing the entire process.

Thirdly, the research described above is often conducted by scientists with little knowledge of singing. In her evaluation of voice teaching in the tertiary Australian institutions, Callaghan writes:

> The usefulness of some scientific research is limited by poor experimental design, often due to researchers’ ignorance about singing. Thus researchers sometimes fail to distinguish between professional and non-professional singers, fail to take into account the different singing training of participant singers, and fail to identify the effects of different vocal strategies on the sound produced (Callaghan, 1998b, p. 15).

Therefore it is fair to conclude that research into the singing profession would greatly benefit from being conducted by a researcher who is also a member of that profession. Although looking at separate elements can be neat and convenient, in the end such research often results in nothing more than superfluous curiosity, adding little to our understanding of what it takes to be a professional singer.

**Singer, tailor, dancer, spy**

It is increasingly recognized by researchers that an opera singer is a unique animal (Brennan, 2005; Graham, 2009). He or she is an instrumentalist only in a sense that his/her voice is used to produce pitches of sound in a highly artistic, musical fashion. However, no other instrument combines their sound with text (often in a foreign language), acting, dance, costume, make-up, sword fighting and increasingly – acrobatic skills. The list can go on. As Haigh put it in his essay:

> For the same reason that many deem opera the greatest of art forms – combining the disciplines of music, singing, conducting, acting and stagecraft – it will always be among the most expensive (Haigh, 2008, p. 20).

Considering the above, one can imagine that creating a tertiary program that would nurture so many complex skills would be extremely challenging and as Haigh put it: “most expensive”. In
his famous on the art of singing, Richard Miller highlights musicianship, vocal technique, artistic imagination, objectivity, perseverance, talent and business acumen as the seven pillars of performance success (Miller, 1996). Robert White found that solid vocal technique, great acting skills, versatility, ability to cope with failure and ability to take risks were essential in preparation for a career in opera (White, 2007). The autobiography of arguably the most successful soprano of her generation, Renee Fleming, distinguishes natural talent, hard work, tenacity, resilience and luck (Fleming, 2004). Sheila Lewis’s interdisciplinary survey-based thesis on role preparation describes opera as being unique among the performing arts in terms of the specific demands required of the performer […] the actual study process may be viewed in terms of four interdependent levels: dramatic, linguistic, musical and vocal (Lewis, 2000, p. 50).

Lotte Latukefu identifies singing as being an interdependent and organically changing synthesis of biochemical vocal skills, musical skills, movement skills, character and text analysis and performance ability. As singing teachers we need to add educational psychology and philosophy (Latukefu, 2007, p. 10).

Coming back to Graham’s research on collegiate-level opera programs we find that she identified two sets of skills that make an opera singer. They are extrinsic skills: vocal technique, musicianship, acting & movement and language fluency as well as intrinsic skills: personal development, professional development, education & mental ability and motivation. She also discovered that while the college curriculum focused on the extrinsic skills, interviewed staff and students identified the importance of having both sets of skills and viewed success in the profession as blend of the two:

Faculty participants (key informants, voice teachers and related faculty) were aware that desired skills required a significant amount of time to cultivate, which may not always occur within the designated program-of-study time frame (2009, p. 234).

**Singers are late bloomers**

Most will agree that a serious pursuit of any discipline should be a life-long study and no university curriculum is responsible for addressing every single skill that an individual may require in their future profession. Unfortunately for the opera programs, not only do they try to address the vast array of skills required for the profession, they are also dealing with students who often have very little prior training. While the instrumentalists enter university programs...
having received over ten years of intense formal training on their instrument, singers would often commence their degree having completed only a couple of years of private voice lessons. During puberty (between the ages of 10 and 15) vocal training can be very frustrating and challenging, particularly for males whose voices “break”, sometimes forcing them to stop singing all together. Both genders, however, experience major vocal, physical and psychological changes. In the chapter on developing young voices, Davis summarises puberty affects on young male and female singers:

Both will lose high notes first and may experience thinning of sound, breathiness (which may continue a long while for girls), huskiness, and general inconsistency of tone […] They are both coping with an identity crisis caused by their changing bodies and changing social roles (Davis, 1998, p. 35).

Besides the woes of puberty, some singers may not even be aware of their operatic potential until they reach their early twenties\(^{17}\) and even then it takes on average another decade for their voices to reach full maturity.\(^{18}\)

It then follows that many singers enter tertiary opera programs years behind instrumentalists in technical ability and musicianship (Graham, 2009; Latukefu, 2007; Miller, 1996). Nevertheless, after only three years in the opera school they are expected to graduate having attained a similar standard of musicianship and performance when compared with the instrumentalists as well as acquire the vast array of skills required for the operatic profession.

Voice students, therefore, must be made aware of the physical and psychological aspects involved in their progress. Voice teachers must discuss the long-term (five to ten years) vocal development period, focusing on slow, careful progress, rather than the competitive “prodigy” stereotype, more appropriate for the instrumentalists. In many cases launching into a vocal music degree straight out of high-school (at the age of 17 or 18) could be counterproductive and the students could be better advised to complete an initial degree in languages, drama or education (or anything else) in order to allow their voices time for sufficient vocal development. A later start (early twenties) will also allow the students to take full advantage of their tertiary vocal training, instead of wasting time feeling frustrated by developmental issues. Although most opera courses have a minimum start age of 21, even this can sometimes be too early for some singers.\(^{19}\)

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\(^{17}\) This was the case with 5 out of 15 singers I have interviewed, all five were males.  
\(^{18}\) See discussion on voice types.  
\(^{19}\) See discussion on voice types.
**Teaching opera in the space-age**

Another issue raised by some scientists and voice pedagogues is the conservative nature of the voice teaching profession and the resistance to employ new technology in the vocal training. In a 2008 survey of attitudes towards voice studio teaching technology in the US, the statistical analysis of survey data showed that the attitude could not be measured because more than 80% of voice teachers reported “no experience” with the technology types specified (Barnes-Burroughs et al., 2008). The researchers also note that “the integration of computer-based technology into the traditional classical singing studio can be a daunting task for many teachers.” (Barnes-Burroughs et al., 2008, p. 591) On the other hand, Graham argues that: “There are many who claim that voice science research has done little to aid the art of pedagogy, and that it cannot be used as a substitute for effective teaching” (2009, p. 26).

Richard Miller argues against the conservative, resistant to innovation voice teacher stereotype, and proposes that it is not historically supported:

> What should a responsible voice teacher be teaching in a scientific age […] is not appreciably different from what responsible voice teachers have been doing for several centuries, most of which have been replete with teachers who considered themselves enlightened and scientific (Miller, 1996, p. 85).

Miller then lists some examples of eminent voice teachers of the 18th century and their studies of the breathing apparatus (Jean-Baptist Berard), resonator tract (Mancini) and larynx (Manuel Garcia - inventor of the laryngeal mirror). He does discuss, however, the other type of vocal pedagogy wrapped in “Mysteries and Miracle”, the vocal teaching that claims to have secret solutions to technical problems. Miller condemns such style as conservative, maintaining one’s own superiority and disengaged from the profession. Other researchers are concerned that too many opera singers go on to teach singing without any proper training:

> How many teachers, including the most prominent, have completed structured courses on acoustics, physiology, psychology, neurophysiology, voice disorders, and educational techniques as a regular part of their university or conservatory training? Indeed, when a number of training programs were assessed (H. Hollien and B. Dobelle, unpublished manuscript), it was found that focus was almost exclusively on the training of performers (Hollien, 1993, p. 203).
Graham, however, underlines the benefits of learning from someone with the stage experience. In her view this phenomenon has lifted the standards of vocal teaching and vocal teaching research in the US, leaving European countries, where opera singers rarely teach, behind (Graham, 2009).

There is one constant in all this – the tremendous influence of the voice teacher and the importance of the teacher-student relationship (Atkinson, Watermeyer, & Delamont, 2012; Barnes, 2009; Graham, 2009; Hollien, 1993; Midgette, 2004). Professional opera singers also remark on the importance of mentoring in their careers and in their personal and artistic development (Fleming, 2004; Weaver, 2008). It is therefore important to reiterate that teacher-student discussion about vocal development, further study and career opportunities should take place early on. The voice students often look no further than the advice of their voice teacher. The voice teachers therefore should understand and own the huge responsibility of influencing and largely shaping their students’ artistic future.

I've graduated, what now?

This is a question that not only young singers, but most young musicians ask themselves. The struggling artist may be an old, romanticised concept, but the issue still stands today and will undoubtedly continue to challenge our society. In Australia there is only one national opera company that employs full-time singers, which means those few existing positions are already taken. Overseas, many opera houses have been closing down, partly due to the global financial crisis. In a recent interview, artistic director of Opera Australia, Lyndon Terracini, reflected:

> There are only three opera houses left that can pay singers in Italy. All the others are finished. All over the world there is a major crisis in classical music really, in orchestras and opera companies […] The reality is that opera companies all over the world are closing virtually by the day... (Neill, 2014, p. 3).

The sentiment is confirmed by Peter Gelb, general manager of one of the biggest opera houses in the world – the Metropolitan, New York. According to Gelb:

> Grand opera is dying along with its increasingly ancient audience […] The renowned 3,800-seat opera house is fighting a losing battle on many fronts, and could face bankruptcy within three years, he says – and the crisis he sees in his own company
could be a warning to many other opera houses (Service & Kennedy, 2014, p. 1).

The gloom and doom prognosis was completely rejected, however, by Alex Beard – chief executive of the Royal Opera House, London:

I don't want to get into a slagging match with the Met, but that is just so far from our experience. Opera is on a roll. As long as love, death, longing and despair are part of the life experience, and people want to hear great stories told through music, opera has a vibrant future[…]

Beard says productions are selling out, with shows in the cinema season often selling fastest (Service & Kennedy, 2014, p. 2).

Beard also commented on the changing composition of the audience, which in fact is getting younger. Whatever the prognosis, it has never been easy to build a career in performing arts. Bridging the gap between studies and work, or breaking into the market can be a very difficult transition for young opera singers. In her book on Bel Canto technique Salaman describes the so-called “bottle-neck”:

Singing students who do well understandably become very competitive, almost hurtling forward to get quick results and to get noticed as fast as possible […] there is, sadly, little outlet for the results (Salaman, 1999, p. 36).

The literature and my own personal experience indicate that amount of opera employment opportunities in other developed countries follows the bottle-neck trend. Salaman was describing the situation in the UK.

In our ageist society with the explosion of the singing reality contests and fairy-tale stories of instant success, vocal prodigies are celebrated. The success, however, is often short lived due to the natural physiognomy and development of the vocal instrument earlier discussed. While lifestyle is moving at a frighteningly fast pace – human anatomy remains as it was in the slow age of Bel Canto. Voices need time to grow and develop. Solid vocal technique needs time, and the bigger the voice, the more time it requires (Koehler, 2004). In the golden age of Bel Canto, and even up to the 1930s and 1940s, a student would live in his or her teacher’s home as an apprentice (Callaghan, 1998a). There would be a vocal lesson every day as well as observation of lessons of the other pupils. There was no deadline of 3 to 4 years to complete the training.

Bel Canto meaning “beautiful singing” is a traditional method of classical vocal technique that developed in Italy in the 17th-18th century. The style reached its pinnacle in operas of Bellini and Donizetti.

See discussion on voice types.
Every student progressed at their own pace allowing the voice to develop naturally in its own time. While sharing a house with their master, the students also received an insight into the business side of the profession (Mackie, 2004).

Stress resulting from the competition can pressure opera students to progress as quickly as possible. This, combined with their underdeveloped vocal and musicianship skills, can in turn result in depression and vocal injury. In his 1993 survey for the *Journal of Voice*, Sapir has uncovered some alarming statistics of vocal attrition:

> Of the 74 students (94%) completing the questionnaire, 10 (13%) were free of symptoms, 19 (26%) had few (one or two), and 45 (61%) had multiple (three or more) symptoms. Thirty-five students (47%) had sought medical help for voice problems since they began their singing career. Students with multiple symptoms were significantly more likely to (a) be bothered, frustrated, worried, depressed, or anxious about their voice; (b) quit performance, forgo audition, limit their repertoire, or quit singing altogether” (Sapir, 1993, p. 69).

The wide range of skills required for becoming an opera singer, associated high costs and the short time-frame of the opera programs aimed to develop the skills, is discussed by all current researchers, opera professionals and voice pedagogues. There is also a recognised lack of healthy dialogue between academia and the opera industry. Academia is faced with great curriculum challenges, while the profession is often of the opinion that training provided is inadequate (Graham, 2009). In a time when professional jobs are scarce, opera programs are also struggling to provide performance opportunities for their students. It is quite possible for many opera students to complete their entire training without having sung a single role on the stage (Graham, 2009). This would be another object of discussion taking place between the student and the voice teacher. Both teacher and student should conduct adequate research of an intended opera program in order to ascertain the performance opportunities on offer. If the opportunities are very limited, the student may be better off doing a couple of years of community theatre or some casual opera chorus work, where they would learn much more from being on the stage and singing with the orchestra than from sitting in a classroom or occasionally performing solos with a pianist.  

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22 See Jonathan’s interview p. 77.
Opera outreach programs

A rather recent trend in opera educational outreach programs such as Oz Opera has become very popular with opera companies here and in the US (Jurisevic, 1999). It seems to kill many birds with one stone: publicizing opera in the community, developing future audiences, creating more opera jobs and creating training and performance opportunities for young singers. Graham, however, warns against outreach programs that “focus primarily on education outreach and actually provide little advanced training or singing experience in full productions with orchestra” (Graham, 2009, p. 5). S. Harrison’s qualitative thesis on opera outreach programs used survey and interview data to argue that

The development of opera education in Australia is in its infancy […] Funding was found to be the major problem in presenting opera education. Relevance and accessibility were also significant issues (Harrison, 1995, p. 1).

Unfortunately, nothing more current was found to support or contradict the arguments. This again underlined the overall lack of current research into the opera education in Australia, particularly at a tertiary level.

Graham suggests that always trying to please the industry is not necessarily the answer and that it is up to the institutions to effect change, to influence and to inspire:

Rather than training to feed the needs of the profession, perhaps academic institutions might focus on developing curriculums where new ideas are generated that can also influence the way in which opera is created, interpreted and perpetuated in the future (2009, p. 42).

Graham describes the historical importance of the collegiate opera programs and workshop style productions, particularly their influence on the American operatic scene after WWII. The primary function of these productions was creation of new work. The movement gave birth to high quality collegiate repertoire still staged today. These examples include Menotti’s The Old Maid and the Thief, The Medium, The Telephone, Amahl and the Night Visitors, Carlisle Floyd’s Susannah, Aaron Copland’s The Tenderland, Bernstein’s Trouble in Tahiti, and Candide, just to name a few (Graham, 2009).
Although outside the scope of this study, judging from the American experience, greater involvement of Australian operatic composers in the local tertiary opera programs is something that could be investigated further.

**What do we know so far?**

While many writers acknowledge great challenges faced by the opera programs in order to provide adequate training for their students, at the same time there has been very little field research into opera training and performance, resulting in a complete lack of a holistic view. A three-year course\(^{23}\) does not provide the students with enough time to master vocal technique, languages, acting and movement, ensemble, performance, as well as basic music skills required for the profession. Due to high costs associated with opera productions, the programs also struggle to provide performance opportunities for their students. Since vocal training is often commenced in the late teens, voice students are sometimes years behind their instrumentalist counterparts in their technical and musical ability. Competitiveness, pressures of the academic program and limited performance and employment opportunities can drive students to rush into repertoire they are not prepared to handle. These factors may be responsible for the high rate of vocal attrition.\(^{24}\) There is a perceived lack of dialogue between academia and the operatic profession, as well as between voice scientists and vocal pedagogues. In view of the above, I propose that both current opera training and industry could greatly benefit from a fresh, holistic perspective that could be better gained through ethnographic field research.

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\(^{23}\) The number of years varies between 2 and 3, depending on courses and institutions

\(^{24}\) Young Artist programs within professional opera companies are also very important training grounds for opera singers commencing their careers, however no literature exists on the topic at this time. See the discussion on Professional Artist Development, p. 71.
Access shapes the study

“I don't like the opera. What are they singing for? Who sings? You got something to say, say it.”

Since they were the only comprehensive opera field studies known to me, I have decided that I would loosely base my project on work of Atkinson with Welsh National Opera and Graham with US opera schools. However, I thought it would also be interesting to conduct the research in both a professional company and a school, and then try to draw a comparison.

I then started approaching the school and the company of choice. Being an “insider” of the opera industry proved very useful. Gatekeepers in both settings already knew me through my professional singing work and so a letter with the university letterhead and my supervisor’s details was enough in both cases to officially secure the access and to receive approval from the Sydney University ethics committee. Of course, “official” access did not facilitate the actual access. In writing about access Atkinson and Hammersley note:

> It is often at its most acute in initial negotiations to enter a setting and during the “first days in the field”; but the problem, and the issues associated with it, persist, to one degree or another, throughout the data collection process. (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007, p. 45).

While the head of the opera school gave me permission to conduct the research, I still had to get the permission from the staff in charge of the school opera productions. This was gained through emailing the opera coordinator - Richard. Richard was a little apprehensive and protective in wanting to know all the exact dates and times I would be attending the rehearsals, which I of course promptly provided. The email was forwarded to the conductor and other gatekeepers with myself copied into the correspondence. A little more resistance and apprehension followed, but very soon the access was granted:

> I have received an email from the opera coordinator Richard saying I would have to “report” to whoever was running the rehearsal. As I walked into the hall some singers were already there, also some observers, like the assistant conductor who immediately started chatting to me about a vocal competition. While talking to her I was conscious of more people entering the hall, I then mentioned that I should sit down and start observing. Suddenly a buzz, commotion - music staff and 17 singers about to start

\(^{25}\) (Seinfeld, 1992)  
\(^{26}\) All the names in the study are pseudonyms
rehearsing. I said good evening to the entering Richard, but noticed that no one cared about my “reporting” - they were too busy. I went to take my seat, reflecting on how initially Richard was uptight and protective. He was trying to create boundaries for me in order to feel he could exert control over my movements with the reporting and the schedule of observation dates. It probably made him feel more “safe” at the time, but in reality I knew that now Richard himself would be very annoyed if I went to “report” to the conductor who was trying to start this rehearsal. The last thing they wanted was an unwelcome distraction.

After this minimal initial resistance things progressed quite smoothly in the opera school. Nobody questioned my presence or tried to limit my access. The only problem remaining was trying to secure interviews with busy staff and students.

Things went a little differently with the professional opera company. Everything really progressed when the resident director took a keen interest in the study and became its champion. He thought it was very “interesting” and “important” and made sure that I could access the rehearsals. With the resident director backing the project, it suddenly became much easier to see the production rehearsals as well as recruit participants for the interviews. It was a stroke of luck that proved crucial, because until the director responded, even with the official OK from the company management, nobody involved in the productions returned my emails and so I still could not observe anything or interview anyone. When I mentioned to my champion director that I had trouble recruiting singers for the interviews, he took it upon himself to forward my emails to the singers personally. It worked like a charm and suddenly I had more than enough willing participants. He even made recommendations on which rehearsals I should go to: “you should see the one tomorrow”. Still the occasional apprehension was always there:

Then the assistant director arrived. He greeted me and got me set up on the stage. He was uncomfortable with me audio recording the rehearsal or even taking notes using my laptop: “It would be better if you used pen and paper”. Although he tried to be friendly and asked about my research, he was visibly tense and not all together comfortable

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27 Observation: 30.07.12 Orpheus in the Underworld
28 Artistic staff in the opera company can be divided into “resident” and “guest”. The company continually employs its resident artists, e.g. directors, singers, conductors, repetiteurs. Guest stars are hired on contracts for a short period such as staging of a single production.
29 It should be clarified that the resident director did not direct the productions I ended up observing and he had to clear my presence with the directors and assistant directors in charge of those productions. The whole procedure really highlighted the fluid complexity of an opera company hierarchy.
with my presence. He ended our brief interaction with: “we have a very busy day today”.

Gaining access in the UK was a long and frustrating process, which lasted approximately one and a half years. Initially the study was going to be limited to Australia, but half way through my candidature I found out about the opportunity to go on an international exchange. I started emailing US and UK institutions that had exchange agreements with Sydney University. In order to secure the exchange I had to gain permission to conduct field research in one of the universities running an opera program. The schools in the US were completely uninterested to the point where I received no response at all. In the UK they were either unwilling to open doors to an observer, or unable to “provide adequate supervision” because their faculty did limited research and was primarily involved in undergraduate performance. Eventually the vocal department of one music school in the UK showed interest. After a few months of negotiations between my home university and the music school, as well as getting new approvals from the ethics committees in both, the exchange was finally given a go ahead. On my arrival at the school, however, I had absolutely no problems with access. Everyone was surprisingly welcoming and supportive. They seemed rather proud of their vocal department and more than willing to “show off” their work:

A lot of people come here and say: the students are really nice, really, really nice. Maybe that’s the environment that Isobel creates as well, and I and Paul and Peter – we try and be really nice with them at all times and we encourage them to be nice. So it’s a nice environment, the staff are amazing, the students are super as well…

Thus, in a way the study was in part dictated by where and when I could gain and maintain the access. In retrospect, I feel that I was very fortunate to gain the support of key gatekeepers in all three settings. Without such champions field studies are practically impossible (Bryman, 2012, p. 58). A bonus of the six-month international exchange in UK meant that in addition to my comparison of the university and the professional company in Australia, I could now also present the international perspective.

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30 Observation: 10.02.12 Cosi fan tutte.
31 Head of vocal studies.
32 Head of opera.
33 Head repetiteur.
34 Interview: 19.09.13, Deputy Head of School of Vocal Studies and Opera, UK.
35 Due to outstanding cooperation of the UK school I was able to complete gathering my data in four months.
Investigation design

Sampling

Four main sources provided data gathered in the settings:

- Semi-structured on-site interviews
- Observations of opera production rehearsals
- Observations of private voice lessons
- Paper and web artefacts

In selecting interview participants and choosing observations I employed stratified purposeful sampling (Burns, 2000; Coyne, 1997). All interviews lasted a minimum of 30 minutes. If the participants felt like talking longer, they were not stopped; hence some interviews ran for over an hour. The private lessons usually ran for an hour and production rehearsals usually ran all day with a break for lunch in the afternoon. In both universities (Australia and UK) samples were designed as follows:

Teaching staff sample:

- At least one head of school or production department
- At least one voice lecturer
- At least one language coach
- At least one conductor or repetiteur

Student sample:

At least three final year students representing different voice types

Observation sample:

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36 With movement in the later part of the 20th century to perform all operas in their original languages, today opera singers will often be performing a language that is foreign to them. Some of the main operatic languages are English, French, Italian, German, Russian and Czech. Hence language coaches have become increasingly important in the opera rehearsal. They usually have a background in linguistics and music and can also be native speakers of the language used for a particular production. Language coaches are hired to help singers to get closer to the native diction and interpretation.

37 Repetiteur is a specific term used for opera pianists. Repetiteurs have a wide-ranging function that can include: playing vocal score in piano rehearsals, coaching the singers privately, assisting conductors, playing for auditions and the list continues. According to Atkinson the repetiteur is “a key member of any operatic company” (Atkinson, 2006).

38 E.g. soprano, mezzo-soprano, baritone, bass.
- Observation of at least three opera production rehearsals
- Observation of at least one private voice/language/repetiteur lesson

For the professional opera company the sample was designed as follows:

Singer sample:

- At least two soloists representing different voice types
- At least two chorus members representing different voice types

Non-singer sample:

- At least one conductor
- At least one repetiteur
- At least one language coach
- At least one director

Observation sample:

- Observation of at least three production rehearsals
- Observation of at least one private repetiteur/language coaching

The above samples were designed to give a fair cross section of participants involved in opera production. Thankfully, out in the field I managed to get very close to the original design.
Confidentiality

In order to protect the privacy of the participants, all names and places are confidential. Confidentiality is often employed in field research, since it not only protects privacy of the contributors, but also facilitates greater sincerity in the interviews and generally lower levels of apprehension (Bryman, 2012). Graham uses pseudonyms in her account; Atkinson, however, states that it is impossible to write about opera anonymously and names all the participants in his ethnography. In my case I strongly felt that unless confidentiality was guaranteed, access would be very difficult, if not impossible. I remembered Atkinson’s remark on a number of occasions though, since the opera industry, like any other artistic environment can suddenly get very “small” and sensitive, making confidentiality a challenge. Several singers were very protective of their privacy with one requesting not to reveal even his voice type (it has been altered) in case it would lead someone to guess who he was. A student in Australia decided not to participate as she felt that participating could hurt her chances in having a career! The level of apprehension was understandable in the highly subjective industry where so much depends on the image, or how one is perceived by fans, management, etc. Even with the confidentiality clause clearly stated on the consent forms, I had to spend time reassuring many of the participants that my interest was in the making of an opera production, not the politics. Still, in their interviews, when the participants felt that they were being too candid, many used phrases like “this is off the record”. In all those cases the interview parts were not transcribed or used in the study. There is certainly a level of paranoia in the opera community. People were extremely sensitive and one learnt to tread lightly to the extent that it almost felt like covert work. In her essay on writing ethnography Hastrup discusses the phenomenon:

A further complication is the general feeling that there is something altogether corrupting about being “there” (Hastrup, 1992, p. 124).

To that end I was even more grateful to those who chose to participate in my research, regardless of their misgivings.

Here I would again direct my attention to the aspiring students and their voice teachers in the hope that the business side of the opera business can also be discussed. For instance: learning not to gossip about other singers or anyone involved in the production. Bad, clumsy remarks can damage relationships or even careers. Learning to be nice to everyone you work with is a
habit that should be entrenched early on. The hiring practices of the business will always favour those who are friendly, supportive and generally easy to work with.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{39} See discussions on supportive, nurturing environment: p. 62.
Data collection methods

I audio recorded nearly all the interviews using either Zoom recorder or the Garage Band application on my MacBook Pro. I later transcribed all the interviews. One interview of the company chorus member was an email reply to my open questions because he couldn’t find any time to meet me face to face. Chorus members in general had extremely busy schedules and were the hardest to recruit. Field notes and observations were typed in Microsoft Word on MacBook Pro, except for the time when I was only allowed to use pen and paper and typed it up afterwards. I also used Internet and document material to clarify some information and add facts to my field notes, interviews and observations.

Data analysis

I employed the Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) concept to analyse what I have experienced in the field. I used NVivo10 to help me code all data into themes and categories which then shaped my ethnography. See figure 1, p. 24, which illustrates the layered approach to data analysis using NVivo10.

![Data analysis diagram]

Figure 1: Data analysis

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40 Transcription by far was the most arduous leg of the project. It took many hours but it definitely made me very familiar with my data.
Time frame

My candidature lasted roughly four years. Obtaining access and receiving the university ethics approval for the Australian leg took up nearly an entire semester of 2011. The process was made more difficult by my trying to manage it from overseas where I was singing at the time. 2012 and 2013 was spent gathering interview and observation data in Australia. It was at the start of 2012 that I also became aware of the international exchange mentioned earlier. The application process was long and frustrating but I departed for the UK in mid September of 2013. I also used the candidature time to complete postgraduate seminar requirements and performance requirements: three 50–minute vocal recitals. Life outside the university was equally busy with my own teaching and performing commitments, as well as personal life changes, one of which was getting married at the start of 2013. As Clifford put it:

The writing and reading of ethnography are overdetermined by forces ultimately beyond the control of either an author or an interpretive community. These contingencies […] must now be openly confronted in the process of writing (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 25).

On my return from the UK in January of 2014 I completed transcribing the interviews and in May all NVivo coding was completed. June and July were spent writing up the thesis and preparing for the third and final Doctoral recital.

I was a novice field researcher, learning on the job. For example, it was very difficult to convince singers to give interviews until I realised that it was much easier to recruit them after they had seen me observe them working in production rehearsals. Out of the blue, unsolicited emails got few results even when official permission from management was mentioned. I later developed a strategy of emailing the singers (as well as other personnel I wanted to talk to) after a rehearsal. I would mention how much I enjoyed their work today (which I genuinely did!) and then ask whether they would be interested in giving an interview. This really accelerated things since I was seen in the rehearsal and therefore I wasn’t a complete outsider anymore. I knew that it was about creating a sense of trust and professionalism as well as showing my support and appreciation for the work I was observing. After a while some of them would even approach me themselves:
It is quite cold in the auditorium, during the break I run to get a hot drink. In the green room I see Aida and congratulate her; the Aida cover is also there, we chat briefly. I then start talking to a chorus member who asks me about my research. He has been in the chorus for many years. I say that it would be great if I could interview him, he agrees, I note down his email.

The more time I spent in the field, the more strategies I developed and the faster the project started to progress. I became more confident and I was also learning how to store and sort vast quantities of collected data and keep track of what still needed to be done or chased up.

Conducting my first field research project was quite a big learning curve. It was only towards the end of my candidature that I started to feel that maybe I knew what I was doing. If I could give one piece of advice to a novice field researcher it’s this: think of the time you may need to complete gathering, analysing and writing up your data and then multiply it by five – this may then give you a fair completion time frame.

**Observer and the ethnographic account**

“I am not sure I can tell the truth…I can only tell what I know”

Time spent in the field was a process of personal growth and re-evaluation. Many writers discuss how field experience can influence and change the observer:

The ethnographer is reinvented by her position in the field-world, and by her relations to the informants. The experience is one of self-dissolution and it is inherently anxiety provoking. In this case methodology may often be a locus of displacement for the anxiety provoked not just by the data but by the investigator’s confrontation with the subjects of research (Hastrup, 1992, p. 120).

The main source of anxiety for me was caused by not always knowing where I stood with my participants. Margaret Mead described the precarious state as “maintaining the balance between empathic involvement and disciplined detachment”. I was researching educational and

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41 Cover is another term for understudy, also see chapter on cover work.
42 Observation: 14.07.12, *Aida*.
43 Spoken by a certain Cree hunter - James Bay when asked to administer oath at the trial concerning the fate of his hunting lands (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).
professional settings and I was both an educator and a professional singer. While I had plenty of empathy, I had to work hard on maintaining the “disciplined detachment”\(^45\). Being an empathetic insider was helpful with access and building of trust with my participants, but it also created personal biases. Scott Grills, however, remarks on the positives of researching a familiar culture:

> Ethnographic research and partisan involvement are not mutually incompatible. For example, someone may be a member of a moral crusade and also undertake a sociological analysis of the group. Sharing a certain like-mindedness with others may provide some degree of comfort, familiarity, or sense of additional purpose for the researcher (Grills, 1998, p. 41).

Although one finds “comfort” in researching their passion, the experience of being in the field carries the inherent stress of “self-dissolution” or being forced to live a double life:

> Marginality is not an easy position to maintain, however, because it engenders a continual sense of insecurity. It involves living in two worlds, that of participation and that of research (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007).

Maintaining “marginality” and learning to be more aware of my biases, separating the part of my life that was performance from the part that was ethnography, was a continuous struggle. It was also the aspect of fieldwork I was least prepared for. The issue with familiarity and lack of detachment is that one starts seeing only what one wants to see, or interpreting what one sees in a way that supports your own convictions. A lecturer in research methods once jokingly told us in class that qualitative researchers always find exactly what they are looking for. It was a wise caution. My goal, of course, was finding what was going on:

> The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to (Geertz, 1983, p. 58).

Ethnography of the performing arts it turns out is an art of maintaining balance between complete immersion in the rehearsal culture and the distancing required for the cultural analysis. Hélène Bouvier offers a wonderful description of the process:

\(^{45}\) One of my strategies was trying as much as possible to interview participants that were personally unknown to me prior to the project. It didn’t always play out that way, but I have succeeded in many cases.
On stage, in the wings, in the audience and outside: these are the spaces ethnologists and anthropologists traverse in the practice of fieldwork and writing—metaphorically, as participant-observers within a given community, or literally, if they study theatre forms. Immersion in another community or society (with the consequent blurring of exoticism), purposeful distancing in time and space (rivaling with empathy generated by field presence), systematic investigation of selected themes, and constant striving to have theory inform data and perceptions of the objects of study—all these aspects of the anthropological method can be applied, in a given society, just as effectively to theatre (Bouvier, 1994, p. 1).

**Emergent themes**

The results of the research are now presented here thematically (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Bryman, 2012; Burns, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although chronologically the company research was the first to take place and that in the UK last, it made more sense to place the two opera schools side by side and to conclude with the company. The final chapter combines all findings in order to describe the unique nature of the opera production rehearsal.

**CASE STUDY I: Australian opera program**

The opera program investigated was part of a larger conservatory faculty, which in turn was part of a larger university. The opera school was quite autonomous, but it collaborated effectively with other departments of the conservatory, such as conducting and orchestral studies to put on the student opera productions. In addition to concert practice, performance classes and masterclasses, there were three productions a year, all double-cast to ensure all students were given the opportunity to perform several principal roles before graduating from the course. The running of the school was designed to mimic an opera company:

You really have to try and squeeze as much as you can into every day, not just the classes, not just the production. And I think one way of doing that is to try and run as
closely as you can the track that an opera company would follow in terms of processes, so that the students get used to the demands.\textsuperscript{46}

\begin{table}[H]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Position} & \textbf{Duties} & \textbf{Pseudonym} \\
\hline
Chair of vocal studies & Administrator, vocal lecturer & Emily \\
& opera & \\
\hline
Lecturer in conducting & Administration, repetiteur, conductor, & Roger \\
& opera, chair of opera & conducting lecturer \\
production & & \\
\hline
Voice lecturer & Diction lecturer, voice lecturer & Sylvia \\
\hline
Opera coordinator & Administration, Theatre Studies lecturer, & Richard \\
& production coordinator & \\
\hline
Lecturer – operatic languages & Language coach & Giulia \\
\hline
Opera student & Soprano, final year & Sophie \\
\hline
Opera student & Tenor, final year & Elliot \\
\hline
Opera student & Baritone, final year & Anthony \\
\hline
Opera student & Mezzo-soprano, final year & Jane \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Australian Opera School Interview Sample N=9}
\end{table}

\begin{table}[H]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Production rehearsals:} & \textit{Orpheus in the Underworld}, Jacques Offenbach \\
\hline
\textbf{Private lessons:} & 2 lessons observed \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Australian Opera School Rehearsal Observations}
\end{table}

\textbf{Figure 2: Australian opera school data sample}

It is important to note that in all the sample tables the division of position titles and duties is very approximate. (See figure 2, p. 29 for the complete Australian opera school sample.) In all the cases non-singers had a very wide range of duties that were never clearly defined on paper.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{46} Interview: 1.11.12, Richard
For example: repetiteur’s duties could range from accompaniment, to administration or to overseeing an entire project, depending on what was running at any particular moment (e.g. main production, outreach program, public recital) and in what capacity that staff member got involved. The number of working hours performed by the staff was also very high and well above what may have appeared on paper. This was the case in the schools and in the company. Therefore, the pecking order at times was fluid and difficult to discern.47 Singing students and professional singers, on the other hand, had very clearly defined duties and regimented schedules.

The staff

The culture and the success of an opera school - the way it is run and perceived in the music community and the community at large - is very much dependant on the calibre and performance of its staff. Out of the five key staff interviewed for this study, prior to joining the opera school faculty: two had international opera careers and were still very active in the opera industry, two had past international experience, but still did professional work in Australia and only one had no international experience in professional opera. In her interview one of the voice teachers - Sylvia briefly discussed her operatic career in Germany and in Australia and how it enriched her teaching:

I was in the young artist program in my first year after the conservatorium and then I was a member of the ensemble of the Komische Oper48. I started guesting and then I married and came to Australia. I free-lanced and I had so much work that I virtually based myself in Australia […] I have quite a broad vision for the singers that come along and what is required internationally. For example the theatres in Cologne, what the teachers would expect in New York, all around.49

The head of opera production, Roger, also discussed his extensive professional work overseas:

I then went to London and I studied at the RAM50, I studied conducting. I didn’t complete the degree, but hey, I studied there and from there I started working in opera houses. So that was about 25 years of basically working in different opera houses in

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47 See discussion on opera rehearsal hierarchy.
48 Berlin, Germany.
49 Interview: 13.10.14, Sylvia.
50 Royal Academy of Music, London.
London, France, Norway, Belgium, but principally Germany and also Australia. Two places where I was the longest are Germany and Australia.\footnote{Interview: 14.11.12, Roger.}

One should not underestimate the importance of the international experience in opera and the benefit it offered to the students of the school. Chair of vocal studies, Emily, discussed her efforts to further develop international networks for the students:

I’ve just come back from Julliard, so making contacts. I’ve been in touch with people at the Met\footnote{Metropolitan Opera Theatre, New York.}, interviewing them for networking for the kids.\footnote{Interview: 9.08.11, Emily.}

It was a relatively small, but very busy department, its success depended on the staff who were highly conscientious and punctual. The following field note is characteristic of the generally conscientious staff behaviour:

I then had a brief look at my questionnaire and tried to rehearse mentally for the interview. By the time I made it to Emily’s office she was already there, busily writing e-mails at her computer. Right on the dot at 9:30 she called me in to start the interview.\footnote{Field notes: 9.08.11, Australian opera school}.

The staff often worked very long hours due to the teaching and administrative load associated with their positions. Most of them shared multiple roles in the conservatory and had teaching duties in the departments other than the opera school. While they were generally very punctual, they could also run overtime or teach through their own break if they felt a student required it:

Roger calls a 15 min break, but asks a tenor to stay and work with him on his solo, the rest of the students chatter while leaving the stage.

Roger: “very bad version of quiet!”

Students shut up and exit. I am surprised Roger doesn’t take a break; I would have thought he would want one, but somehow he still has great reserves of energy and keeps going.\footnote{Observation: 30.07.12, \textit{Orpheus in the Underworld}}

In their teaching all staff showed great attention to detail. The detail could range from technical to musical, dramatic, linguistic, movement or anything else. No component was considered too
unimportant to spend time on. It was not unusual to dedicate a considerable portion of a session to a single bar of music or one vowel:

Roger: “you should be ready for some tempi changes. Be ready for it, don’t anticipate but be ready. The placing of the dotted semiquaver needs to be as late as possible.”

They keep working on detail; Roger works on precise entries and dynamics. He tries to make sure the cast read his gestures very clearly. More detailed work. I have noticed that this 2-minute piece was now rehearsed for over half an hour.

“ladies it still sounds to me that with the nasal of “Dormon” you are extricating it from the rest of the phrase, can we just try it again?”

A lot of importance was also attached to catering for individual student weaknesses and strengths, as well as developing their unique talents:

…every singer will be different, because they all have different issues that are either strong or weak, so you have to adapt to what is technically there at the time. So there are things that you can do generally and then there are things that you have to look after individually in every singer.

I don’t mean to tell them it’s all fantastic and how great they are, but to find every single singer has something that they can do well and that’s good about them and to nurture that. And then they have something where they can shine and where they can feel well about their instruments.

In their teaching the staff tended to draw on their own professional experience, rather than any literature, particularly if a student was facing a vocal problem:

When you have to deal with students that have been studying in one way or the other singing for quite a few years and then deal with mindset about singing, with problems that were created with muscle memory, so then you actually have to remove a lot of

56 This production was performed in the original French version.
57 Observation: 30.07.12, Orpheus in the Underworld
58 Interview: 14.11.12, Giulia.
59 Interview: 13.11.12, Sylvia.
habits. When you have to remove dysfunctions – that is when I would say the experience in the business and as a singer yourself is very helpful.60

Another strategy often employed was humour, especially if the students started to struggle or tire. The production rehearsals were always very taxing, particularly towards the end of the day, so a little laughter went a long way to re-energise the room:

Roger begins to conduct – there is no sound coming from the piano, he turns around and realizes the pianist is not there. Everyone laughs hysterically. They notice the pianist returning, he in turn realises what has happened and races back to the piano. Everyone chants his name as he runs: “An-dy! An-dy! An-dy!” He lands on the piano stool, everybody applauds and shouts with joy, the rehearsal now continues with a new sense of energy and purpose.61

The students

Four final year students were interviewed. All the student participants were in their mid-twenties and born in Australia. Besides the interviews, I also observed them perform in public concert practice, the conservatory production and one in a private lesson. When choosing these participants, besides the different voice types, I also specifically looked for very strong performers who stood out in their course and therefore in my professional opinion had the most chance of entering the industry. While they were very different individuals with vastly varied backgrounds and performance styles, they also shared common characteristics of a high work ethic and self-confidence. Here is a telling bit of conversation from Sophie’s private lesson with Emily. The lesson was in preparation for a national opera competition final:

Sophie sang through a part of Mozart’s “Ach Ich liebte” from Abduction from Seraglio

Emily: “When you start on a lower note, start on a high, so you start in the high position, with good resonance. Your voice is very big, but then moving it around is the issue. How nervous do you get these days?”

Sophie: “Not very, also I am very well prepared.”62

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60 Interview: 13.11.12, Sylvia.
61 Observation: 30.07.12, Orpheus in the Underworld rehearsal.
62 Observation: 4.10.12, Private voice lesson.
For Sophie then thorough preparation didn’t only build her confidence but also became a successful anxiety management strategy. As I watched her in rehearsals, her work ethic was obvious: she never had memory lapses or looked confused or uncomfortable. Sophie came across as very confident and professional. This was also the case with the other three advanced students I spoke to. The confidence went hand-in-hand with the students’ ability to be self-critical and accept criticism from others. Here Sophie reflects critically on her own progress:

I have various things that I could talk about that I am lacking as am about to go into the industry.63

And here is what Elliot had to say. One would never suspect that this competent performer had such a harsh self-view:

I have a big L-plate on my forehead. Not “loser” but “learner” (laughs) So I feel like it’s, like I said I still feel like I’ve got a long way to go. I am sort of, I would say three quarters of the half way mark of my journey I think. Probably a little bit less than that. I still know that there is a long way to go. There is a huge journey to go and I am not even near the half way mark yet. (laughs)64

Although comfortable with the fact that he had a “long way to go”, Elliot was also excited about tracking his own development:

When I was singing with no technique at all, I was always singing with the soprano who would shoot like a laser and I would be this little “aaaah” tenor you know? And I would be always overpowered by a soprano – always! Now what’s given me a bit of a “wow” is that like not with any vanity or anything, but like I am starting to feel like I can not really be drained by a soprano at times, I mean at times I am, but like at least now I can be sort of like, I can be heard a little bit more (giggles). Back a while ago I was like this little tenor that was always drowned out by a soprano. But now what’s given me a bit of “wow” is like “Oh wow, I can actually be heard with the soprano, not over the soprano, but with the soprano”. (giggles)65

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63 Interview: 13.06.12, Sophie
64 Interview: 3.10.12, Elliot
65 Ibid.
All advanced students showed ability to track their progress, which inspired them to work harder and fed their confidence. See Figure 3, p. 35.

![Student progress cycle](image)

**Figure 3: Student progress cycle**

The students also had a realistic view of their vocal development and the time frame required for entering the professional market. Here is how Anthony assessed his situation:

> I think I am about probably four or five years away from like a young artist program. I think being 25 and being a baritone – the competition is pretty stiff. But also the voice doesn’t mature for another 5 years and realistically I am not going to get roles until I am at least 30, not in any company that’s going to pay anyway. I mean I can do amateur stuff, but I think realistically I am looking at about 5 years before really having a go at it professionally, so I guess from now till then I will be putting myself in the best place that is going to guide me vocally.  

The time gap between finishing the course and being professionally employable was a big issue for these young singers. All of them had their plans for “filling” the years to give their voices a chance to strengthen and develop, often by extending their studies into a postgraduate course:

> The plan is that I am not finishing yet, I finish the Diploma and I am planning to do another two years, hopefully, see how things go…So that like I would like to develop a lot more twang in the voice and a lot more openness, a bit more freedom.

All four students were strong vocal and dramatic performers. The males in particular had excellent stagecraft skills. It turned out that both of them had background in amateur musical theatre. All remarked that they learned the most from being in productions and considered it the most important part of their training:

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66 Interview: 5.10.12, Anthony.
67 Interview: 3.10.12, Elliot.
I guess personally, getting through some difficult roles and performing them, sort of made me feel proud of myself… yeah. I remember the first role of Mrs Herring, I was 20, 21 and that was a bit of a challenge musically, it was very low and being on stage that first time in an operatic role, in character, audience and I just remember being “All right, this is cool! This is what I want to do”. So I guess having opportunities to perform on stage, which I know not all opera schools actually offer, which seems strange, but having those opportunities, that was very inspiring.  

I was talking to a friend last night and I said “look I would have loved to have done the Bachelor here because now I know I’ve got a long way to go with the voice and I felt like if I did three or four years extra training, then the three years opera, things would have been sorted out a little bit more by now, but to be honest no I don’t regret it at all, because I loved my time in doing G&S and all that stuff that young people, that little 20 year olds, 18 year olds can do and not harm the voice, you know? So in singing with no real technique. So that gave me a good chance to really learn how dialogue works and how to project on stage and stuff like that. Yeah (laughs)

The participants also learnt and drew inspiration from watching their teachers do professional work:

I guess a big part of it is that some of the teachers who we study of… and then seeing them on stage…having them teach us the skills, most important skills of just being on stage, character skills, I find that personally quite inspiring and then seeing them down there in all the action, seeing how good they are and wanting to learn more and more from them.

Another marked quality was tenacity and refusal to be discouraged by failure. Here is how Elliot reacted to his failure to get into the opera course on first attempt:

So then I didn’t get in, but the head of opera was nice to suggest to get into a TAFE course for about a year. And then I studied music with them and I asked them every

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68 Interview: 7.10.12, Jane.
69 Gilbert and Sullivan operettas.
70 Interview: 3.10.12, Elliot.
71 Interview: 7.10.12, Jane.
single question under the sun about music and theory and I just worked really hard so that I not only just get the diploma … it was also, I just really wanted to know! I actually wanted to be behind a desk and start learning you know?²²

The two girls seemed to be a bit further in their development than the boys. Whether the boys were thinking of continuing study and buying more time to give their voices further chance to develop, the girls were already starting to do a little professional work. The two girls also had a stronger music background. Sophie completed a Bachelor of Music degree prior commencing the opera diploma and Jane played piano and violin. Jane also attended a high school with a very strong music program. The boys received less formal training prior to the diploma: Anthony grew up singing in a choir and doing amateur theatre and Elliot did amateur theatre and one year at a TAFE music program. All four students had private voice lessons since their teens.

²² Interview: 3.10.12, Elliot.
The training

The three-year opera diploma offered students participation in three opera productions a year, which then made nine over the course of their degree. All productions were rehearsed with at least two casts, making sure all students got an opportunity to perform a principal role. Besides the productions, students also attended classes in diction (Italian, German and French), movement and theatre studies. Each student also received weekly private lessons with their assigned voice teachers and private rehearsals (coachings) with repetiteurs. The students were offered opportunities to perform in weekly performance classes, public concerts and masterclasses. According to the observed and interviewed participants, the opera course had many advantages, but it also faced some challenges.

One of the big attractions of the course was that it was very practical and allowed the students a sufficient platform to learn their craft by doing it. Being in the productions was especially valued because it offered the unique opportunity of singing with orchestra and working with the conductor while performing on the stage:

There are lots an lots of skills that are taught, there are lots of performing opportunities, so and really there are a lot of opera programs where you get to do you know, sing arias with piano and that and I am not trashing that, but it is…you know there was a terribly, terribly simple number in Orpheus which I probably cannot play (walks over to the piano and plays part of Offenbach’s chorus from the opera) – 5 verses of it, it’s not one of my favourite pieces any more (I giggle), but on paper it looks like nothing! It starts with “pada-da-da-da-da” – a three-bar phrase, then a one-bar phrase “blup-pup-pup-pa-ba-ba” now, it would have been 10 people who sang those 5 verses, because it was double-cast, they all had the hugest of trouble just to come in! So to be able to read my beat (I don’t think I was that unclear), to be dealing with my beat against the sound of the orchestra, against where they need to sing, depending on where they are standing on stage, so 4 metres can almost be a semiquaver difference (clicks fingers), so all of that sort of stuff – they are the really important skills that they get here from working with, even though it’s a student orchestra, but from working with it and becomes sort of a real thing as opposed to doing an opera with piano.73

73 Interview: 14.11.12, Roger.
French opera, Italian, German. Last year we did *Die lustige Weiber von Windsor* which is in the repertoire in Germany, so they are studying a wide range of languages and roles on stage with professional directors and I think with three operas each year it makes us very busy, but the point is the kids are getting stage experience, actually learning their apprenticeship on the floor, while learning how to move, how to act, how to sing, how to follow a conductor and how to move in costume in one hit and I think if anything, that’s the best innovation that I’ve been able to put in.\(^{74}\)

Besides learning the skills, students were also able to add performed roles to their CVs:

So we were able to put on three operas a year, which means every single year people get a minimum of one role, sometimes they get two or three, particularly the men, they get more chance, sopranos are harder, because there are more of them. But I think one of the baritones graduated last year with 11 roles and I mean for any opera company overseas that’s much more attractive, than if you come over with two.\(^{75}\)

It was clear, however, from Emily’s statement that providing equal opportunities for everyone proved a challenge, since there were always more sopranos than other voice types and only so many soprano roles in every production. The roles were allocated via audition process, which encouraged a competitive environment. Simultaneous rehearsal of both casts also meant that both casts continually compared themselves to one another, resulting in yet another level of competition:

The second cast now tried the same move with singing – they were clearly better singers (the tenor did not mark\(^{76}\)), they also knew their parts off the book much better.\(^{77}\)

The competitive environment caused pressure and stress that was not always easy to manage:

I notice frustration from the 2nd cast tenor, he snaps at another student: “get your hands out of my face!” The other student framed the tenor’s face with his hands as a harmless joke, but he clearly was not in the mood. This tenor was quite large and probably had

\(^{74}\) Interview: 9.08.11, Emily.
\(^{75}\) ibid.
\(^{76}\) “marking” – singing very softly or not singing to the full capacity – rehearsal technique used by singers with a sick or tired voice.
\(^{77}\) Observation: 8.08.12 *Orpheus in the Underworld*. 


trouble moving for so long\textsuperscript{78}, he was also hoarse. He marked a lot and may have been concerned about being compared to the other cast tenor who was in great voice…

They change casts again. This cast is the stronger one in my opinion. I notice that certain singers are always in good voice and always know their parts, while others do not and always sound tired or hoarse. The “strong” singers clearly have more fun. The others seem anxious, unsure, clumsy, confused. This is a long process of growth and development. There is a disparity of level of singing and musicianship – a challenge for teachers, since everyone needs to be given a go, everyone needs to learn.\textsuperscript{79}

The disparity in student background training in music, languages, movement and stagecraft was a continuous challenge for the staff production team. While some students picked things up at lightning speed, others struggled, got frustrated and held back the production process:

Another obstacle was the singers who were not entirely familiar with their parts at this point. They kept stopping and stumbling at times. That again was handled with great patience from Roger…It was noticeable that some students have learnt their parts better since Wednesday (2 days ago).\textsuperscript{80}

Independent rehearsal preparation and stamina played an important role in how much the students enjoyed the rehearsals and the amount of stress they displayed. The \textit{Orpheus} production was a comedy that called for very high energy levels from the cast. There were a lot of fast ensemble numbers with challenging detailed choreography. The choreography movement and the singing had to be meticulously rehearsed over and over in order to achieve the required coordination on the stage and with the orchestra. Although some students had good levels of fitness, others were overweight or very uncoordinated and inexperienced. They had trouble remembering the steps and their vocal lines, or if they did – they fell out of sync with others and with the orchestra. The stress and strain resulted in fatigue and chronic hoarseness. I was speculating whether some lack of independent rehearsal preparation was playing a role as well.

There is a difficult transition with a big move for the entire chorus that has to sing and drink Champagne while changing group formation. Roger wants to do the transition again. I wonder how vocally tired everyone is, this section has many high notes. Everyone keeps singing every run in full voice. More experienced singers would do it an

\textsuperscript{78} This production had a lot of fast choreography.

\textsuperscript{79} Observation: 8.08.12 \textit{Orpheus in the Underworld}.

\textsuperscript{80} Observation: 30.07.12 \textit{Orpheus in the Underworld}.
octave lower or marked some of it, considering this is double cast and they have to rehearse everything twice! I am cranky that Roger doesn’t tell them to sing an octave lower. He is clearly carried away and anxious to get things right…It’s 7:35pm, I am hoping we may have a break soon, but there is no sight of it.

Roger: At the moment I am concerned about the dancing – it’s very strenuous. You have to dance and sing, this is normal for people primarily trained as singers and having to dance.81

The interviewed participants also put vocal fatigue as one of the biggest challenges of being in the course. Many suggested that timetabling during the production periods was the biggest contributor to the vocal fatigue since the students were still expected to attend their regular performance and language classes while rehearsing in the production for several hours a day:

…during production week … there is still a lot going on in like actual classes. And you know your coaches and stuff like that. I do feel like we should have a production week, where we just don’t have anything on at all. It’s probably not fair to the other people who aren’t in the opera, but I do feel like there’s structural things that can be improved in a way that young singers don’t feel exhausted and have to sing you know and are expected to make vocal progress when we are just exhausted. I am not trying to victimise students at all, it’s not that at all, I just do feel that there can be things that can give us just a bit of a break, you know?82

This was then echoed by lecturers dealing with student exhaustion in their classes:

…I think the stamina of the first year for example, like a lot of people get sick. I think like 9 to 9 in the evening is a very long day… The expectations of some people that the students have to sing important rehearsals in the morning and then be as switched on and the voice function as fantastic a few hours later, I think is very unrealistic. When big projects are being done people either can’t go to classes or a lot of times they are present physically in the classes, but mentally they are not present.83

In my time at the school complaining about vocal fatigue was the norm. It was brought up in private lessons and group rehearsals: “She then spoke about being very tired”.84 The only

81 Ibid.
82 Interview: 3.10.12, Elliot.
83 Interview: 13.11.12, Sylvia.
84 Observation: 11.05.12, private lesson.
remedy it seemed was working on one’s personal fitness and vocal technique. Developing their stamina, singing while tired, stressed and under the competitive pressure was just another skill these students were being taught. The huge expense of putting on the productions and the time limits of the degree meant that there was little room for recuperation:

Well, the focus is to try and prepare them as best as possible for all eventualities and any program will have limitations because you can only do so much for various reasons. You can only do so much because you only have so much money or you’ve only got so much time or you’ve only got the venue that you need for not enough hours in the week. And all those things apply, so you really have to try and squeeze as much as you can into every day, not just the classes, not just the production.  

On the other hand the manner of the teaching staff was always supportive, encouraging and patient:

The atmosphere is light hearted and serious at the same time. Everybody giggles at Emily’s occasional jokes, she keeps praising the pianist and singers every time they achieve something. She is very encouraging.

Discussion of inspirational teachers and the influence of teachers on the students was one of the strongest themes that emerged in the research of the school. Working with voices that were still in development, disparate levels of previous training, and under the strain of time and money limitation, the faculty managed to deliver international level operatic education. Success of the program was often reflected by students who received placement in elite postgraduate opera courses overseas, went on to have professional careers, or won awards in international opera competitions.

How you get them to be enthused and encouraged and to work properly and in a disciplined and effective way in their own practice time – it’s essential to what we are training. So how the teacher motivates them and how you enthuse them and give them a commitment and self-belief that they can do this if they work properly. It’s essential to where they end up.

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85 Interview: 4.11.12, Richard.
86 Observation: 11.05.12, private lesson.
87 Interview: 9.08.11, Emily.
Although excellence was always encouraged and the competitive environment was evident, more value was placed on the individual progress and hard work, rather than the immediate result. Students always exhibited camaraderie and support for each other:

As the soloists stood up to sing their numbers, the rest of the cast sat silently following their scores. The soloists were applauded after their numbers. It was obvious that the students shared great support for each other. 88

Stronger students led and supported the weaker ones. These leaders were also the main support for the teaching staff, providing them with suggestions and feedback:

There are a number of leading singers here. They try to give the director some suggestions on blocking or freeing the space for the next scene, usually a couple of boys. She listens to them. They clearly want to help and have authority among their colleagues and the staff. 89

The spirit of friendship and camaraderie was particularly evident during the playful activity that occurred in the breaks:

Some students organise getting together and studying the dialogue others play a game of football in the hall and get in trouble with security guard, the ball narrowly misses soprano’s head. Then sudden noise and commotion: “who has lollies?! Lollies!!” 90

Although efforts were made to simulate a professional company environment and make the opera course as practical as possible, it still had to fit within the university degree assessment structure, resulting in lack of flexibility and at times failure to cater to specific opera student needs. Several students regretted not being able to combine their course with language studies on the main university campus (the language training offered in the course was minimal and only covered phonetic pronunciation):

I think they decided that it doesn’t work ‘cause I was only in it for a month, because there was no way I could travel between campuses – it’s ridiculous, ‘cause it’s a way of

88 Observation: 30.07.12, Orpheus in the Underworld.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
being able to do music and languages…we do diction and phonetics and things like that, but to actually learn the grammar, to have the course for that, that would be ideal.\textsuperscript{91}

Some also wished for a much more comprehensive movement and acting training:

Drama is only in 2nd and 3rd year of the diploma, of which we get one hour a week and there is you know – 18, 20 people in the class. We have one dance class a week for 1 hour and that’s everyone, so that’s 27, 28 people.\textsuperscript{92}

Others regretted not being able to take professional leave from the course or switch to part-time when they were offered professional opportunities:

I was talking to a student the other day and he was offered an opportunity with the “X” orchestra to travel and he was telling me that he can’t take that because the university won’t allow him to take that professional leave … They do make allowances for you wherever possible, but you can’t really take a few weeks off to go and do professional work somewhere.\textsuperscript{93}

Although the course boasted a huge number of performance opportunities for the students, there was a lack of awareness about the business side of the profession and a certain detachment from the actual industry. There was no specific course that covered contracts, agents, resumes and audition skills. The business specifics were skimmed over with generalities with the assumption that every student would somehow find their own way:

I can only think in terms of what the degree might be lacking, if that’s something…it’s not artistic, but it’s more reality skills, so things like you know, money (giggles), how to get jobs, how to deal with contracts how to deal with people even and we can be in this world of just learning how to sing and act and everything, but I think at the end of the day you have to make living and unless you marry someone (giggles) ridiculously wealthy, you do have to think of the reality of the business, so that’s something that’s going to hit us hard I think…we haven’t quite been prepared for that, may be it is just you’ve got to work hard and then you get the job and then you get the money, but I am sure that there will be times when it’s going to be difficult. But may be that’s something

\textsuperscript{91} Interview: 7.10.12, Jane.
\textsuperscript{92} Interview: 13.06.12, Sophie.
\textsuperscript{93} Interview: 13.06.12, Sophie.
you can’t teach, may be that’s just through teaching ourselves how to deal with it. So yeah, I think that’s something that we haven’t quite been taught here.\footnote{Interview: 7.10.12, Jane.}

Ignoring the realities of the Australian opera industry was partly linked to the assumption that the most talented students would go to start their careers overseas. There was an acknowledged lack of local employment and many students assumed that as soon as they completed the training in Australia, their next move would be to leave the country:

…that’s why I want to go over there (Germany) and study, because if I study I will get a study visa and it will get me in the country for a couple of years and I will continue to get the training.\footnote{Interview: 5.10.12, Anthony.}

To summarise, the Australian course had a real democratic feel about it. Time, care and attention were invested in all students, no matter how advanced or otherwise they were in their development. Every student got to perform principal roles during the course of their candidature with the emphasis being on the individual progress rather than the immediate result. The mutual student support that was evident in rehearsals and the concert practice performances reinforced the nurturing, democratic atmosphere of the place. Disparate levels of student training and vocal development, limited funding offered and continued cuts\footnote{Sadly, the course that was researched for this study was phased out during the final year of my candidature: It became a two year postgraduate course. This change only took place after all the data was gathered and did not become a part of the current thesis.}, as well as rigidity of the academic university structure created challenges. Some of those were: inadequate languages training, acting and movement, business skills as well as vocal exhaustion exacerbated by overcrowded scheduling during the production periods. See Figure 4, p. 46 for a graphic summary of the top emergent themes in the Australian opera school setting.
What makes an accomplished opera singer?

It interested me how the contemporary ideal opera artist was perceived in the researched settings. (See Figure 5, p. 47.) In the Australian opera school one of the emergent themes was the idea of “being a package” or having the combination of vocal talent, matching look, stage presence and ability to be a convincing character:

‘Cause as I say – once you’ve got the voice, in the industry then they start to look at everything else. And if you are not portraying the character in the right way or you look awkward or uncomfortable, they are not going to buy what you are selling as such.  

Being a package, like that you can sell. I don’t know like you’ve got a good sound, you can play a role, you can be believable, you can you know – show emotion and have good timing and presence and all that kind of stuff.

Other desired characteristics were: possessing solid vocal technique, good command of the operatic languages, advanced acting skills and having a back-up plan - another skill or profession to fall back on in case one found himself/herself out of work or could not find enough work to generate consistent income:

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97 I found that having a theme chart helped to crystallise what was said and observed. The charts aim to give a thematic snapshot and should only be viewed in context of the textual analysis.
98 Interview: 13.06.12, Sophie.
99 Interview: 5.10.12, Anthony.
The other thing I’d say is have another profession. If somebody says they’ve studied law or whatever, I sort of think OK – these are people that have got something to fall back on, who want to do it, but at the same time they are building their life a little cleverly and practically…\(^{100}\)

**Figure 5: Accomplished singer perception: Australian opera school**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accomplished opera singer perception: Australian opera school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being a good package</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solid vocal technique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a back-up plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced language skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced acting skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to note that the perception of what was important for the operatic profession today could not always match what was provided in the training. While the importance of having a back-up plan was acknowledged, the structure of the course did not allow for a double degree or part-time attendance to accommodate this issue. The language and acting training provided was also minimal; however, the practicality of the course in terms of stage experience and the continuous efforts of the staff to tap into individual talents ensured the overall “package” development as well as development of solid vocal technique. The school had a good track record of alumni employed by opera companies in Australia and overseas.

**CASE STUDY II: UK opera program**

The program investigated in the UK was structured quite differently to the Australian counterpart. The vocal department was part of a large conservatory. It did not have an opera school as such, instead vocal students had the option of auditioning for productions of which there were three every year: two operas (one of which was baroque) and one Broadway show. Postgraduate students had the option of further specialising in opera through the choice of their electives. The very large vocal school\(^{101}\) offered a wide range of training that included: choral, ensemble, language diction, stagecraft, Feldenkrais and performance workshops in early music, Lieder and operatic scenes. The students could also study vocal pedagogy and sign up for

\(^{100}\) Interview: 14.11.12, Roger.

\(^{101}\) There were about 40 singers in the first year alone.
mentored private voice teaching in the local community. Fourth year students were also offered a music business course. All voice students received weekly private voice lessons. Here is how Paul - the head of opera studies, described the difficulty of offering comprehensive training required for the modern industry:

…you are not only nurturing the instrument, but you are nurturing the package – the personality, the presentation skills, the linguistic skills, the musical skills – all the skills. That’s why some of our singers can off and be managers at Marks & Spencer’s or go off and multitask and do all sorts of jobs. Because it’s not just about the instrument. Consequently one is questioning how much can you squeeze into a 30 week academic year, over three terms, one hour a week, when you’ve got to give them linguistic skills, and movement skills and stamina skills and presentation skills as well as the vast range of music that is out there! Not just opera of course, but also Lieder and French song and Italian song and give them performance classes and give them Russian and give them Spanish and give them Czech (laughs) and give them absolutely everything that they require and still we don’t give it to them enough! And give them speech skills and give them articulation and talk to them about their presentation skills and talk to them about tax and business and absolutely everything to do with surviving in a professional world and also the skills to go out there and make contact and to sell themselves. It’s deciding where you are going to put your funding.

Principal roles in the productions were cast through a competitive audition process, which included students from undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. This meant that if a first year student was good enough, he or she could be cast in a principal role. The Opera Chorus was built from the undergraduate Bachelor stream:

After the break as I walk back with other singers I talked to the chorus. It turned out the chorus consists of the entire second year and 6 singers selected from the first. A first year chorus girl told me she felt privileged to be involved in the opera.

All principal roles had covers or understudies. The cast of understudies had to cover the principals in case they fell ill and could not perform; they also received one performance date – the cover show. Very few top singers (one or two every year) belonged to the International

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102 Interview: 01.10.13, Paul.
103 In the Australian setting, Bachelor of Music voice students were never involved in the opera productions. Productions only involved students from the Diploma of Opera course.
104 Observation: 04.11.13, L’elisir d’amore.
Artist Diploma program designed for students who completed some postgraduate study and showed outstanding ability; e.g. winners of major opera competitions. Such students were guaranteed one principal role during the year of their diploma. Thus rather than making sure that everyone received equal opportunity to perform an operatic role, the audition process created opportunities for the outstanding operatic talent. Having principals and covers instead of the equal double casting, further limited the amount of stage experience available. Therefore, being cast in a principal role or even a cover was highly competitive and considered a privilege. The vocal department effectively collaborated with other conservatory departments (e.g. orchestral and conducting) during opera production periods. See figure 6, p.50 for the complete UK school participant sample.
UK Opera School Interview Sample N=10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Duties</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head of vocal studies</td>
<td>Administration, voice lecturer</td>
<td>Isobel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy head of school of vocal studies</td>
<td>Administration, voice lecturer</td>
<td>Meryl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of opera, tutor in dramatic interpretation</td>
<td>Administration, opera director(^{105})</td>
<td>Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor in historical performance</td>
<td>Conductor, repetiteur, early instruments tutor</td>
<td>Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor in language studies</td>
<td>Language coach</td>
<td>Angelo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera student</td>
<td>Soprano, final year IAD(^{106})</td>
<td>Barbara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera student</td>
<td>Soprano, final year Masters</td>
<td>Sharon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera student</td>
<td>Tenor, final year IAD</td>
<td>James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera student</td>
<td>Baritone, final year Masters</td>
<td>Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera student</td>
<td>Bass, final year Masters</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UK Opera School Rehearsal Observations

**Production rehearsals:**  \(L \text{’elisir d’amore, Gaetano Donizetti}\)

**Private lessons:** 2 lessons observed

*Figure 6: UK opera program data sample*

The staff

All key staff interviewed at the school boasted international careers. Here is Paul talking about some of his directorial work prior to becoming the head of opera studies at the school:

…I was invited to Scottish Opera to revive *Hansel and Gretel*, which I did and then the Coliseum to rework the production of *Tosca* that they did, so I did that and then I

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\(^{105}\) Although Atkinson refers to them as “producers”, in my experience in the field, the person in charge of directing opera production was always called “director”.

\(^{106}\) International Artist Diploma.
looked after the tour for Glyndebourne touring opera and then I was invited to go to Belgium to do My Fair Lady, which ran for three years and then I did West Side Story which ran for another three years. Then I did King and I, which ran for another three years and I worked for an American director who asked me to revive his production of Alcina in LA, which I did with John Tomlinson and Della Jones and …that’s a bit of my career.\textsuperscript{107}

Three out of five key staff members interviewed for the study were still professionally active in the opera industry. Besides bringing their industry experience to the students, the staff also actively and continually sought to expend their industry networks in order to secure numerous professional opportunities for the students, effectively providing them with a career launch pad:

…we have connections with Basel, we have connections with Stuttgart, we have connections with Bergen, Amsterdam and we are creating more European connections, or they go directly into employment. “X”\textsuperscript{108} went into, it’s like a London Agency, for two years. “Y” went straight to Glyndebourne, having problems with his South-African visa, he is still backwards and forwards. “X” went straight into employment, especially with the English Touring Opera and also Garsington and also Holland Park, so they are all working, but therefore the students really need to be of an ilk who are going to go out there, work, be professional and be ambassadors for the school.\textsuperscript{109}

Some of those opportunities were regularly organised auditions with professional opera companies:

We also have to talk about how we view the repertoire, because you can use the repertoire obviously to grow the voice in a healthy manner and that’s also reflected in the repertoire that I expect the students to chose for auditions for outside opera companies and I am really assured, because a lot of people that we do auditions for I know, because I am known in the profession.\textsuperscript{110}

Another way the school showcased their students to the industry was by inviting opera agents to the student productions:

\textsuperscript{107} ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} This was an Australian alumni - name removed for privacy reasons
\textsuperscript{109} Interview: 01.10.13, Paul.
\textsuperscript{110} Interview: 01.10.13, Isobel.
…they are going to invite different people to come to watch the performances, so I hope these 4 performances are going to lead to something professional, like an engagement in Europe or Britain or whatever and also because as an international artist I have the freedom to do what I want. So after this opera I can go to Europe, I can sing for the agents, I can audition for places…

The staff also used their industry networks to engage leading musicians to work with the students on their repertoire, which not only inspired the students, but also exposed them to the professional expectations:

I was keen that in the performance classes, we should not be talking about “the singing”, but we should talk about the music. And so the first and second years are taken by the singing teachers, but from the third year upwards, half of the performance classes are taken by the professional accompanists and they are of the stature of Roger Vignoles, David Owen Norris…

…the people I’ve been able to work with such as Pauline Griffiths, David Owen Norris and Martin Pickard and Audrey Highland and all the inspirational people that I’ve been able to work with that are huge in their profession and they’ve worked with me and gave me lots of advice and showed me the way forward.

Like in Australia, the training levels of singers that came through the course were quite different; one of the challenges for the staff was designing a program that would cater for the disparity:

…because in the secondary school system in England the government decided that they would grade the schools according to how good their results were and it made the schools teach the students in order to get grades in their exams, instead of giving them an education. But that’s another sweeping generalisation…But there is an enormous difference in the UK between the public school, and the private education. In the private schools the education is absolutely fantastic. A lot of kids who come here from that background, they sing and they also play two instruments and they’ve been choristers and they’ve been in the school choir and they’ve had a lot of workshops and they’ve done drama and they have a completely different cultural background. And then we

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111 Interview: 30.11.13, James.
112 Interview: 01.10.13, Isobel.
113 Interview: 06.11.13, Matthew.
will get some people from the state school who would love singing, but they have hardly any experience. And so there is a big variety of students, so the training must take that into account.114

The staff made continuous efforts to utilise unique talents of their students by shaping the curriculum in order to showcase student strengths:

But this year, for example... because of the broad span of talent of singers that we’ve got, I am doing: early music by having a Gluck double bill and at the moment I’ve got some bel canto115 singers, so I am doing a bel canto opera. Then I’ve also got a great popularity of Music Theatre, so I am going to do Sondheim’s Company in the Capitol Theatre.116

Building characterisation on students’ personal traits and characteristics was also one of the main features of directorship in the production rehearsals:

Director:

I am not going to ask covers to do the same character as the principals because they are different people, but the geography will have to stay the same.117

Even the chorus were expected to have developed characterisation that was then showcased with appropriate staging:

It is nice to see that the stage is raked in such a way that every cast member can be seen at all times, every person is utilised.118

The teaching style focused on fine detail, but at the same time was also motivating and encouraging. (See Figure 7, p. 54 demonstrating UK school teaching strategies.) The students were motivated because all expectations of the staff were explained and justified whenever possible. The students weren’t just told what to do, they were also told why they had to do it. The students were encouraged because all progress and success was met with genuine praise and enthusiasm:

114 Interview: 01.10.13, Isobel.
115 “Beautiful singing” – has various meanings, but in this case refers to 19th century Italian operas of such composers as Donizetti and Bellini.
116 Interview: 01.10.13, Paul.
118 Observation: 22.11.13, L’elisir d’amore.
Maestro moves on to the two principals and gets the soprano to sing the next bit, so that the chorus understand the context of their interjections. She sings it beautifully, the chorus come in with their refrain in the correct spot. Maestro screams over them: “Bravi! that actually sounded Italian, do it again! Beautiful!”

Figure 7: UK school teaching strategies

Here is a typical snapshot of the director working with full cast of about 40 singers:

Now Belcore (principal baritone character) comes into the action. He sings his pompous aria to Adina (principal soprano character), as he goes into a little cadenza director screams:

Melt chorus! A little orgasm over there! (This gets huge giggles) Melt into each other! Swoon!

The director wants the female chorus to react to Belcore’s “pick up” aria.

Walk away Adina, ladies crowd him “I love you!” Shock! Adina doesn’t like him! Move! Swap! When you are in the Glyndebourne chorus you want to be noticed on the telly, by your parents!


\[119\] Observation: 28.10.13, L’elisir d’amore.
The director is working very fast, but in such a way that the singers remember the blocking. He constantly explains the motivation for each move and how it’s tied to the text, music and the production. He explains to the cast what will be happening on the stage at any particular time and where they need to be. He does it in such a way that the singers are constantly moving and singing, rather than listening and then trying to do it. He speaks and moves them as they sing. This simultaneous direction is proving very effective, especially with the young singers, who are constantly challenged to pay attention, move, remember, give energy, be involved, react, use imagination and maintain focus.

At other times, however, it seemed that there was too much explanation given, to the point where students were bombarded with detail:

Angelo is incredibly detailed. He stops on every syllable now. Every time he stops, he explains why this or that vowel needs to be long or short or accented or bright or linked. He not only tells how it should sound and feel and produced, but also why it should be so from dramatic, historical and linguistic perspective. I start wondering whether he is bombarding this singer with too much background information and how much is actually sinking in…

They continue working phrase by phrase. Helen is working on freeing formation of the vowels. She talks about using the right amount of lip movement, paying attention to the tongue and the jaw. It is very detailed. They stop practically on every word. I wonder whether it is becoming detailed to the point where this student is getting bogged down in lip, tongue and jaw coordination, gaining more tension rather than the desired freedom.

The students

Three final year Masters and two International Artist Diploma (IAD) students were interviewed. These students were of comparable age and vocal development to their Australian counterparts. Thus after spending some initial time in the UK setting I worked out that the final year Masters and IAD students of the UK structured course were roughly comparable to the final year opera

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120 Blocking refers to setting the basic moves for a particular scene.
121 Observation: 28.10.13, L’elisir d’amore.
122 Observation: 01.10.13, private diction coaching.
123 Observation: 29.11.13, private voice lesson.
diploma students interviewed in Australia. Here again I tried to select outstanding students (principal and cover cast) of different voice types. It was surprising and curious to discover that 3 out of 5 students I was interviewing were from Australia and New Zealand, that included both of the elite students undertaking the IAD. One of the major differences here was that unlike their Australian counterparts who envisioned travelling overseas, these students were here to use their degree as a career launch pad:

I reflect on how singing a principal role in this production could give some of these young singers a real break into the professional market. Companies and managers are attending the shows with a view to check out the fresh talent. The production is really a professional showcase for the industry. It is a great idea, since it’s so much more important for prospective employers to see these singers in action than in a detached audition. It is within the production - with sets, costumes, make-up, orchestra and props that they will be able to see how much these guys can really shine. It would be so much harder to create the same impression in a panel audition environment…At the end of the rehearsal I overhear a quick exchange:

Maestro:

By the way these principals are doing such a great job! Wow!

Director:

Yes these two are the best singers we have. They are part of the international studio program. This is a launch pad for them. The tenor is on the market from June. I am inviting several people to watch this.124

While these students were very confident performers, they also had the ability to reflect on their progress in a critical way:

For me I think the colour is OK [vocal quality], I think my top notes are OK…could be better but I mean, we will work on that. I think my passaggio125 needs lots of work and I am not a really good musician, I don’t have a bachelor of music. I can read music, but I can’t sight-read, so if I need to learn something I always learn it in advance.126

125 “Passaggio” is a part of singer’s voice that is particularly difficult to manage. It is where lower vocal register changes into the higher “head” register. The area is particularly difficult for tenors.
126 Interview: 30.11.13, James.
Well I have almost no technique. I have been building it for the last year, but I didn’t really think about how I produced my sound. So that’s the major thing I will try to sort out while I am here. I’ve been performing my whole life, I’ve had plenty of stage experience, like G&S musicals, so I’m quite happy on stage performing. But there is still plenty to learn for acting.\textsuperscript{127}

All students felt that this was a great practical program, but they also spoke a lot about learning from and being inspired by professional artists:

… this summer I went to see \textit{Turandot} at the Royal Opera House, it was the first time I’ve seen an opera at the Royal Opera House and I didn’t know the opera at all, because I don’t know that many, but it was thoroughly moving, wonderful and even if they weren’t…I thought that they were all superb. The chap I was with was standing there, criticising the singers, I was fine with it. But even if they weren’t perfect singers, it was just amazing how much an opera was able to move me, the way it never had before. So it was at that point that I decided that it was probably a good idea that I had decided to do singing, ’cause you can, it’s so obvious how you can affect people with it, so I wouldn’t say I was inspired specifically to do opera, but it reinforced my conviction that singing was a good idea. (giggles)\textsuperscript{128}

The students shared a very high work ethic and passion for the art form; however, they also had a realistic view of their vocal development and a workable plan for starting a career in the industry:

Right now I am 24, so I am very young, that’s why another year was great and I will be a graduate here at 25 - more likely to get chorus work… I am in talks at the moment with Isobel and Paul about the IAD and their advice has never yet put me wrong, so that’s a possibility. If not - go out, get some chorus work or some main roles for some small opera companies. Start earning a bit of money, do some concert repertoire and move forward that way.\textsuperscript{129}

It seemed that there were many similarities between the top Australian and UK opera students. The view on what needed to be achieved in order to enter the industry was also very similar:

\textsuperscript{127} Interview: 30.10.13, Robert.
\textsuperscript{128} Interview: 30.10.13, Robert.
\textsuperscript{129} Interview: 06.11.13, Matthew.
linear progression from training to auditions and employment, except in the Australian case, the final stages were often envisioned overseas. (Figure 8, p. 58 summarises the student career perception.) This was supported by the fact that some of the top singers here in UK were Australian.  

Figure 8: Opera students - early career perception

The training

As mentioned earlier, operatic talent in the vocal department of this school was sourced from the streams of the undergraduate, masters and International Artist Diploma cohort. The pool of singers was therefore very large and far from everyone could be given a chance of singing a principal role in a production. Many singers however got the opportunity to participate in the chorus during their undergraduate years. Since operatic agents and other industry stakeholders were invited to the performances, the emphasis was on casting soloists that were market-ready or at least showed potential to be so in the very near future. Productions were used to help the most promising singers launch their careers as well as boost the prestige of the vocal department, therefore the final product was extremely important. It appeared that the stakes were very high here: reputations and future careers were on the line, leaving little room for error. The production observed here was a much larger undertaking than that in Australia and it seemed that the entire conservatory was involved in one way or another. The opera performances were highlight events in the concert calendar of this busy music school. Many conservatory staff and students have told me that the vocal department was very famous for its outstanding opera productions and that they were always highly anticipated in the surrounding community.

While a lot of excitement and anticipation was created around the production, it also put a lot of pressure on the staff and students involved. The pressure was particularly evident in the first full-cast music call with the conductor. The conductor was an Italian maestro and a guest at the school. Prior to his arrival the vocal department staff spent a few weeks teaching the music to

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130 Also see discussion on p. 107.
the principals and chorus. The first full-cast music call with Maestro was a very anticipated rehearsal: the conductor was introduced to the singers as they were introduced to him. It was a nerve-wrecking experience, similar to a first date perhaps, where if the chemistry was not right from the start – the whole future relationship might be in jeopardy. Likewise, the school staff were also on trial: how well did the students know their material? Would maestro be pleased with what he heard?

Maestro is maintaining a very energetic atmosphere; he smiles and jokes frequently, however the mood in the room is intense. Everyone is trying to get it right and there is a great deal to get through. I feel that there are two pressures here: the staff present feel responsible for the preparation of the singers and Maestro is under pressure to show the staff how well he can lead the first combined rehearsal. They move on to a section that’s slightly tricky with chorus and principals interjecting. After Adina sings her line the chorus fail to come in correctly. I can see the head of music frowning at the back, he whispers to the chorus: “this is bar twenty”. I feel the mood intensified, stakes are suddenly quite high and the head of music has little tolerance for mistakes from the chorus today…Maestro is doing his best to engage with the singers, to inspire energy and animation. He sings the singers’ lines to demonstrate the shape and the pronunciation, he explains the characters’ motivations, he tells anecdotes and produces many giggles from the students…one hour into the rehearsal maestro loses his voice…End of rehearsal - everyone applauds. As the students pack some of them continue singing bits of the opera, some chatter. The Italian coach gives bits of paper to the principals with his notes scribbled on. The rest of the staff linger a little longer around the director’s table discussing something quietly. I pack up and get ready to depart, but not before the director suddenly spots me and sings to me a little line of the last chorus with some disco dance moves thrown in. I ask him:

- Will that be the choreography?
- Yes I just made it up now, I think its pretty good!

We both laugh and exit. He is obviously in a good mood and happy with how things have gone today. The stress and tension of the first rehearsal with Maestro have now been relieved.131

The pressure of competition between the singers and their desire to prove themselves to the staff was also evident. The competition was particularly exposed between the principals and the cast.

of covers. The covers were present in all rehearsals and were expected to know the roles as well as the principals. In order to do that they had to “shadow” the principals – follow everything with their score, write everything down and whenever possible – physically mimic all stage movements: that way the covers would “get the roles into their bodies” as well as their minds. It was a difficult task – the covers received less stage time, but were expected to perform the roles just as well as the principals. They were also under the pressure of constant comparison to their principal counterparts:

All the while the covers are following the music with their scores. I am wondering about the interplay between covers and principals, the stress of having to sit listening to the principals singing for 40 minutes, then suddenly singing the same thing for ten minutes, then waiting and listening again…

Maestro:

It is a pity we have to work in blocks. Have a ten-minute break, lets hear the others, so we get to know each other.

He turns to the two covers and asks them now to sing the same duet he just worked on with the principals. This is a tense moment. The principals just sang through the duet beautifully and now this pair will have to sing it and be compared. The cover tenor in particular looked uncomfortable. As he sang, his body language was excessive and nervous. He turned to the soprano, as he delivered his lines, his facial expressions were forced and his head movements were exaggerated. The cover soprano seemed much more poised. Nevertheless, they sounded fine.

Maestro:

Fine, fine there is just a few things, we will have to find some time later to work on this a little more.\textsuperscript{132}

This rehearsal has been very even in terms of using both casts (covers and principals), more so than other rehearsals. One can’t help but compare the different personalities and voices - some clearly stronger than others. Although camaraderie and friendliness between the students is obvious, the competition is always there.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{133} Observation: 4.11.13, \textit{L’elisir d’amore}. 
The camaraderie, friendliness and generally supportive atmosphere were a prominent feature of these rehearsals and reflected in the overall culture of the conservatory. Although the stakes were high and the pressure was evident, I never saw it spilling over into the personal relationships. On the contrary, there was an awareness of pressure that resulted in mutual support:

I notice that the principals watch their covers very carefully and occasionally gesture to them or mime something to remind them of the blocking. The covers did not have as much time on the stage; the principal cast are very supportive in trying to help them whenever possible. As they stop, I see the principal Belcore run up to his counterpart and start explaining something enthusiastically.

**Director:**

We are going to carry on with the scene until 5 now, I thought I had you until 6, but I got the schedule wrong AGAIN. So we will carry on.

They run the scene one more time. Adina turns to her cover:

**Do you want to do it?**

She is offering her cover a chance to sing the next run of the scene. Cover Adina quickly jumps up to switch places with the principal. I am most impressed by this friendly and supportive behaviour of the cast. The genuine friendliness among all the students and the staff is quite evident. Everyone is trying very hard to support each other in every way and to produce the best show possible.\(^{134}\)

It is worth noting here that in most professional productions covers and principals do not normally rehearse together. Covers can watch principal rehearsals, but they only get involved in the rehearsal if a principal is ill or unavailable. The principals rarely get to see their covers rehearse. There are special cover rehearsals and principals are not required to attend them, so in this case it was interesting to see the covers and the principals working together so closely\(^{135}\).

Even outside the production rehearsals, the nurturing, supportive environment of the vocal department and the entire conservatory was one of the things that attracted the students:

I started the postgraduate diploma in September 2012, so this is my second year here. I love it, I absolutely love it…The great thing about this college is that there isn’t that whole massive competitive edge. You can walk in and I am saying hello to everybody and everybody is just welcoming and happy and relaxed and focusing on themselves,

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\(^{134}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{135}\) See also discussion on cover work, p. 78.
not focusing on competing with everyone else around them. It’s because of that I think it’s sort of more productive. It’s a much more encouraging environment and I think that people are much more likely to develop further and more, you can get so much more from being here and not having to waste your energy on up somebody else or anything like that.\(^{136}\)

I auditioned all over the place as you would when you do your first set of auditions. But the minute I walked through this door and had my consultation lesson and then came for my audition, it felt like home and this building really does feel like a family, whereas I found personally in some of the colleges it was all a little bit detached and no-one really wanted to help anyone and it was all a bit…\(^{137}\)

After spending more time at the school it became evident to me that mutual student support and the nurturing environment were not accidental. On the contrary, it was a product of a very focused effort:

> I want to take the competition away from them [vocal students] and then they have to be supportive…they are really privileged to be studying music and they have to earn their places and they have to be supportive of each other in all circumstances.\(^{138}\)

Many students and staff here discussed the nurturing, family feel of the school. After only a few days at the conservatory I myself was very aware of it. For example, it was very easy to meet and to talk to people here. The conservatory principal and other executive staff made themselves socially available by attending most college performances and then staying on afterwards, chatting with the students and other staff. This happened almost every evening. All college concerts were promoted to the entire student cohort via email on daily basis, always stressing the fact that the students had either free access or a very cheap ticket. The result was that almost the entire college would turn up to performances and then “hang out” afterwards discussing what they heard and saw. The discussion could easily move on to a local pub and continue late into the night. Likewise, the student representatives here were very active and received a great amount of support and encouragement. They helped to promote student performances and organised a large number of social events. There were also regular surveys sent out to all students, asking them to produce feedback on various aspects of the school, further encouraging

\(^{136}\) Interview: 6.11.13, Barbara.  
\(^{137}\) Interview: 6.11.13, Matthew.  
\(^{138}\) Interview: 01.10.13, Isobel.
productive dialogue and active student involvement. Even I was requested to attend a focus group session as an international postgraduate student, where I was questioned about my experience at the college and then treated to refreshments and drinks. There were many similar catered events during my semester at the school. The executive staff always attended them and used the opportunity to talk to the students in the relaxed, casual environment. All this was a part of the focused effort to create a supportive, nurturing atmosphere and to encourage effective dialogue between the students and the staff. It should be noted that for all the friendliness and focused efforts to create a warm social environment, it never affected staff professionalism. There was a healthy balance of encouragement and criticism as well as mutual respect that prevented excessive student-staff familiarity. It seemed that those boundaries were quite clearly defined and were always there.

Inspirational teaching staff - particularly voice teachers, were also a prominent theme here. Many students commented that besides the opera productions, their private voice lessons were the most important aspects of the training: “Well for me the most important part of the course is the private singing lessons.” Staff leadership and encouragement was also fundamental to the opera production rehearsals:

It is hard to transmit in writing the director’s larger than life personality, but it has a dominant impact on the character and the environment of these rehearsals. He is a short stout man of about 60 with a rather high but very expressive voice. He smiles and jokes continuously and he drives these rehearsals with his energy, wit, enthusiasm and clear leadership. He has a very generous personality and it seems it is virtually impossible to irritate him. Even when he tells someone off it is always with good humour and encouragement. He is very flamboyant and enjoys being theatrical. He also continuously laughs at himself. It’s a 15 min break now and for the first time I see him slightly collapsed and tired.

They discussed the scene briefly. Maestro then went on describing how the characters were feeling and what was happening between them at that point: a power struggle. He was very animated: every time he tried to explain the emotions at play, he hopped off his high conductor chair and approached the singers. Maestro also demonstrated a

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139 Interview: 30.10.13, Robert.
140 Observation: 4.11.13, L’elisir d’amore.
lot by singing the vocal lines. His voice was a nice tenor. That impressed me, since not that many operatic conductors can actually sing.\textsuperscript{141}

The energy, dedication and enthusiasm of the staff created a fast rehearsal pace. The students were required to maintain their engagement and to respond quickly to what was going on. At the same time, the grinding, repetitive rehearsal process demanded high levels of patience:

Finally the stage is set: most of the chairs are moved away and so is the desk. The chorus are seated on the floor next to their assigned love interests in a pastoral scene. Nemorino\textsuperscript{142} is standing up now, ready to enter the scene. I’ve just realised that it’s 3:30pm and the rehearsal started at 2pm. Nemorino was sitting there the whole time waiting to sing his part of the scene. Now he is standing on the side, wearing a straw hat and ready to go. The music starts, the chorus sing their number, but they are stopped again and again. The whole time Nemorino is waiting to sing his aria. Finally they are allowed to go on, just as they approach Nemorino’s entry they stop again and he is asked to swap with his cover.\textsuperscript{143}

A demanding rehearsal schedule and high-energy levels expected by the production staff resulted in high levels of vocal fatigue, particularly in the younger chorus singers who had yet to develop their stamina and learn how to pace themselves in a rehearsal:

The student came in: a 19-year-old mezzo-soprano - dark, chirpy and pretty. As she enters she says shyly to her teacher:

- I am so tired from the opera!
- I know and the director expects full energy from you all the time!
- Yes and I also have to practice in between!\textsuperscript{144}

While the principals also experienced the fatigue, they had some strategies on dealing with it:

Pacing yourself is very, very important. Especially vocally and it’s mainly vocal fatigue I find that hits. So the way I deal with that is you just make sure that even if you are not singing for now, your intention and your action and your characterisation doesn’t match

\textsuperscript{141} Observation: 21.10.13, \textit{L’elisir d’amore}.
\textsuperscript{142} Principal tenor character.
\textsuperscript{143} Observation: 4.11.13, \textit{L’elisir d’amore}.
\textsuperscript{144} Observation: 29.11.13, Private voice lesson.
what you are doing vocally. So you can be singing quietly and singing more internally as long as your actions are still as big as they are going to be when you are on stage because then it shows the conductor and the director and everyone else like the language coach that you still know what’s going on and you are still engaged with this production, but you are just having a little bit of vocal rest…I find that when I am in a production I occasionally end up on almost a dancer diet, which is little and often, so half a banana here, half a banana there, some fruits and nuts. Things that are naturally good and naturally full of energy and slow release energy. And not eating too many sweets. That’s something that I find hilarious when I see chorus members or young professionals in breaks stuffing their faces with sweets. It’s like “that’s great, but that will get you through like 20 minutes of this rehearsal and then all of a sudden all of the artificial sugar will just make you crash and it will be no good for you, it’s no good for them, it’s no good for the production because all of a sudden you’ve got no energy”, so yeah. So it is making sure that you don’t push your voice further than your voice can go – you are the only person that knows what your voice can do because it’s inside you. Yes the conductor, the director, the choreographer may be wanting more from you, but there is no point if you can’t give vocally more at that point. Give physically more. Even though you are not singing, give the words more, give it the energy you will give it when you are singing full voice, but don’t push it, especially when you are in long production calls like at the moment we generally work 6 hours a day: three hours in the morning, three hours in the afternoon. That also occasionally changes when we’ve got chorus, we will end up with 4 hours in the afternoon, 3 hours in the morning. And especially chorus rehearsals, ‘cause there are so many of the chorus, there are so many things to do with them, you end up repeating sections over and over and over again.  

Towards the end of the production period many singers started losing their voices and falling ill. There were, however, some that remained oblivious to the issue:

I don’t have too much of a problem, I was at a Billy Joel concert last night and was singing away quite emphatically so I am feeling a bit tired today, but I have a reasonably strong voice I think, ‘cause it never seems to get really bad. Occasionally I

145 Interview: 06.11.13, Matthew.
have a day where I won’t sing so damn loudly, but I’ve been singing loudly my entire life so it’s probably given it some stamina.  

Language and diction was another aspect of the training that received a lot of emphasis. In production rehearsals and in private lessons a lot of attention was placed on correct pronunciation, dramatic expression and understanding of the text:

The conductor asks the chorus to recite the text instead of singing it. Maestro, his assistant and the repetiteur are native Italians and diction mistakes really bother them. But it’s more than diction: under energised pronunciation was losing all character and meaning. The chorus start to recite the text, they are stopped intermittently by Maestro who demonstrates correct execution. Suddenly the director jumps up and shouts to the chorus dramatically:

It’s “vampa!” its “ardente”! It’s ardent, it’s the blood pulsing boom, boom, boom! It’s Sophia Loren on a good day!

The language training classes however were not perceived as answering the needs of all the singing students:

This class is called “Italian surgery”. Every student books 15 minutes to work on an Italian aria, the rest sit around and follow the lesson with a spare score. Angelo is the Italian tutor. At the end of the session he exclaims:

I am so, so sorry, we have to stop. You need to speak to whoever is organising this, 15 minutes is not enough to go through an aria!

The next class is heard chattering outside, they are ready to come in and we have to leave. Angelo, slightly irritated, explains to me that here he has no time to teach the students all the desired components like the IPA, grammar and interpretation.

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146 Interview: 30.10.13, Robert.
147 This production was performed in the original Italian version.
148 Observation: 4.11.13, L’elisir d’amore.
149 IPA - International Phonetic Alphabet. It is an essential tool for singers performing in a foreign language.
150 Observation: 1.10.13, language coaching.
I think the language here is a bit light on. Our French is only diction, so we don’t really learn grammar…at the moment its just phonetics and pronunciation rather then learning the language. ¹⁵¹

Good command of the language one was singing in was seen as an essential first step towards a convincing performance. Correct diction and understanding of the text was the initial requirement for secure vocal technique as well as a pathway to the dramatic interpretation. The motivations of the characters, their facial expressions, movements and gestures – all originated from the text one was singing. Therefore convincing language skills were interdependent with convincing acting skills:

The chorus have just sung through their big opening number, the director is not convinced:

OK it’s very nice, but its flat dramatically, what are you singing at the end, what are you saying? “Fortunate”? What’s that about? Ah?! Ah?!¹⁵²

To summarise, the vocal department observed in the UK was structured very differently to the relatively small Australian opera school. Figure 9, p. 67 demonstrates the top emergent themes in UK setting. Here it was impossible to give everyone the opportunity to perform a role in the course of their vocal studies, so instead the competitive audition process screened for outstanding operatic talent. Those outstanding students were promoted by the school and used the production and other performance opportunities to launch their operatic careers. The school prided itself on having very active industry networks in UK and all around Europe. It also attracted top industry professionals to tutor the singers at the school. The vocal department and the conservatory had a distinct nurturing atmosphere. Much effort was made to facilitate a healthy staff-student dialogue. Students were encouraged to support each other, regardless of the highly competitive environment. Although a comprehensive array of subjects was offered, the disparate student skill levels and lack of time did not always allow meeting the student needs adequately. This was particularly evident in the units covering languages.

¹⁵¹ Interview: 6.11.13, Sharon.
¹⁵² Observation: 28.10.13, L’élisir d’amore.
**Top emergent themes from the UK vocal school**

- Nurturing environment
- Inspirational teachers
- Industry connections, launching careers
- Patience and attention in rehearsals
- Competitive environment
- Vocal fatigue
- Lacking language training
- Informed performance and acting skills
- Responding fast to feedback in the rehearsal

![Figure 9: UK vocal school top themes](image)

**What makes an accomplished opera singer?**

Figure 10, p. 70 lists a summery of the accomplished opera singer perception in UK setting. In the UK setting perceptions of what made an accomplished opera singer were quite similar to Australia. The main difference was that having a second profession or a “back-up plan” was not one of the major themes here. Having a beautiful voice was considered to be one of the main prerequisites:

> …some people have an extraordinary quality in their voice which provokes an emotional response – that’s a very good thing.\(^\text{153}\)

Having the sound that matched the look and the array of other skills or being a good package was also discussed:

> Well a friend of mine says you need to turn up on time, be nice and know the music. So that means you have to have a good voice, doesn’t have to be exceptional, a good voice and an enormous range of skills.\(^\text{154}\)

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\(^\text{153}\) Interview: 15.10.13, Alex.

\(^\text{154}\) Interview: 01.10.13, Isobel.
I think someone who is emotionally engaged and is technically efficient, knows how to colour their voice, but has a beautiful like, tone, resonant tone, but is also able to act and make you believe in their character so it’s all one package – there is nothing that’s missing. That’s always the struggle I guess with singing.  

A large part of that package was discipline and hard work:

…and then they select if you are disciplined enough. If you have the sense of responsibility, because nowadays lots of people don’t show up to rehearsal, they don’t take good care of themselves, like they drink too much or they smoke or they party too much or they don’t have a very healthy lifestyle, not taking care of their own voices and also you can see some “diva” or “divo” kind of thing…I think for the opera houses discipline is very important, because they want to have someone who can work! After all it’s a job, it’s a profession. It’s a profession with passion and all the other things, but it’s still a profession. You have to be disciplined. I think that’s one of the most important things for young singers.

Part of the discipline was being able to respond fast to feedback in rehearsals:

…and someone who takes on board information, but can test it, try it, make it mean something to them.

Finally, good acting skills were another desirable quality:

…the chaps I really like can also act properly, as a stage actor would, convince you of what he is singing, which is, I’ve always liked Shakespeare and I did more straight acting before I could sing and I think that’s supremely important.

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155 Interview: 6.11.13, Sharon.
156 Interview: 30.11.13, James.
157 Interview: 19.09.13, Meryl.
158 Interview: 30.10.13, Robert.
In this school the perception of an accomplished opera singer and the training provided was a good match. One of the exceptions was lack of time devoted to the language training, which was a big part of “being a package”. On the other hand the practical, soloist role stage experience was only available to a few top students. While everyone could audition for the roles, the student numbers did not make it feasible to provide everybody with the opportunity. In the absence of the actual opera school (like the Australian model), the opera stream training (opera electives) was of high standard, but only available through a highly competitive audition process. However, the experience of being in the opera chorus was available to many undergraduates. Once selected by audition, the operatic soloist training was very purposeful and aimed at launching the careers of the outstanding students, therefore a lot of emphasis was placed on the final product. The college had a very good track record of the opera alumni employed by opera companies, and it should be noted that many of them were Australian postgraduates. As mentioned earlier, many outstanding young Australian singers made their way overseas in search of better opportunities for training and employment. The student sample in this setting was another example of such talent ending up in an elite opera stream of a UK vocal school.

**CASE STUDY III: Australian opera company**

Figure 11, p. 71 gives a full summery of the opera company participants. The Australian opera company investigated created a great opportunity to gain professional industry perspective. Because there are so few professional opera companies in Australia, in the interests of protecting confidentiality, I will not describe in detail its working structure and size.
The singer sample was a mixture of young principals (late 20s to mid 30s), one older international artist in his 50s and one chorus member in his 50s. All the interviewed singers were Australian-born. Only one singer did not study music at a tertiary level, the rest had undergone tertiary music training in Australia. Only 2 out of the 6 singers interviewed had international singing experience. Three of the principals started in the chorus and sang there for several years, then moved on to the company young artist program and were subsequently promoted to principal positions. Several participants discussed the advantage of being able to develop gradually within the company. Starting in the chorus meant that one sang in a group in a professional environment, but without the pressure of being a soloist. That way the young singers could learn their craft in a safer environment where they could develop their stamina, learn to follow direction and the conductor, as well as share the stage with experienced soloists. While in the chorus the singers could also be offered the opportunity to cover small roles and to participate in outreach programs that toured remote country areas:
So I spent 2 years in the chorus doing mainly my chorus duties, understudying some of the smaller roles, then the following year I remained in the chorus, but went on tour as Pinkerton in *Madam Butterfly*. The following year I became a young artist with the company and did various roles and covers and tour again. The second year of the young artist program then happened. The whole lot of that year was doing the Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto* and then I became a first-year principal, that was last year and this year I am a principal artist, but it’s my second year of doing that […] I think that the chorus master would probably attest that my development as a singer and as a chorister over the three years was quite a good one where I was able to contribute and be a big contributor to the first tenor section and to be part of some really great productions. So that’s really where I think I finalised my apprenticeship of my craft. ‘Cause I think that we have to view it like an apprenticeship where you might do some studies, you might then get in to profession in some guise and there may be a period of chorus and young artist business before you end up moving on.  

I did 2 years in the young artist program and was lucky enough to then be kept on as a principal in the ensemble, which is by no means guaranteed, if you’ve done the young artist program they make that very clear that it’s not a guarantee that you are going to be given work when that finishes […] I don’t think they like to box people too much, which is a good thing. When I think about all the repertoire that I’ve got under my belt in those few years I’ve been here, it’s an incredible amount of roles that I’ve either performed or understudied – it’s nearly all of major repertoire for my voice type, all the common stuff I mean so it’s really good!

Ability to develop and grow within an opera company was becoming a rare experience in the European opera industry that was operating more and more on short contract basis. As a result there was a lack of young artist development to the extent that some promising careers could come to an early end:

The problem for British singers is they do sometimes a fantastic job, but they don’t do another job like that, so they don’t get developed by the same opera house. They have to learn their craft, but no-one is developing them. In the old days you had a group of singers, like they did at Covent Garden – fantastic singers who were on contract. They

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159 Interview: 16.05.12, Patrick.
160 Interview: 24.02.12, Rachel.
had lots of coaching for languages and music and they worked with directors and they learnt their craft, so each time they did an opera, they got better, so by the end when they’ve been there for say 8 years or onwards – they were brilliant. They may not have been the best singers, but when they went on the stage, they could what you call “hold the stage”… I’ve seen people in Europe who were put on the stage and given a big part, but did not bring it off, not because they couldn’t sing it, they sang it beautifully, but they didn’t bring it off, and its hard to put your reasons about that, but it’s a general reaction – they didn’t hold the stage, or they didn’t make an impact. Then they never get used again. It’s actually more dangerous to get the good job, because if you don’t bring it off – that’s it. That’s really sad, because they probably had a talent but they were pushed too early. Everyone gets excited – this is the new talent! But then they are not ready to do it, they probably have got the talent, but they need to be fostered slowly and not to be thrown in the deep end to that extent. They need a lifeboat.  

Due to Australian geography, however, the situation here was somewhat different and there were real opportunities for the local young artist development:

…because of the distance they have to use Australian singers. If you go to Covent Garden and see Boheme – most of the singers will be non-British. Hardly any of them would be British – it’s an unusual thing. It will be Russians or Italians – obviously fantastic singers, it’s a whole market out there, whereas in Australia you can’t use that market because it’s too far away. So you have to put on Boheme mainly with Australian singers, obviously you have a few guests, but it’s a much more interesting culture because you can develop the singers.

All participants discussed the practicality of the operatic profession and the necessity of learning the craft by being involved in production environment as much as possible:

So I would encourage people to just get experience anyway they can being on the stage and being a performer. ‘Cause you only learn by doing I think. Yes of course you need your vocal technique and all that sort of stuff, but then you do get to a point where you don’t need to see your teacher much.

161 Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.  
162 referring to La Boheme by Puccini.  
163 Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.  
164 Interview: 24.02.12, Rachel.
Lack of dialogue with academia

There was a perception that the university-structured environment was not always conducive to the practicality required for the operatic training:

I don’t know how to solve the education of singers because the only way they learn is on the job. Of course they’ve still got to do all the language things, they’ve still got to do the classes but they’ve got to be allowed, even if they do an amateur production, something outside of the institution - it’s still better for them to do that, to be released to do that, because they are going to learn more from it, then by having a whole year of singing lessons.165

I think you just have to learn by doing unfortunately and that’s hard in an institution to do that. When I joined the company I had so little experience on the stage! I had a few choruses that I’ve done and one role, but I’d hardly done anything, so to be in the chorus, to be on the stage nearly every night performing was just the best education.166

Some participants chose not to finish their music degree at all and learn on the job instead:

…the chorus for me I felt when I left the university, the decision was: do I stay and finish my degree and turn down two years of full-time employment or do I have two years of gainful employment and learn on the job? So the reason for being in the chorus was that it’s a job. I moved out with two bags of clothing. I was also able to take two years and become familiar with many operas, and be a part of the production and get to understand how production works, what is involved. I got to stand in the background and watch international and local principal artists do their job and so I got to observe like a field study – observe them doing what they do and work out in the two-to-three years: is this something that I want to do for another 30 odd years?167

While there was young artist development taking place within the company, there was a perceived lack of dialogue with the academic institutions. It was felt that the university programs did not provide sufficient performance opportunities for opera students. There was

165 Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.
166 Interview: 24.02.12, Rachel.
167 Interview: 16.05.12, Patrick.
also a perceived lack of flexibility in the university course structure that prevented young singers from undertaking professional opera work while keeping their degree going at the same time. The participants also discussed the lack of any link between finishing their operatic training and entering the profession:

I would have actually liked to have completed my degree part-time… I had to make the choice: either full-time work, or finish my degree one more year, but we were only doing one production a year, 12 hours a week, I had no money coming, so of course I am going to choose a job with money, with various other things, so would have been nice at the time if I could have sort of taken maybe a year and a half, two years to complete the final year and done some recitals and perhaps my performance practice in opera in the chorus could be used as some form of credit for a unit or something like that on top of that, so that you get a bit more of a bridge between the profession and the conservatoire… There must be other people, I wasn’t the last person and I wasn’t the first person to leave and yeah you think well even now if I could go back and do some masters of performance as you say and there’d be credits for what I do, I could do research on the roles that I am playing in the year, there could be a link…

Of course you can still go back and have a singing lesson, but then the academic course doesn’t allow for that flexibility. Because the university quite rightly will say – you’ve got to fulfil certain conditions. That’s where it all goes wrong because teaching a singer is not an academic thing. It’s like learning to be a plumber or an electrician. You’ve got to get out and be an apprentice. Universities still don’t understand that because they’ve got a different way of educating, which is for intellectual people who become scientists, things like that. The trouble with singers is that they are doing a job and they have to learn how to do that.

Some participants also felt that lack of institutional connection with the industry could sometimes prevent the opera students from receiving adequate expert advice:

… in terms of education now it seems to be all about research and it seems to be about what pieces of paper you’ve got after your name. Now if you are going to be a freelance singer or opera singer or freelance musician – you need someone who’s walked the walk, you need somebody to say - 9 times out of 10 when we have major performances are not the nights our voice feels fantastic, which is usually when we don’t have to sing

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168 Interview: 16.05.12, Patrick.
169 Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.
for anything. So you’ve got to work out how do you get through performances when you are tired? How do you get through performances when you can’t do it? Which is 9 times out of 10. How do you pace massive roles? If you haven’t sung Madam Butterfly or you haven’t sung great big roles in major opera houses - I don’t understand how you can tell someone how to do it?!\(^{170}\)

Trouble is there are a lot of people close to these singers who haven’t been on the stage. Because even if you know about it and go to the performances – you don’t really understand it. I know how the plumber works, I can see and understand what he is doing, but it doesn’t mean I can help an apprentice plumber; only another plumber who is very good at his job can help that person. Because just to say “have a go at this” or “no you should try this” until the problem happens…only he can tell them how to deal with the problem.\(^{171}\)

**Cover work**

Most soloists started their professional careers by doing cover work - understudying principal roles. All principal roles were usually “covered” in case a principal fell ill. The job of the cover was to know the role and to stand by on the days of the performances in case the principal they were covering was unable to “go on” – perform the role. Cover work was highly stressful for two main reasons.

Firstly – a cover never knew if he/she would be required to perform. The cover singer had to be ready to sing the role on any night of the performance and could sometimes be called on halfway through the show. On the other hand, one could be standing by for the entire season without having to go on.

Secondly, covers got much less rehearsal time and very little stage time; hence they were much less familiar with the production details like sets, props and costumes. Covers were also unfamiliar with the rest of the principal cast and their conductor and had no rehearsals with the orchestra. Therefore going on as a cover was highly stressful as there were a lot of unknowns to contend with:

…as a cover you don’t get the proper rehearsal. Like here it’s really great because they do rehearse you thoroughly, but it’s very different the when you rehearse when you

\(^{170}\) Interview: 17.02.12, John.  
\(^{171}\) Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.
are actually doing the role. When you are doing the role you have like 5 or 6 weeks of full on rehearsal, which is great because you sing it into your voice, you get it into your body, you are very confident with your performance. If you are a cover, you’ll get cover rehearsals, but not with the people that you would be working with if you went on the stage and you don’t usually get the costume, you don’t ever walk on the set, so if you ever do have to go on, there is a lot to contend with [...] It’s the first time you are working with conductor, with the orchestra, you’ve never moved around the set, you don’t know the spacing, you don’t know how the costume works, you don’t know how the prop works. So it’s really, really stressful…

On the positive side - if a cover went on and did a good job, it could impress the company management and affect the singer’s movement from chorus into a principal position:

…they just need to make sure the curtain is going to go up and they don’t want to have to worry about a cover not being prepared or not knowing their music, or not knowing what they are doing or not being competent on the stage and so if you are able to step up and show them that you can manage then they will be like “great, we can rely on her”. The consistency is a big thing.

Assigning cover work to promising young singers was part of their development and a way for the company to see how well the singers would perform under pressure:

I think we’ve got the talent, you just have to foster it. Everyone has got it in one sense, but until you throw them in the deep end, you don’t really know if they can bring it off, however good they are in the studio – that’s the hard thing. That’s why it’s great in the opera companies when you have covers – that means you can find out in a cover rehearsal – which is not easy to do, because you only had so much time and you have to be ready to go on, but it’s a really good way of finding out and that’s how most opera companies try people out. It’s too dangerous to throw them on the stage, because if it goes wrong – that’s it!

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172 Interview: 26.03.12, Elizabeth.
173 Interview: 24.02.12, Rachel.
174 Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.
Not all companies have a pathway for young singers entering the chorus that can eventually lead to principal work. In countries like Germany, chorus work and solo work is completely separate and there is virtually no movement between the two:

There are some in the company who think there should be delineation as there is in Germany, but I think we are such a small pool here and I think if you want good voices in the chorus, you have to entice them with some good covers. I think jobs should be given on merit and if someone is capable in the chorus, clearly soloist material – they should be given a chance.

This company was therefore unique in giving cover opportunities to promising young singers in the chorus. The singers that managed to go on and do a good job were eventually promoted to the young artist and principal positions. Cover work was therefore an important part of artist development. It should be noted that cover work was by no means limited to young and inexperienced singers. While smaller, episodic roles could be covered by younger singers – main, big roles were always covered by seasoned artists. Company principals would usually cover some roles in addition to their principal work.

**Chorus work**

Most operas are written for soloists and chorus. The Australian company investigated staged productions with varied numbers of chorus involved. Crowd scenes in Aida had up to forty chorus on the stage. Ladies and gentlemen of the chorus were used in the scenes containing choral ensemble numbers. They were also used in the scenes that did not contain any choral numbers, but where the chorus were still used as part of the action, e.g. portraying guests at a wedding.

Musically the chorus had very little to do in the *Cosi*: there were only two chorus numbers in the entire opera. However, in this production the chorus were used on the stage for much of the action: they were all given different characters to play and were divided into little social groups portraying wedding guests or romantic couples in the garden. All chorus movements were choreographed and timed to fine detail…chorus received regular praise and encouragement. The rehearsal staff maintained an up-beat,

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175*Glyndebourne festival, UK is another great example of young artist development. Many young singers that start in its chorus get offered cover work, some have subsequently become famous international soloists.*

176*Interview: 24.02.12, Rachel.*
energetic atmosphere. The chorus was treated as an essential part of the drama in the production. They received undivided attention from the staff, who took much trouble in explaining to them all the details of the production and reasons behind them.\textsuperscript{177}

Next big crowd scene: the male chorus are transformed into solemn Egyptian priests worshiping Horus.\textsuperscript{178}

There could also be moments with “off-stage” chorus, where they could be heard singing off-stage, but not actually seen by the audience:

At one point the chorus master runs up to the head of music and has an intense discussion about something. He is wearing big headphones over his neck. I am guessing this is for conducting the backstage chorus and listening to the orchestra in real time through the headphones. (there are several moments in the production, when the chorus is heard off stage)\textsuperscript{179}

The chorus were expected to know their parts musically and dramatically. They were expected to be involved in the drama and to portray their characters at all times, which meant that even when they were not singing, they needed to be aware of what was happening on the stage and react.

Chorus singers were also the busiest and the hardest participants to get a hold of. Full-time chorus could have a schedule where they would be performing in the evening and rehearsing during the day, six days a week:

…being in the chorus for 18 months really prepares you for the rigors of what it’s like to sing all the time. I mean it’s really hard work being in the chorus. I think in some ways it’s more taxing than being a principal. I mean there is more pressure as a principal, but the number of hours that you are singing is much more in the chorus. I mean vocally it’s much more tiring.\textsuperscript{180}

… you perform six nights a week sometimes towards the end of a season so in terms of vocal stamina that was a huge learning experience, in being able to get up every day

\textsuperscript{177} Observation: 10.02.12, \textit{Cosi fan tutte}.
\textsuperscript{178} Observation: 13.07.12, \textit{Aida}.
\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{180} Interview: 24.02.12, Rachel.
basically, except for a Sunday and I would honestly take Sundays off as vocal rests, unless I had concerts, which did happen from time to time, but most of the time I got to take a Sunday off. That meant that after three years – and I’ve never lost my voice and I’ve never had a vocal issue – but I knew I was robust enough to be in this profession and continue to grow.181

Although chorus work could be used as artist development for some younger singers, most of the older singers were employed in the chorus for many years and made it their profession. Chorus members that were offered cover work, accepted that work on top of their chorus duties:

I auditioned for the company and was offered a full time position in the Chorus where I have been employed since 1997.182

But that’s not to take away from those who make the chorus their career goal. So I never assumed that when I was in the chorus that I would move on one day … I was never using this as a stepping-stone. And it’s not a stepping-stone – it’s a job. Whether it’s a one-year, two-year, a season or a production that you are involved in and those who see it as a stepping stone, won’t treat it seriously and it gets noticed, so in terms of my development I do strongly feel that my years as a chorister were very informative about what I could deliver… I was given the opportunity to do some extra work as I mentioned, so that was good, but that’s also a juggle – so you take on extra responsibility [cover work]. You get paid for it and when I hear people complain now who are in the chorus about taking on extra things and being so tired, I think, well – you are getting paid for that, so you can’t complain, you took that on. But that’s not for everyone and there are people there who I respect deeply who have been in the chorus for twenty plus years, twenty to thirty-five years and they have a wealth of knowledge about the industry and the craft and the requirements. The wealth of knowledge that those people have about productions and singing and I think that if you are open to listening and you are open to accepting information, then those people can be a tremendous source to help you form your ideas and they are often the leaders. They turn up on time, they do a great job, they participate, they are enthusiastic. You can learn from your colleagues about things like that.183

181 Interview: 16.05.12, Patrick.
182 Interview: 23.12.12, Eddy.
183 Interview: 16.05.12, Patrick.
Principal work

Principal singers were soloists and did not sing in the chorus. As mentioned earlier, they could be involved in cover work as well. While the rehearsal period for the principals was very intense, involving group and private rehearsals with repetiteurs, language coaches, choreographer, director and conductor, after the premiere they were usually allowed two to three days rest between the performances. The principals were also expected to do a lot more independent work. They usually had to arrive at the first production rehearsal with their role well learnt or even completely memorised. The principals had a lot of down time and were expected to manage it effectively to learn their roles. Learning one’s role included the music and the text (mostly other than English). Many hours had to be invested into learning the roles not only mentally, but also physically – “singing them into the body”. The material needed to be known well enough to enable following stage direction in the first production rehearsal without worrying about the music:

Being a principal now, this is the fourth year of being a principal artist – two years of young artist and now a second year of principal artist – I have a lot more time. I have fewer roles to do, but I have more responsibility, because I am playing a bigger part within a production. I only turn up for production with the group and personal coachings, but I have to come knowing my music, so that’s really one of the key differences. In the chorus they schedule the time for you to learn it and you get it taught to you, so I have to learn it all by myself and I can request coachings and you have personal one-on-ones and that’s good, but every role I do, I have to kind of come at least knowing the notes, or knowing how things should go. So that’s really a big difference. And so my time in the calendar is a lot less rigid. The last six months, I had no more than two shows a week – doing Turandot. And I’ve had a reasonably big role, I was Pong in Turandot\(^\text{184}\) so I would take the day off, a day after the performance and generally the day before – I wouldn’t do too much singing.\(^\text{185}\)

Some principals found time management more challenging than others:

…especially doing this job where you’ve got a lot of time to kill. So sometimes you’ve got like 4 hours a week. So you have all these days that you have to kill. Ironically I think it’s boring, I’d rather be working, I’d rather be here doing…I mean that’s one of

\(^{184}\) Opera by Giacomo Puccini who died before completing it, posthumously completed by his student Franco Alfano(Kennedy, 2014)

\(^{185}\) Interview: 16.05.12, Patrick.
the things that kills me about this job and I wish I was better, is all the extra curriculum stuff. I should be spending my free time studying languages, movement, all this kind of thing - thin argument probably comes from laziness more than anything, it’s just you’ve gotta have a life as well. So…

**Voice types**

Voice types played a tremendous part in shaping the singers’ careers. (See Figure 12, p. 86.) Vocal size, range and colour dictated casting choices and how much time the company would invest in a particular singer. Light soprano and baritone voices were the most common types and therefore the roles requiring such voices were extremely competitive. On the other hand other voice types were more rare and generally more sought after:

I was lucky enough to be kept on and so I’ve been a principal for about 4 years and pretty much apart from when I took time off for maternity, pretty much in full-time employment so I think it was just partly the repertoire that artistic director chose happened to have things for me to do and he wanted to use me and also there was just a dearth of my type of mezzo around I think at the time. I mean the year that I did the young artist program it was just one other girl and me in the program and we basically shared all the mezzo repertoire: *Le Nozze*\(^{187}\), there were a couple of others that were used but they weren’t doing exactly the same sort of stuff so her and I shared a lot of stuff and we sort of moved into a bit of different sort of stuff now.\(^{188}\)

Voice types comprised an important part of the singers’ personal identity but were not always immutable or even clear. Over the years voices could “mature”, change in color and size or even move into a different category, meaning that the singer would have to completely redefine their musical persona or what roles he/she would consider auditioning for:

…as you grow as a singer, things change as well. You have to kind of redefine how you sing, what you sing and where you sing it.\(^ {189}\)

I am definitely a baritone. I think when I was at university I was a bass-baritone and when I went to “X” he was like “no you are definitely a baritone”. And I think the sort

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\(^{186}\) Interview: 20.02.12, Andrew.

\(^{187}\) *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Mozart.

\(^{188}\) Interview: 24.02.12, Rachel.

\(^{189}\) Interview: 16.05.12, Patrick.
of feeling that I get from a lot of people: from teachers, from coaches and stuff is – not what I am capable of now, but what they think it could be. And that’s great. I mean you know I am glad that people think that, but that’s worth nothing. It’s worth nothing unless I can get there… For a long time when people asked what I thought I was, I didn’t say what I was, because I didn’t know, I am still too young to know. And I’ve never touched the top, like the very top, because I’ve never needed to. I was never put in anything where I needed to use it and that was a blessing in disguise because it meant that all my developmental years I wasn’t trying to be something – I was sort of fitting into what, you know, the bits that people wanted me to do. And then it wasn’t till last year where I sort of finally, ‘cause I was learning from “X”, and he was like “you’ve got the top!” But now I know it’s there. And now it’s just a question of using it and showing it, so yeah now…It’s constant discoveries and it’s constant evolution.190

Language coach Monica originally trained as a singer, but when she discovered that her voice type did not match the repertoire she was passionate about, it caused so much conflict in her personal identity as a singer that she decided to give up on the idea of a professional career:

And then when I was over there [Austria] I was told that even though I had been training as a mezzo, I was told like “you are not a mezzo”. And I was sort of like, what? Anyway, I came back and I changed teachers and I was told the same thing all the time: “no you are not a mezzo”. Great…and I think that was really the critical point of moving from thinking that I would actually try and pursue it. Also when I got back, no when I was over there I was told that my voice was probably too small anyway. It was sort of like a Lieder191 sort of voice or you know, earlier music rather than the music that I really liked and so it just had a sense of inevitability about it, which took me a long time to actually decide that I wasn’t going to do it anymore.192

She further discussed how singing something that was perceived as not matching one’s voice type could greatly affect singers’ motivation and psychological well-being:

… it can be difficult in a repertory company because people are cast in all sorts of things that they may or may not be passionate about, so they might have a year of work and in that year they might be really keen to do 5 % of it. Or they may be really keen to

190 Interview: 20.02.12, Andrew.
191 German art song.
192 Interview: 16.05.12, Monica.
do 20% of it, or may be 80 if they are lucky, but then other things it’s not really the stuff you don’t love should be performed at a lesser level, lesser quality or something, but it’s difficult to be inspired by something that you feel doesn’t suit you.\textsuperscript{193}

Soprano Elizabeth discussed her difficulty with performing the role of Despina\textsuperscript{194} in \textit{Cosi fan tutte} as it was not entirely appropriate for her voice type, and what roles she would rather sing instead:

Like my Despina is very different…Now in hindsight I think it’s actually too low for me. It’s very, very low. And in all the ensembles I am singing underneath Dorabella\textsuperscript{195} – she is a mezzo! It’s almost mezzo register. It’s funny too because when I said I was doing \textit{Cosi} a couple of people were like “you are doing Fiordiligi\textsuperscript{196}?!?” and I was like no, I would never sing that, it’s too big for me. And I think if you can’t breeze through those long arias, I’d rather stick to the real coloratura\textsuperscript{197} repertoire: I’d love to do Zerbinetta one day, it’s like…Sophie in \textit{Der Rosenkavalier} – I’d love that sort of, I love Strauss a lot – my favourite! But also bel canto as well is wonderful. Just have to wait and see what comes up really.\textsuperscript{198}

It was then very important that the personal identity, the singer’s voice type and the roles that the singers were offered were as close a match as possible. The voice and role match was also dependant on the singer’s physical appearance. For example, lighter voices were often cast in lighter, comic repertoire and called for a slighter, agile physical appearance on the stage. Likewise, lyric voices could be cast in romantic roles that called for a trim, sexy look:

Well that is actually why I got fit, because I knew the director wanted us to have our gear off, or some of our gear off and look there is totally vanity involved and I am happy to admit to that, but…I would have been happy taking it off before I guess, but the way I think about it is it’s another string in your bow. If you can… I am 29 years old, I am healthy – if I can do this, I am going to do it… As a friend of mine said “when Mimi is dying at the end of \textit{La Boheme} I want to know she is dying of consumption, not

\textsuperscript{193} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{194} Principal soprano character in \textit{Cosi fan tutte.}
\textsuperscript{195} Principal mezzo character in \textit{Cosi fan tutte.}
\textsuperscript{196} Principal soprano character in \textit{Cosi fan tutte.}
\textsuperscript{197} Coloratura is the highest female soprano voice type: usually relatively small, bright and very agile.
\textsuperscript{198} Interview: 26.03.12, Elizabeth.
heart disease” …you can be the best singer in the world and if you don’t have the goods to be on stage, then that’s no good either. So if you don’t look the part, like there are great voices in this company that don’t look the part. I mean fuck! So it’s hard! 199

Therefore not having a match between one’s voice type and physical appearance could greatly affect singers’ chances of being cast in desired roles. Likewise, being cast in roles that were perceived as not matching one’s voice type was equally damaging to the singers’ musical identity and artistic fulfilment. The careers were, therefore largely dictated by the God-given vocal qualities. Those qualities could be developed through training and natural physical development, but generally one had little control over which voice type they fell into. One would usually “discover” their type through trial, training and expert advice. However, artificially manipulating one’s voice, or training incorrectly could cause vocal damage, which was a particular issue with big dramatic voices. Most importantly, no matter what voice type - to be suitable for opera, the singers had to possess the ability of being heard in the theatre (without artificial amplification) over the sound of the orchestra:

It’s very tricky because nothing is ideal. Most singing teachers work in small rooms, they are very close to the singer, which of course you will never be that close. There is going to be an orchestra in between. It’s not easy to find a big hall and sometimes they are too resonant – it’s like a bathroom. Everyone sounds huge, but its just rubbish, because it’s never going to be like that. You need to have a bigger room with dryer acoustic, so you can hear if the sound is spinning out, because you are going to be in a bigger theatre in the end, even in a recital hall…doesn’t mean you have to be loud, but you have to learn how to spin that voice out. What’s happening is sometimes a big voice is being made smaller because in a small room it’s not easy to cope with. I’ve worked with a lot of big voices in my life and I can tell you – some sound terrible close to! Terrible! …you can't judge a big voice close to. A lot of big voices have started and were probably lost on the way because they’ve been told “oh its not a nice noise, terrible”. Conductors make the same mistake, always shutting singers up when they are close to them in the music call. Forgetting that then they get with the orchestra and we can’t hear them! Because they’ve been told for weeks to shut up! That is rubbish! A clever singer learns how to mark. If they have a big voice they mark, so the conductor says “that’s brilliant!” They know perfectly well they are not going to sing like that in the end. But with the orchestra, not only you have to be loud but have the sound, which

199 Interview: 20.02.12, Andrew.
is continuous and can pour out over the orchestra and not get stuck in the orchestral sound, because the orchestra is much more continuous then the piano. It’s sustained all of it. That’s why it’s easy to sing with – it’s like a blanket of sound underneath, but you have to still spin your voice out over the top of that in a legato way. People aren’t dealing with that because they judge them close to. It’s a big mistake. The conductors have fantastic ears, but I can name a few very famous ones who make big mistakes – they forget.200

Figure 12: Some factors affecting opera singer's musical identity and fulfilment

The lifestyle

Working for the opera company dictated a unique lifestyle that had its challenges. The company rehearsal schedule was emailed to the artists weekly, often making it impossible to plan anything more than a week in advance. Hours for the chorus were particularly challenging: they were busy most nights, which made it extremely difficult to have social interactions outside the company world. Odd hours and time away on tours put strain on personal relationships, especially in cases where the other partner was working outside the opera industry. Things proved more manageable, however, when both partners were employed by the company.

200 Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.
The inability to have a normal life. Lot’s of people say they can do it and I am sure they can - I don’t think I can, I am too worried about pleasing other people to be able to constructively differentiate the two. So you know I accept that in the foreseeable future I am not going to have a normal relationship or a permanent house or those kinds of things. And for some people that’s really important, for me it’s not. So but it’s obviously a downside, so I don’t think that this is the white picket fence life… the way I sort of look at it is that I was willing to quit in April last year because of the guilt of being away from my partner and stuff. Whereas now I’d rather just for at least a short term may be a couple of years focus on my job and let nothing else get in the way. So I am looking forward to touring this year because I am not leaving anyone behind… Yeah, my life was a lot more complicated last year, when I had a partner and all those kinds of responsibilities. When I look at so many people in this company who have partners, mortgages, all that kind of thing and this job is not conducive to having a normal life. 

I’ve always said it’s a lifestyle job. We don’t work nine to five and a lot of people don’t get that. When I look after my son at odd hours of the day, people assume that I am divorced and that I am a single dad or that I am (giggle) you know, otherwise unemployed, because what we do comes at different hours. Some weeks I might only have three hours of work, or six hours of work. If you tell your nine to five working friends that they sort of don’t understand, but what comes into the challenge of this profession is that you have to spend hours – take hours – to learn a role…The hardest aspect I think to being in the chorus is that it’s even more of an extreme lifestyle job. You can’t schedule coffees with friends and you can’t have dinners and you know. I am fortunate to have a partner who is in the industry, so she is in the chorus, so she is able to…you know we had the same schedule when we were both in the chorus for a period of time, which was great. We could come to work, we wouldn’t stand around holding hands all day, but we basically would go “right, see you at break” or whatever and get on with it and do what our jobs required. For those I think who don’t have partners in the industry, it must be difficult, because you are out five nights, four, six nights a week, depending on the week. And you are at odd hours and it’s a lifestyle, so that must be difficult. And for those who have children on top of that, I think that’s even probably more of a difficulty.

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201 Interview: 20.02.12, Andrew.
202 Interview: 16.05.12, Patrick.
Yes I have to go. My husband has a performance of Flute\textsuperscript{203} tonight, so I need to go home and mind the child, so he can have a rest.\textsuperscript{204}

The engrossing lifestyle of singing for the company could at times become too insular and overwhelming. (See Figure 14, p. 93.) Strong artistic personalities and egos could clash under stress, creating dramas outside the stage. Some participants found it very important to maintain outside interests and relationships to help sustain a healthy lifestyle:

…the hardest thing I think is to just maintain your own integrity amongst all that turmoil of peoples’ egos and stress and just stick to what you have to do and try not to get pulled or dragged into negative kind of vibes perhaps around the company or politics or things that are just going to drag you down. I think I’ve learnt over the years to just be a little bit more detached in my professional interactions. I mean obviously I have some close friends in the company, but just generally to just be, just have a bit more of a detached air about how I conduct myself and that’s just I think maturity as you get older as well. That’s just like any workplace I guess though. I think that’s the hardest thing…So it’s not glamorous in any sense. It’s hard work and you need to have a strong sense of self I think to be able to do this sort of job without getting swayed by everyone else’s opinion and all the toxic crap that goes on in an arts organisation…

You’ve got to have other interests I think, but that’s just healthy. I love just doing outdoorsy things, things with my son. I love going to nice restaurants, I love reading and talking, love good conversation with my close friends about art and music and just life, not just talking about opera all the time – it’s really boring (giggles)… I don’t feel like I want to be defined by what I do. I mean I do what I do and it’s great and people are “wow, she is an opera singer!” but I am also a mother and I do other stuff in my life as well, I have other interests, so I just want to keep that balance and perspective in my life with my work… ‘cause there’s so many egos at play and everyone’s got an opinion and you just need to be pretty level-headed I think and remain objective about yourself and always be trying to improve. You don’t want to stagnate, there are plenty of people waiting to take our place, so just to have that balance between being on the stage and just having a life.\textsuperscript{205}

\textsuperscript{203}Referring to \textit{Magic Flute} by Mozart.
\textsuperscript{204}Interview: 24.02.12, Rachel.
\textsuperscript{205}Interview: 24.02.12, Rachel.
It’s funny ’cause my real group of friends are non-singers. So this is kind of like my secret identity and you know we don’t really talk about work, I might tell them what I am doing. Up here nearly all my friends are singers, so it is nice to have a rest from that sometimes.\footnote{Interview: 20.02.12, Andrew.}

All participants felt that they were privileged and lucky to be employed as opera singers. At the same time they spoke about the stress of competition and lack of financial security.

We’ve just started a brand new year where for me I am lucky enough to have a full year’s work, but I am already worried, we’ve started to get into what’s going to happen year after and you know, sort of wondering whether you’ve got a full year’s work then. So definitely just that stress of…I think the foot is always on the jugular…I will be very disappointed when this finishes for me. And if that’s next year then fine – that’s next year. If it’s five years down the track – amazing! If it’s 10 – absolutely amazing, I mean anything beyond that is ridiculous! I mean I just figure – like anything, if you work your hardest its not up to you…So you are never safe.\footnote{Interview: 20.02.12, Andrew.}

I guess I was fortunate in that I started, I am a tenor and I filled a gap and so I’ve always been able to fill a gap, thus far in my career and that’s been useful for me. But I know that for every example of me, there might be ten others who aren’t given those opportunities and are struggling to find a way to express themselves in their singing. So I do feel incredibly grateful and fortunate that I have been given my opportunities and I am not quite at the 35 mark yet, so things appear to be going well, but I realise also that they could change at any time. So I don’t rest on any laurels. I take every role as it comes…I’ve sung some great things but you know, who cares! It’s only what you are going to do next or what you are doing now that really counts.\footnote{Interview: 16.05.12, Patrick.}

Far from being glamorous, singing opera was hard, stressful work. Performing consistently well played an important role in being hired year after year. Mental and physical fitness were paramount in maintaining the consistency. Many productions were not only vocally, but also physically demanding, at times - even hazardous. The set of the \textit{Cosi} production had a stage that was raked at 45°. The singers had to walk, run and jump on the slope for the entire show. In \textit{Aida} the set had a number of revolving walls and stage sections that would slide and turn at
various times. While visually exciting, it also meant that on top of singing beautifully and projecting over the orchestra, the singers were negotiating hazardous sets. (See Figure 13, p. 91 for a summary of the opera singer performance process.) The noise from the set moving machinery, the lights, tricky costumes and props added another layer to the already challenging stage environment:

…the chorus started appearing on the stage wearing extravagant capes. They were very long and heavy, with a harness underneath, holding a large, round neck collar. It was disconcerting to watch the chorus negotiate 45º raked stage in these costumes dragging over the floor. I thought it was only a matter of time before someone tripped and fell rolling down. The call was given to stand by. The music commenced, after about 20 seconds of action the chorus were stopped and told to take off the capes.209

Jonathan reflected on his experience of observing a challenging stage environment over the years and the demands placed on the singers:

You are going to be in an acoustic sometimes which is really difficult, you don’t know if your voice is going out, you have to trust people to tell you, because there may be so much material around on the stage, your voice sounds dead, but you can’t compensate against that or push against that because it may be getting out without you realising, but you can’t tell, because you can’t judge it. That is really tough. When you look back at the stage and you can’t hear the orchestra, and there is a lot of noise getting off the stage and a lot of noise because a scene change is about to happen. You are trying to deal with that and the conductor is screaming that you are not in time, but you can hardly hear anything! Because the orchestra is designed to get the sound out into the auditorium, not on to the stage. You can always have speakers and you can sometimes say “please can I have more speakers, because I can’t hear the orchestra, I can’t even tell if I am right or wrong and the lighting is so strong in my face, I can’t see the conductor anyway!” Obviously we have monitors and things to help them as much as we can, but it gets really hard. They often have side lighting from the wings. Which if you turn into it, you get blinded, so as you turn back, you can’t see anything. So suddenly for 40 seconds you can’t see anything. Or if snow falls into your mouth while

209 Observation: 10.02.12, Cosi fan tutte.
you are singing, that is really dangerous. It certainly is a dangerous place, the stage.
Singers have to be trained to deal with that.  

Andrew recalled how in his early career with another company, the direction was so dangerous that following it nearly disabled him for life:

I hurt my neck in a show in the early 2010. It just led to really serious complications and I had a headache I couldn’t get rid of for about 14 months and stuff […] I was dive-rolling head first through some French stalls, full stuntman style… The director asked me to and you know you go “sure, I can do that”. And a friend of mine said, “you are crazy, you are going to hurt yourself” I said, “it’s fine! I am 27 years old, I’ve done this”

![Diagram of Opera Singer Performance Process]

**Figure 13: Opera singer performance process**

It became clear that opera singing called for people who thrived on challenges, embraced them, even enjoyed them. They were risk takers, but they also loved the art form. One of the greatest rewards of the profession was singing beautiful music with great artists:

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210 Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.
211 Interview: 20.02.12, Andrew.
The most rewarding aspect of the job for me is the opportunity to see and hear fine artists at work both in performance and rehearsal. I never tire of hearing great singing.  

All participants discussed countless “special moments” they had in rehearsal and performance. It ranged from watching a great director at work, to a great international artist singing an aria and sending shivers down their spine, or even their own performance that they felt was particularly moving. On the other hand, the singers were never in control. For all their hard work and enthusiasm, they still depended on the casting decisions. Inability to steer one’s life was a big concern for John – a seasoned international artist:

I am just a little bit jaded from travelling I mean I am going back to London again and I’ve just spent three months there. I am missing my son, you know he is already now becoming a teenager I’ve never wanted to be at 52 years of age, even though I am nowhere near ready to stop, but never wanted to be a singer who was waiting for jobs. Because I always felt, maybe this is arrogant, but I always felt I was a singer with a brain, I wanted to steer my life, because as a singer we are always babies and that’s the biggest problem singers face. You are at the mercy of an agent, you are at the mercy of coaches telling you how to sing something, you are at the mercy of the opera company giving you the gig, you are at the mercy of the press and the opera management, so we are always wanting to please people all the time, even if you have a great, strong personality – still at the end of the day, you’ve got to get the gig. So I feel that we are always ever so slightly children and I want to steer my life at this stage I feel like I am a grown man.  

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212 Interview: 23.12.12, Eddy.
213 Interview: 17.02.12, John.
Professional Opera Rehearsals

There were several differences between the student opera rehearsals and the professional opera rehearsals. One major difference was the absence of a constant factor when it came to the personnel. Although a few guest staff were used in the schools, there were always the school staff that ran most aspects of the rehearsals. In the company each production contained a lot of guest personnel: soloists, directors, conductors and others. The singers had to adjust to working with different colleagues, conductors and directors for each production they were involved in and they were always involved in more than one production at a time. This was another difference. Whether the students were focusing on one show at any point, the professionals were contending with different production environments running parallel to each other. They could be a minor principal in one, a cover in the next and a major principal in another, unless of course they were in the chorus, but even then, as discussed previously - they could have some cover duties. Both chorus and soloists had to possess flexibility that enabled them adjust to vastly different personalities and styles of people they were working with, but at the same time remain true to their own vocal technique, health and emotional well-being. The conductors and some of the soloists could often change half way through the season, which meant further adjustments. If the production was a revival and some of the cast performed it in a previous season, they would already know it quite well. However, they would need to alter what they
knew and adjust it depending on who they were working with this particular season. If, however, it was a brand new production, everything was learnt from scratch.

While some personal could be very accommodating and supportive, others could be impatient and irritable. I found that the environment in the *Cosi* was very friendly, warm and playful – rather appropriate for this small scale, intimate piece:

Little groups of chorus characters were gradually placed on the set stage by the director. He then asked them to walk around. His manner was very relaxed, friendly and jovial. He seemed to know everyone personally, the chorus could freely address him with questions.\(^{214}\)

This was a “big-name” guest director working with the chorus. His manner with the principals was just as gentle, quiet and supportive. This matched the style of the conductor. Rather than dictating his ideas, he had many discussions with the singers during the rehearsals and tried to accommodate them as much as possible:

I like to think of opera as accompaniment and not every conductor does, most conductors want singers to follow them very closely but the way I work is that I like to get as much trust with the singers and as much direction done in the rehearsals, so that in the performance they feel free and you can then accompany them… so you have to constantly think of what you need to compromise on and how you can make it easier for people, achievable for people and be flexible.\(^{215}\)

Director Harry also spoke about supporting the singers in the rehearsal, particularly the younger and the less experienced. He also discussed the challenge of catering for disparate singer skill levels:

…that’s another thing that I think is unique to opera direction is that you end up teaching a lot. You end up having to pretty much coach people to a place where they are able to give a great performance. I mean the most challenging thing for me is balancing the needs of singers in the room. You go into the room, you’ve got one singer… She may have done a course somewhere, but she is virtually done nothing, she barely knows what the front of the stage is! I mean this is not a criticism, but she in terms of stagecraft, how to present, how to use your eyes, use your face, how to use your body, how to make contact with somebody else on stage and make it presentable, just how to

\(^{214}\) Observation: 10.02.12, *Cosi fan tutte*.

\(^{215}\) Interview: 24.03.12, Robert.
cope with the challenges of being on stage and sing at the same time…so she knows nothing. So you are dealing with that and you’ve got someone who is got quite a lot of experience now, but basically is insecure about the material so he needs a lot of confidence, he needs a lot of patience, he needs a lot of entirely different kind of approach, which is just really encouraging him to relax and trust his impulses. Then you’ve got somebody who is a very wooden performer, so it’s like watching a choirboy perform you know? And you are thinking OK, he needs a whole lot of physical stuff, you need to give him stuff that turns his imagination on, makes him feel like he is having an adventure, you know, all those little triggers that will make him, get him out of his body and get his muscles activated. So you’ve got a whole lot of performers who have entirely different needs and how does one person manage all of that in one rehearsal? You are basically juggling each person and the thing is at the end of the day you want them to all look like they are in the same opera. It’s got to be coherent…and finding what triggers somebody or getting somebody to face something that you know is a problem in performance and getting them to conquer it is incredibly rewarding. Even just establishing a sense of trust, to know that people really care what you have to say and that really they do allow you to effect change in their performance – that’s really satisfying.216

The environment in Aida rehearsals was very different. Compared to Cosi, it was a monumental production with large numbers of singers and other personnel being involved. The stage rehearsal that had some principals taking over half-way through the season was particularly tense. The soprano singing Aida, for example, was taking over and had only three days to learn the complex production. As previously mentioned, it contained spectacular effects like moving walls and sliding stage floor sections. In this rehearsal the soprano had to contend with all that was happening around her as well as cope with a particularly irritable guest conductor:

This conductor takes various sections much faster than the previous one, he also occasionally speaks to the orchestra in his loud, thickly accented (Italian), growly voice. He is very energetic and keeps the orchestra and cast on their toes. I sense a special kind of high energy and alertness from the stage…The new Aida is sounding superb, suddenly she gets out of time with the orchestra in her big opening aria “Ritorna Vincitor” – the conductor stops the orchestra and roars at her: “verre arrerre youooo?!” – it is completely shocking, like a sudden slap in the face. I’ve never seen

216 Interview: 19.12.12, Harry.
somebody shout at a singer before, especially in a dress rehearsal…He restarts the orchestra, the soprano goes on as if nothing has happened and sings gloriously – what a trooper! I turn and look at my rehearsal buddy - the Aida cover, she does not comment on what has happened, I also decide to leave it alone. In a small orchestral interlude the conductor screams at the orchestra “pianissimo!” I suddenly feel better for Aida, it seems this is his normal mode of communication - he just shouts at everybody.217

Regardless of what had passed in the rehearsal and whether there was a certain lack of harmony behind the scenes, the singers had a job to do and so did everybody else. A lot of money was being spent and a lot of money was charged for the tickets - the audience deserved the absolute best. All rehearsals were highly detailed with a marked culture of the pursuit of excellence and quality. There was also an appreciation of the many elements involved and work of countless people that never received the applause of the audience:

I love also the behind the scenes. Like this company is enormous and there is so many people that work really, really hard to get the shows on the stage but they don’t often get the recognition for that. But you know, we have a whole team of people creating all of our costumes and altering them and cleaning them and people dressing us, people doing our make-up, people doing surtitles – it’s such a huge collaboration and I feel really proud to be a part of that and I always appreciate the fact that they are also contributing. Like I think people, the audience often just kind of focus on the singers, but there is actually a lot more behind the scenes and at least we get to see that and appreciate that.218

What makes an accomplished opera singer?

The observations and discussions of the top successful opera singer qualities in the professional setting showed interesting differences and similarities to those of the schools (See Figure 15, p. 97.)

217 Observation: 10.09.12, Aida.
218 Interview: 26.03.12, Elizabeth.
Figure 15: Accomplished singer perception: opera company

One of the significant differences was that strong acting skills - ability to portray a character, charisma, stage presence and communication with the audience – became supremely important:

I think the communication is the most important thing because I think that even if you sound totally beautiful – if you are not communicating, you are just going to leave the audience cold.\textsuperscript{219}

Instead of the schools’ preoccupation with vocal quality and technique, there was preoccupation with surviving the vocal and physical load. That included ability to perform the role while ill, tired or heavily pregnant:

You have to be like an athlete. You’ve got to be physically strong. People like “X” go to the gym every day to be fit, because he knows the most important thing is being fit. Otherwise you will miss a performance. It’s a hard life. You can’t go out drinking, you’ve got to be really fit and strong on the stage and that’s why he has his presence… You can’t just collapse, because then you’ve got to work it all up. Its like a car at the traffic lights that’s always got its engine running. It’s turning it off and turning it on which lessens its life…it’s a physical occupation. That’s what it is. You have to know that you are an athlete as much as an artist. When you are running on the stage, its physically so demanding anyway, even if you didn’t have to sing.\textsuperscript{220}

Finally, ability to cope with the stresses of lifestyle and the job was something totally new and important here. One could perhaps also describe it as “psychological stamina”:

\textsuperscript{219} Interview: 16.05.12, Monica.
\textsuperscript{220} Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.
You have to have a very strong armour and be able to cope with a very difficult profession, often in places where you don’t speak the language and often when you are feeling lonely or homesick or frustrated or whatever.\textsuperscript{221}

**IMPORTANT TRENDS: Opera production rehearsals**

What follows now is my attempt at combining what I observed in the rehearsals of the three researched settings. The rehearsal hierarchy, rehearsal stages and processes involved in creating an opera production were complex and unique to the genre.

**The hierarchy**

The hierarchy in an opera production rehearsal was not always entirely clear, not only to an observer, but also to the participants themselves. This was due to the two following reasons:

Firstly, because of the monumental nature of the opera genre, the sheer number of people dedicated to the production was huge. In turn, people in charge of various areas like music, direction, costume, etc. shared their responsibilities with various assistants, which made the matter even more confusing:

> The director stopped and introduced the staff, which was very helpful to me, since I was wondering about the exact hierarchy in the room. Running the rehearsal were: the director, assistant director, assistant choreographer, conductor and chorus master. I initially mistook the assistant director for the principal one.\textsuperscript{222}

Secondly, the hierarchy was not stable and changed radically during the production period. Monica discussed her fascination with the phenomena:

> I love sitting in the rehearsal room and watching the different powers at play, ‘cause there is sort of like this dichotomy between the director and his people\textsuperscript{223} and the conductor and his people. And how they negotiate that creative time. That’s really interesting and then how it’s kind of director, director, director all the way from the beginning of the production. Like you’ve got the ensemble day, conductor day, then prrrrr all this time blocking, which is director time and then it’s Sitz, so no director –

\textsuperscript{221} Interview: 17.02.12, John.  
\textsuperscript{222} Observation: 10.02.12, Cosi fan tutte.  
\textsuperscript{223} See figure 16 for clarification of the various rehearsals terminology.
music and then back to the piano dress – director and then all of a sudden the tables turn for good and the conductor is in with the orchestra, stage orchestrals and then it’s his deal kind of. And it’s interesting to watch that power play, but it’s also really interesting to watch the singers – poor singers negotiate how they are going to go between one and the other, especially when there are conflicting ideas.\textsuperscript{224}

In other words, the production rehearsals were led by the director, but as soon as orchestral rehearsals started, followed in turn by the performances – the conductor was very much in charge. Within those periods the director and the conductor continued negotiating, searching for ways of making things work musically and dramatically. Those negotiations could range from being very friendly to hostile and the singers were always stuck in the middle:

… singers who are young have to be prepared for that world, because they don’t know what they are walking into – that’s what they have to deal with, that’s the hard bit, dealing with those egos and how you deal with it politely and tactically, at the same time you think about your own performance and get that sorted.\textsuperscript{225}

Here now is an approximate flow chart of various rehearsals that took place during production periods: (Figure 16, p. 100.)

\textsuperscript{224} Interview: 16.05.12, Monica.  
\textsuperscript{225} Interview: 07.10.11, Jonathan.
There was a healthy collaboration between the director and conductor camps in the three settings investigated, although the shifting hierarchy still caused confusion and at times even worked to my advantage. This is what happened when I arrived to observe one of the *Aida* rehearsals:

The assistant manager explained to me that today’s rehearsal was cancelled late last night. I sensed an opportunity: “well, since I missed out today, could I come to the closed general tomorrow?” I hoped that if I pushed a little, perhaps I could get in. I was
told that the artist manager and the head director were both away, so they were not sure whom to ask. “Sweet I thought! Less people to say no!”

Later that day I received an email confirming I was permitted to observe the closed general rehearsal.

The diagram below (Figure 17, p. 101.) portrays the hierarchy in the director-led production rehearsals:

![Diagram of Opera Production Rehearsal Hierarchy]

**Figure 17: Opera production rehearsal hierarchy**

The director was clearly in charge of all the areas, however, there was always room for discussion and negotiation:

At one point Gugliemo expressed that he couldn’t find justification for an emotion requested from him by the director. “That’s fine, that’s fine” was the director’s reply. Guglielmo said that he just needed time to work out how he would do it. Several small discussions with the conductor followed.

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227 Observation: 10.02.12, *Cosi fan tutte.*
The room for negotiation became smaller and smaller towards the final week of the main production period. During the piano dress rehearsals the direction was dictated to the stage over the microphone and no further time could be spent on questions or discussions:

The director at the desk is looking unusually serious. His ever-present rehearsal smile is completely gone. He is watching the stage with intent concentration. Very occasionally he gives directions to the cast on his microphone, but his voice is now quiet, almost mechanical. His larger than life persona is gone and the focused, quiet professional has emerged. He knows that this is the home run. The time is running out and they cannot afford any slip-ups… The house lights gently go down, the curtain opens, they start again from the top of the act. 10 minutes in, the director speaks into the microphone and stops the crowd scene:

I told you before, you cannot sing with your bums to the conductor! Do you understand? Again please.228

As the director’s control became tighter and tighter, so also neared the end of his/her reign, until “the tables turned for good” and the conductor took over starting with the Sitzprobe, stage orchestral rehearsals and right until the final show of the season. Here is an approximate chart of the hierarchy in the conductor led orchestral rehearsals and subsequent performances: (Figure 18, p. 103.)

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228 Observation: 22.11.13, L’elisir d’amore.
In his interview Robert reflected on the challenge of conducting an opera:

…so working with singers who are acting at the same time means that there is a lot of compromise involved in terms of looking after singers and the nature of the company and the stage. There are so many distractions with the distances involved with the stage and the issues of synchronisation, people facing different directions at different times and there are so many more things that can go wrong. Quick costume changes, people being late onto stage or entrances, things not working – it’s just so much more unpredictable and at the same time you’ve got to look after the orchestra as well, you can’t ignore the orchestra completely and just conduct the stage. You need to keep everybody engaged in the performance at all times and that’s a big challenge. 229

**Opera rehearsal process**

The process of rehearsing was detailed, repetitive and demanding. (See Figure 19, p. 105.) Here is an example of “stop and start” detailed rehearsing:

The blocking was very detailed. One minute of music was now taking 40 minutes to block. As the move was rehearsed again and again, the assistant director and

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229 Interview: 24.03.12, Robert.
choreographer stood in for the absent principals… The section rehearsed with chorus this morning was now rehearsed again with added principals. The principals were marking or singing an octave lower, focusing on getting the moves rather than wasting vocal energy to sing full voice.\(^{230}\)

As the production weeks progressed and the work became more and more familiar, the directors would request runs of larger sections, entire scenes and entire acts. As the work continued towards the general rehearsal, it was highly desirable (but not always possible) that the general rehearsal itself would be a complete run of the opera without any stops or technical glitches. The entire production period was a process of starting from minute pieces and moving towards a continuous, coherent performance of the whole. The difficult task of connecting the pieces of the giant puzzle was particularly evident in the student rehearsals. Here is an example of a first orchestral student rehearsal:

It is nice to see that the stage is raked in such a way that every cast member can be seen at all times, every person is utilised. Unfortunately it also highlights the choristers that have weaker characterisations. It is mostly evident in how they are able to connect various blockings. Some of them will do a certain move, like having a fight over the bottle of the magic elixir, but then as soon as this blocking is finished they completely fall out of character and just turn to the front and sing. There is no residual anger, no believable emotion that connects one action to the next. The dramatic arch is not quite there yet. Even the principals seem to characterise in blocks, rather than over the entire story. Of course this is not aided by the stop and start nature of this run and there are so many different things they have to nail musically, dramatically, they are still getting used to the dimensions of the stage, the lights, the orchestral sounds rising from the pit.\(^{231}\)

On the other hand, the professional choristers and principals were outstanding in maintaining convincing characterisations at all times. The principals also showed character development over the arch of the story. Powerful charisma and stage presence were striking features of the professional rehearsals and performances. Here is a particularly memorable performance from *Aida* piano dress rehearsal:

\(^{230}\) Observation: 10.02.12, *Cosi fan tutte*.
\(^{231}\) Observation: 22.11.13, *L’elisir d’amore*. 

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…Out comes Amonasro and Ethiopian prisoners. Amonasro is wearing a T-shirt and kneepads over his jeans. His voice is powerful and very expressive. He suddenly brings magic to this rehearsal, despite the weird mix of costume and casual on the stage, despite the absence of the orchestra and the audience. Suddenly everyone steps up: somehow the power of his presence transfigures the rehearsal. I am imagining that Amonasro pulled everyone out of the mundane run they’ve done time and time again, into the realm of grand opera. His demeanour is larger than life, commanding, arresting, bursting with demonic energy. He completely captivates even in his jeans and kneepads…

**Figure 19: Opera rehearsal process “stop and start”**

**EPILOGUE: future directions**

The above survey highlights some of the findings from the three settings investigated over a period of my candidature. If nothing else, the account demonstrates the enormous scope of skills and personal attributes required for contemporary vocal operatic training and the professional operatic industry. It is my hope that this could serve as first step towards a holistic view of operatic training, rehearsal and performance. I propose that operatic singer training has

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232 Baritone character - Aida’s father and exiled Ethiopian king.
233 Observation: 13.07.12, Aida
completely different requirements to that of an instrumentalist and that the administrators involved in making funding decisions view it as such. The difference is as great as that which divides the opera singers on the stage from the orchestra in the pit. No other musicians are required to perform difficult, multiple tasks while playing their instrument, yet this is the job of an opera singer. The amount of time and effort that has to be dedicated to fostering vocal technique, languages, stagecraft, movement, dance and physical stamina cannot be underestimated. What is being fostered is not just the voice or just the musician or an actor or an athlete – it is the complete whole, where each part has to coexist with all others in perfect coordination. How much time and money would one allocate to the training of an actor or an athlete or a musician? It is then feasible to think that a profession that combines all those elements would require more.

It was highlighted in the professional setting that stage presence – the ability to captivate, perform vivid, living characters - was highly important. Unfortunately the institutions could not afford to address this adequately. The other aspect that needed much more investment was language training.

On the positive side, both institutions recognised crucial role of the practical stage experience. Although the two researched courses had a vastly different structure, size and overall teaching philosophy, both managed to provide many performance opportunities for their opera student cohort. This included public performances, masterclasses and most importantly - stage roles. The Australian school in particular was very good at providing multiple stage role opportunities to all the opera students. The UK setting however had great industry connections and managed to provide a career launch pad to its best and brightest (of course as we now know a large precent of those were Australian singers).

The teaching staff was very attuned to the individual needs, strengths and weaknesses of the students when trying to build their future “package”. As was later seen in the professional company survey, the package was very much synonymous with the voice type and its matching attributes.

I am also hoping that this survey could begin to address a certain lack of dialogue between the Australian opera industry and academia. In these uncertain times working together and learning from each other would only make us stronger. The fact that both Australian settings (the company and the school) were very enthusiastic about this research was encouraging and demonstrated the need for such a dialogue to take place. It could be a forum or a national opera summer school – the possibilities are many. The Australian Youth Orchestra happens every year,
why not Australian Youth Opera – bringing top industry professionals and the most outstanding opera students together? Perhaps the AYOs could even collaborate on a production…

The other aspect that was very prominent in the professional Australian setting was the levels of stress and challenging lifestyle associated with the profession. It may be worth considering to better address these issues during the training. Things like ability to take professional leave, study part-time, claim credits for professional opera work or even elementary introduction to contracts and other related issues - could all help in lowering the levels of stress and eliminating some of the lifestyle challenges.

As I was conducting interviews in the UK college in the late 2013, it turned out that three out of five top singers I was interviewing were from Australia and New Zealand. Then in January of 2014, 3 young Australians (3 out of 5 in the entire world!) won places in the 2014 Covent Garden Jette Parker Young Artist program. It was great to see young Australian talent do so well and it only proved that given the support and the opportunity Australian operatic training was of the highest standard. This standard however, cannot be maintained with continuous cuts. Australia is well located in the middle of the developing Asian market. Instead of sending off our best operatic young talent overseas, we could be investing in the training and attracting overseas students to study in Australia. (It is interesting to note that all singing students interviewed in Australia were Australian born). Perhaps Australian operatic training becoming more international (like the UK model) rather than local could be something that guaranteed its future. The UK opera industry seems to be experiencing a boom, while some of the biggest opera houses in the world are closing. This phenomenon is outside the scope of this study, but is worth investigating.

Finally, I am hoping that disseminating this research among its participants and the wider singing profession would encourage more ideas and recommendations. Although the scope of this work did not allow me to share all that I have learnt, I am hoping the most important aspects were reflected to the best of my ability. I also hope that the study can increase the understanding, awareness and appreciation of the art form as well as what it takes to be an opera singer in the 21st century.
About the researcher

I described earlier that acknowledging the researcher’s personal biases in this type of study is important, this is why I will now say a little about myself.

I was born in Moscow, Russia to a family of a Russian Orthodox priest and a kindergarten teacher. I have four siblings of which one is a professional violinist and two are professional dancers. Needless to say, I was fortunate to have been brought up in a very artistic household. Like most Russians, both of my parents were very passionate about opera, ballet, painting, literature, theatre…I was very lucky to have been exposed to all of it since childhood. My parents also really believed in investing time and money in their children’s artistic pursuits. I always took it for granted, but it must have taken a lot to drag five kids to lessons, rehearsals, concerts and plays (this is before we were “allowed” to have cars). I studied piano since I was 6, then at the age of 10 I was accepted into a specialist music school where I started to learn musical theory, solfege, history and choral conducting. In the early nineties the political atmosphere in Russia was such, that my parents decided it was no longer safe. We arrived in Australia in 1993 and became Australian citizens in 1995.

It was very, very hard for my parents to start over in a new country with five children, but personally I hardly noticed, because at that point I was turning 15 and was practicing piano for up to 8 hours a day - determined to become the next Sviatoslav Richter. I did very well in the HSC and even performed a piano solo at the Sydney Opera House Encore concert. I graduated as a piano major from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in 2001, but by that time my piano virtuoso dreams had faded and were replaced by an interest in the opera. I completed a Masters in opera through the Newcastle Conservatorium and afterwards spent a few years as a freelance singer and music educator. I did choral conducting, accompaniment, repetiteur work, song writing, I played for ballet, I did arrangements and of course worked as a soprano. For a few years my sister Anna (violin) and I also ran “Marianna Ensemble”. The ensemble later became an original quartet: piano/vocals, sax, guitar, violin. All ensemble members wrote original tracks that were available on iTunes. Our repertoire included jazz, gypsy, classical and world music. “Marianna” performed for ABC classic FM, Musica Viva and various Australian music festivals. Some of my classical solo singing highlights included live and recorded performances with ABC classic FM, as well as cover work for the Glyndebourne Opera Festival, UK. Over
the years I competed in international opera competitions and was a finalist of most national opera awards. I was also very fortunate to win the 2008 Mietta National Recital award.

In the last few years I have been more and more interested in vocal training. I undertook the Doctor of Musical Arts degree, which was perfect since it combined my two main interests: vocal training research and performance. During the candidature my own teaching experience became very useful. I ran a large private music studio for many years. In that time my talented young students taught me a great deal (I am hoping that they’ve learnt something too). This study was certainly helpful in improving my own teaching and performance.
Bibliography


Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics approval letter
the Annual Report/Completion Report Form from the Human Ethics website at:

The HREC approval is valid for four (4) years from the Approval Period stated in this letter and is
conditional upon submission of Annual Reports. If your project is not completed by four (4) years from
the approval period, you will have to submit a Modification Form requesting an extension. Please refer
to the guideline on extension of ethics approval which is available on the website at:

Chief Investigator / Supervisor’s responsibilities to ensure that:

1. All serious and unexpected adverse events should be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.
2. All unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should be
   reported to the HREC as soon as possible.
3. You must retain copies of all signed Consent Forms and provide these to the HREC on request.
4. It is your responsibility to provide a copy of this letter to any internal/external granting agencies if
   requested.
5. All research participants are to be provided with a Participant Information Statement and Consent
   Form, unless otherwise agreed by the Committee. The following statement must appear on the
   bottom of the Participant Information Statement. Any person with concerns or complaints about
   the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager, Human Ethics, University of Sydney on
   +61 2 8827 8176 (Telephone); + 61 2 8627 8177 (Facsimile) or to humanethics@sydney.edu.au
   (Email).
6. Any changes to the protocol including changes to research personnel must be approved by the
   HREC by submitting a Modification Form before the research project can proceed. Please refer to
   the website at http://sydney.edu.au/research/support/human/forms to download a copy of
   the Modification Form.
7. A Completion Report should be provided to the Human Research Ethics Committee at the
   completion of the Project.

Please do not hesitate to contact Research Integrity (Human Ethics) should you require further
information or clarification.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Associate Professor Ian Maxwell
Chair
Human Research Ethics Committee

cc Maria Okunev moku2218@uni.sydney.edu.au
Appendix B: Participant information statements for private lessons, observations and interviews.

PRIVATE LESSON OBSERVATION PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is the study about?

This study aims to provide better understanding of current opera training in Australia.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Maria Okunev and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr Michael Halliwell, Associate Professor.

(3) What does the study involve?

This study will involve an observation of a private lesson. The researcher will be a passive or “invisible” observer of the session. The aim of this will be to gain a better understanding of which skills or traits are considered to be valuable or important by the singer and the teacher. The session will be audio recorded, a video recording may also be made if the participants agree.

(4) How much time will the study take?

The researcher will observe the rehearsal for its entire duration.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?

Being in this study is completely voluntary - you are not under any obligation to consent and - if you do consent - you can withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the researcher, and the University of Sydney now or in the future.

The researcher will leave the room and erase your session. No part of the session will be used in the study.

(6) Will anyone else know the results?

All aspects of the study, including results, will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to information on participants. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

(7) Will the study benefit me?

All involved in the singing profession will benefit from an investigation into the opera training in this country.
(8) Can I tell other people about the study?

Yes.

(9) What if I require further information about the study or my involvement in it?

When you have read this information, Maria Okunev will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Dr Michael Halliwell, Associate Professor, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, ph: +61 2 9351 1408, e: michael.halliwell@sydney.edu.au

(10) What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact The Manager, Human Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on +61 2 8627 8176 (Telephone); +61 2 8627 8177 (Facsimile) or ro.humanethics@sydney.edu.au (Email).

This information sheet is for you to keep
Tertiary Opera Training

OBSERVATION PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is the study about?
This study aims to provide better understanding of current opera training in Australia.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?
The study is being conducted by Maria Okunev and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr Michael Halliwell, Associate Professor.

(3) What does the study involve?
This study will involve an observation of a rehearsal. The researcher will be a passive or “invisible” observer of the session. The aim of this will be to gain a better understanding of which skills or traits are considered to be valuable or important by the rehearsal leaders and the participants. The session will be audio recorded, a video recording may also be made if the participants agree.

(4) How much time will the study take?
The researcher will observe the rehearsal for its entire duration.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?
Being in this study is completely voluntary - you are not under any obligation to consent and - if you do consent - you can withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the researcher and the University of Sydney now or in the future.

You may withdraw from the observation at any time if I do not wish to continue, however as it is a collaborative rehearsal, it will not be possible to erase your participation up to that point.

(6) Will anyone else know the results?
All aspects of the study, including results, will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to information on participants. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

(7) Will the study benefit me?
Opera Training
Version 2, August 1, 2011
All involved in the singing profession will benefit from an investigation into the opera training in this country.

(8) Can I tell other people about the study?
Yes.

(9) What if I require further information about the study or my involvement in it?
When you have read this information, Maria Okunev will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Dr Michael Halliwell, Associate Professor, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, ph: +61 2 9351 1408, e: michael.halliwell@sydney.edu.au

(10) What if I have a complaint or any concerns?
Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact The Manager, Human Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on +61 2 8627 8176 (Telephone); +61 2 8627 8177 (Facsimile) or ro.humanethics@sydney.edu.au (Email).

This information sheet is for you to keep
Tertiary Opera Training

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is the study about?
This study aims to provide better understanding of current opera training in Australia.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?
The study is being conducted by Maria Okunev and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr Michael Halliwell, Associate Professor.

(3) What does the study involve?
This study will involve an individual interview. The interview will be conducted in the participant’s office at a time most convenient to the participant. It will be a relaxed, open-ended discussion. The researcher will be interested in the participant’s background, experiences, future plans and expectations. The interview will be audio recorded.

(4) How much time will the study take?
Each individual interview will last approximately 30 minutes.

(5) Can I withdraw from the study?
Being in this study is completely voluntary - you are not under any obligation to consent and - if you do consent - you can withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the researcher and the University of Sydney now or in the future.

You may stop the interview at any time if you do not wish to continue, the audio recording will be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.

(6) Will anyone else know the results?
All aspects of the study, including results, will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to information on participants. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

(7) Will the study benefit me?

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(8) Can I tell other people about the study?

Yes.

(9) What if I require further information about the study or my involvement in it?

When you have read this information, Maria Okunev will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Dr Michael Halliwell, Associate Professor, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, ph: +61 2 9351 1408, e: michael.halliwell@sydney.edu.au

(10) What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact The Manager, Human Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on +61 2 8627 8178 (Telephone); +61 2 8627 8177 (Facsimile) or ro.humanethics@sydney.edu.au (Email).

This information sheet is for you to keep.
Appendix C: Participant consent forms for private lessons, observations and interviews.

PRIVATE LESSON OBSERVATION PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, __________________________ (PRINT NAME), give consent to my participation in the research project.

TITLE: Tertiary Opera Training

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Sydney now or in the future.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

5. I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary – I am not under any obligation to consent.

6. I understand that I can stop my participation in the observation of the private lesson at any time if I do not wish to continue. The researcher will exit the coaching room and
all the audio/video records of the coaching will be erased. The information provided will not be in the study.

7. I consent to:
   i) Audio-taping    YES ☐    NO ☐
   ii) Video-taping   YES ☐    NO ☐
   iii) Receiving Feedback YES ☐    NO ☐

   If you answered YES to the "Receiving Feedback Question", please provide your details i.e. mailing address, email address.

   Feedback Option

   Address: ____________________________________________________________

                           ____________________________________________________________

   Email: ___________________________________________________________

   Signed: ................................................................................................

   Name: ................................................................................................

   Date: ................................................................................................
REHEARSAL OBSERVATION PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

1. ..........................................................................................[PRINT NAME], give consent to my participation in the research project

TITLE:  Tertiary Opera Training

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher(s).

3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Sydney now or in the future.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

5. I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary – I am not under any obligation to consent.

6. I understand that I can stop my participation in the observation at any time if I do not wish to continue, however as it is a collaborative rehearsal, I understand that it will not be possible to erase my participation up to that point.
7. I consent to:
   i) Audio-taping          YES ☐          NO ☐
   ii) Video-taping        YES ☐          NO ☐
   iii) Receiving Feedback YES ☐          NO ☐

If you answered YES to the “Receiving Feedback Question”, please provide your details i.e. mailing address, email address.

Feedback Option

Address: 

Email: 

Signed: 

Name: 

Date: 

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INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, .......................................................... [PRINT NAME], give consent to my participation in the research project.

TITLE:  Tertiary Opera Training

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Sydney now or in the future.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

5. I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary – I am not under any obligation to consent.

Maria Briggs (née Okunev) Tertiary Opera Training in Australia & UK: Ethnographic Perspective
6. I understand that I can stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, the audio and video recording will be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.

7. I consent to:
   i) Audio-taping        YES ☐      NO ☐
   ii) Video-taping       YES ☐      NO ☐
   iii) Receiving Feedback YES ☐      NO ☐

If you answered YES to the “Receiving Feedback Question”, please provide your details i.e. mailing address, email address.

Feedback Option

Address:  

Email:  

Signed:  ………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Name:  …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Date:  …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Opera Training
Version 1, June 24, 2011