

International Opera Academy 2014

From 20th of July to 3rd of August I participated in International Opera Academy, IOA for short. To sum it up, it was a two-week comprehensive course that included daily voice lessons, daily coachings, a course in auditioning, a course in the German opera contracts, a course from an ear-nose-throat doctor, 2 concerts, a course with a stage director and an audition for an agent... so a very useful two weeks for a young singer anyhow. As for me, I had struggled with a question for some time before IOA- what is my *fach*? Am I a tenor or a baritone? So I went to IOA with a specific problem at hand, apart from the wish to develop my vocal abilities of course.

The place where we stayed was Haus Villigst near Schwerte- a small town near Dortmund. It was a quiet place with beautiful big park and a shallow yet rapid river running past the villa. We were provided with everything necessary to spend two very hard working weeks there- comfortable private rooms for housing, mostly delicious German food, plenty of room for practising and rehearsals, but most importantly, highly professional and extremely pleasant staff.

Most of us, students, got to Haus Villigst on Sunday, but nothing really happened then apart from getting to know each other. The next morning, nevertheless, was started with a mock audition for an agent. Just to be clear, I had prepared two tenor arias and a couple of *lieder* for this summer academy, but I had done so alone, without any coaching or help from singing teachers. So, it was kind of shock treatment for me to start performing those pieces of music... in front of people... on the second day. It did, however, go alright and I got some good, constructive feedback.

The mock audition also served as an introduction for the singers and to the teachers. At this point I would like to give a quick overview of who were teaching us over these two weeks- Elisabeth Werres (professor of voice in University of the Arts Berlin), Yamina Maamar (assistant professor in Hannover University of Music, Drama and Media) and Sylvia Bleimund (also teaching in Hannover University of Music, Drama and Media) were the voice teachers. There were also two coaches who were with us throughout the course, Norbert Schmittberg (soloist in Opera Zurich, Teatro Liceu Barcelona, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Vienna State Opera) and Francis Corke (former head coach Deutsche Oper am Rhein). Of course my question of *fach* wasn't solved immediately, since it is a rather big question and the teachers had different opinions about the first impression of Laur (initial opinions ranged from a baritone to a potential counter tenor in the rough).

After the mock audition, the teachers decided that the program I had prepared for the summer academy was not in fact the best repertoire for a young voice such as mine, so they gave me an antique aria to start working on. Also the singing and coaching lessons began on the third day. It was pure joy working with such professionals, who were extremely nice and wonderful people at the same time. I was also given some new *lieder* to learn. The tempo was fast and I loved it. I got immediate and adequate feedback every day, which made my progress so much faster, I surprised myself.

The first concert was already on Friday, the 6th day we were there. That meant four days of practise and preparing of new repertoire, but everything went great. My performance wasn't of course finely polished piece of art, but I enjoyed every moment of it, as did the audience (of about 250 people) by the looks of it. One great thing was, that all the auditions and concerts were recorded for later reviewing. I hadn't realised that earlier, but the recording really is the harshest and the most honest critic of all. The thing is, we don't actually sound as we think we do and a recording points out all the weak-spots that might go unnoticed otherwise. A recording doesn't care about your feelings, it just tells you the truth and it's also a great way to track your progress without external help from a trusted teacher.

The next day after the concert, we had a lecture from an ear-nose-throat doctor and by the end of the lecture, we could have him put a fiberscope in through our noses to check our vocal chords. Apparently I have extremely long vocal chords, which means I am almost certainly not a tenor. In

fact, I had the longest vocal chords there altogether. That paired with opinions from Prof. Werres and other staff there answered my question of *fach* in a satisfactory manner for me. I embraced the deepness of my voice (even though the job market just got way more difficult). I won't say, it wasn't a disappointment for me to learn I'm not a tenor, but I am happy that it happened sooner rather than later.

Over the following week, I started learning Papageno's aria. The singing and coaching lessons continued and we had couple of interesting and educating workshops about acting and make-up for example. I wouldn't recommend anybody to try and learn an aria from scratch in four days, as I did, even with such a relatively simple aria as "Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja", because there are always nuances that need time to settle in. However, everything worked out great at our gala concert with more than 300 people listening.

The previous last day was when we got feedback from all three voice teachers and both coaches, face to face. It was extremely pleasant to hear that they too saw the potential in me and offered their help and advice regarding entrance exams after my last year in konsa. All in all, I did get my *fach*-problem solved, I made some new (and useful) friends, I learnt a lot about my voice and got new perspective about singing as an art in general. I know what steps to take next and also where my path is headed. Great experience!