

GERMAN-AUSTRALIAN OPERA GRANT

WIESBADEN REVIEW

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Darcy Carroll
- 2021 -

Darcy's departure to Germany was delayed for a whole year due to COVID, but that has not hindered him in the least:

My year at the Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden (HSW) as the recipient of the German-Australian Opera Grant (GAOG) has been quite the journey. My experience has been varied but very positive, with several memorable moments since I first arrived in 2022. The following are some of my reflections on the past year.

I arrived on 1 June and in my jetlagged state made my first decision to push my two heavy suitcases from the Hauptbahnhof, all the way up the steep hill on Bierstadter Straße to my Airbnb. I spent the first few weeks exploring Wiesbaden, which included meeting up with Michelle, Sharon, and Fleuranne (ed.: previous GAOG recipients) for the first time. They were kind enough to give me a tour of the theatre as well as show me around Wiesbaden. I saw my first opera, *Don Carlos*, on my 2nd evening in Wiesbaden, and although I enjoyed it very much, I fell victim to jetlag once again and fell asleep halfway through. On 10 June the jetlag had subsided and I went on a tour of the Henkell Sektkellerei, which I found to be remarkably interesting and informative! The latter half of June was spent on an impromptu holiday to Paris with my partner. We went to all the top touristy locations, the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, the Moulin Rouge and even Disney World!

After this fun and games, I was very keen to begin my work with the theatre by coaching my role in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. These coachings were a good introduction to some of the available rehearsal spaces and an opportunity to meet and work with some of the wonderful répétiteurs, who helped me to get my first role up to the standard expected by the theatre.

July saw me travelling to Freiburg im Breisgau for my month-long German course. I travelled with the 9 Euro ticket, using only regional trains, an excellent and cheap way to travel around the country, although quite slow. Eventually I arrived and was immediately taken by the lively and youthful city Freiburg, truly the perfect place to be a student for a month. The Goethe month-



long intensive German language course was a great environment to be completely immersed in the learning process. I really appreciated how focused and thorough it was. It really helped me to dive back into German. It was a wonderful multicultural environment and I formed strong friendships with the people there, which really added to the whole experience.

I returned to Wiesbaden in August and was surprised to learn that most of Europe goes on summer holidays during July and August. Unfortunately I got sick for an extended period around this time, however, this quiet time was useful for studying my upcoming roles. August was also fraught with the perils of trying to organize my visa. I knew it would be difficult going back and forth with the *Ausländerbehörde*. Even with Michelle's help and insight it was still a headache to navigate the excessive administration processes and the reliance on paper documentation. Thankfully I obtained my visa in the end, at the same time learning a lot about the logistics surrounding working outside of Australia.

The new season kicked off with two weeks of intensive rehearsals for my first production, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. This was my introduction to the German rehearsal room in full swing, in particular, the fast-paced and condensed rehearsal period of a *Wiederaufnahme*, which is a remounting of an already established production. The expectation is that you know all your blocking and music from day one. Therefore, it was necessary to study a

video recording of the previous performance in my own time, paying careful attention to where my character was on the stage at any given moment, as well as when and where any exits and entrances took place. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is a huge ensemble cast and it was a thrill to see a variety of skilled performers at different stages in their careers engage in this process.

I rehearsed my second production, a *Wiederaufnahme* of *Rigoletto*, in October and found the rehearsal process to be very similar. I was quite glad to have smaller roles in these first productions as I was able to learn the process and make my debut in Wiesbaden without too much pressure.

My first big *Premiere* was a production of *Die Lustige Witwe*. I definitely enjoyed the longer six-week rehearsal period as it was much more akin to what I was used to back in Australia. My German language skills were really put to the test in these rehearsals. I was fairly nervous to have a slightly larger role this time, I even sang the opening lines of the show! As much as I enjoyed the breakneck speed of the *Wiederaufnahme* productions, I must admit that I preferred the slower pace of the *Premiere*. I also feel the more detailed approach when creating a new production allowed me to settle in more, creatively speaking, and really add my voice to the show, as opposed to simply copying the work done by another performer in a *Wiederaufnahme*.

One less than fond memory I have of this production was performing it on Christmas Day and New Years Eve (or *Silvester*), an unfamiliar custom for me. I was also utterly unprepared for the sheer volume of fireworks people set off throughout the night on NYE, which made the trip home after work feel almost apocalyptic.

A major highlight was my solo recital in January. I enjoyed the creative process of being able to devise my own program for the evening, picking material which really resonated with me and showcased my strengths of storytelling and character work. I spent the first part of the program illustrating my love for German *Lieder*, and the 2nd half exploring English art song, and revisiting my first love, musical theatre. I really like the more intimate performance settings where you get to properly engage with the audience, so this was particularly special to me. I found the collaborative process of working with the wonderful repre-

tituteur Akira Nakamura extremely rewarding. I was astounded and heartened by the exceedingly positive feedback on the night as well as the particularly kind words of one radio reviewer.

February was the month of auditions. Throughout the year I had been looking into where I should be auditioning in order to take my next steps in Germany. For a time I believed that appropriate next step would be in a young artist program or opera studio. To that end I secured auditions for several young artist programs in Linz, Essen and Stuttgart as well as an audition for the government agency (ZAV) in Cologne. Though these auditions were unsuccessful, I feel they were still worth doing. For one thing, I know that forcing myself into uncomfortable and unfamiliar audition scenarios is very good practice. I also got a better sense of the overall landscape and talent pool in my age group, and saw the standard which is expected even of entry level young artists.

The Janáček double bill (Dr Kolenatý in *Die Sache Makropulos* and Wassili in *Aus einem Totenhaus* for the opening of the Internationale Maifestspiele 2023) was really special. These Czech operas challenged me more than anything else I did at the theatre. This was primarily because I have never sung or done any work in the Czech language. On top of this, one of my roles featured several passages of extremely fast, almost patter-like phrases of rapid-fire Czech. It took many months of intensive work and coaching to get my head around the language, then to get it to flow while spoken, and then to marry it to the extremely complex music. I am tremendously grateful for the patient and dedicated team, particularly our Czech language coach, and the répétiteurs who very slowly helped me drill the music into my head. I count it as one of the most rewarding performance experiences of my life so far.

The final opera for the season was a *Wiederaufnahme* of *Carmen*, which made for a nice change of pace after the intensive rehearsal period of the Czech operas. I received particularly positive feedback for my singing of the role of Morales. I feel as if all the vocal knowledge and experience I accumulated over the past year coalesced to a point where I finally got comfortable and truly found my rhythm for this production.

I think it's fair to say that over the past year I have grown a lot as a performer and as a person. It would probably be impossible not to, given the variety of challenges and opportunities that present themselves when you enter such a completely new and overwhelming environment. One thing I will certainly take away from this experience is that I do have the strength and ability to adapt to challenging situations, moreover, I have learned that despite the challenges, I really, really enjoy doing this job! I am so thankful to have been given this unique and totally life-changing opportunity by MTO-GAOG, and I can't wait to see what's ahead in the 2023/2024 season.

Michelle Ryan - 2020 -

Due to COVID Michelle spent two seasons at HSW and will be staying on in Germany in an exciting career development:

The 2021-2022 season at HSW started with rehearsals for the French opera *Werther* (Jules Massenet). I was offered a few shows of this production with a few months' notice. I was so grateful for this extra role as I had always wanted to sing the role of Charlotte's younger sister Sophie. I shared this role in rehearsals with the other soprano, which made it easy to learn from each other. Within a few weeks I

was juggling another two opera productions at the same time. In *Hänsel und Gretel* I was asked to share the roles of Gretel, Sandman and Dew Fairy again with another soprano. We had a wonderful time swapping roles every rehearsal and I loved trying different characters. I was also at the early stages of rehearsing a very small role in *Pique Dame* (Tchaikovsky), directed by the Intendant of the theatre, Uwe Eric Laufenberg. It was really interesting to sing German, French and Russian in the space of one month! I found it a tremendous challenge to rehearse so many different styles of opera while learning how to look after my voice. Sleep, exercise, in particular riding my bike to work in the theatre, and a healthy diet contributed to managing this.

I started horse riding lessons around September, a hobby that helped me to get away from the business of the theatre. The riding stables were a 15-minute drive from Wiesbaden with a lovely country lady as my instructor. It was the first hobby I have ever learnt in German and I got very hooked. As rehearsals got busy I rode less but tried to go whenever I had a spare morning.

After a sad first Christmas in 2020 with nothing open due to COVID, I was finally able to experience the lovely Christmas twilight markets in the marketplace and enjoyed a few strolls after work with colleagues, drinking hot mulled wine. I absolutely adore how the Germans do Christmas, it is really special. It was also a joy to do performances of *Hänsel und Gretel* at this time of year and play a kid on stage.

In the New Year, I started rehearsals for the role of Zerlina in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which I had performed previously at a Summer Program in Prague in 2016. In the Leporello/Zerlina duet, which is often cut, I had to climb some stairs to tie Leporello up - wearing white boots with heels, might I add! - while looking down at the conductor from afar to keep in time. Zerlina is a very energetic role and I found a lot of weight dropped off after running around the stage in a corset, big dress over a hoop skirt and those boots for a month. It was a very fun production and I loved the cast.

We had also started rehearsals for *Elektra* (Richard Strauss), where I sang the Fourth Maid. It was a joy to work with Wagnerian soprano Catherine Foster again, whom I shared the stage with for the Wagner *Ring Cycle* rehearsals the previous season. I had organised to do a few auditions around Germany as I knew I had a few weeks of opportunities to get away to sing for some agents and companies. A very interesting job caught my eye in Stuttgart in the choir of the local radio station. A soprano position had been vacant for some years in the SWR Vokalensemble. I saw that they were auditioning in late March so applied. I was offered an audition and sent a list of very difficult pieces to prepare.



Darcy (right) as Vicomte Cascada in *Die Lustige Witwe* for HSW (production photo © Karl and Monika Forster)

With the help of a few colleagues at the theatre with excellent choral training, I made my way to Stuttgart, made it through both rounds of the audition and was offered a trial position for the 2022-2023 season. I was absolutely delighted to accept the job. The ensemble is the smallest radio choir in Germany and specialises in modern music. Knowing that I had something exciting lined up for the following season made my final months in Wiesbaden an absolute ball.

I had a surprise jump in for the premiere of *Don Carlos* (Verdi) for the role of Voce del Cielo. It is quite a small role but very significant in the opera. Unfortunately there was an outbreak of COVID at HSW, meaning one of the sopranos was unable to sing the premiere. I got a call that morning asking if I could see if the other soprano's dress fit me. The costume ladies and I breathed a sigh of relief when it did. The evening was a great success. But two days later I tested positive myself, thankfully only a mild case.

There were two more roles for the rest of the season prepared and ready to rehearse when I was back at work, Servilia in *La clemenza di Tito* and Die Seele (The Soul) in *Babylon*, which is a modern opera by Jörg Widmann. The production had been postponed for a year due to COVID and was to be the opening of the famous *Internationale Maifestspiele*. Thankfully I had already started coaching in the role the previous year. It has some very difficult vocal challenges and I believe that having already been singing in the theatre quite frequently for six months really helped to build the stamina I needed. As well as the vocal challenges I found the character tremendously challenging. Die Seele is usually not human in this opera, but my character was to be played as an abandoned Jewish Orthodox wife and mother, who spends a lot of time in pain but also looking to protect her husband Tammu from ruin. It was fabulous to work with conductor Albert Horne and director Daniela Kerck. The production played to full audiences and there were many fantastic reviews after it opened. I was very proud to be part of something new and exciting and I believe I really made the most of the role.



Michelle as Die Seele in HSW's production of *Babylon* by Jörg Widmann (production photo HSW)

Following on from these productions, I was very lucky to sing in a few church concerts, one being in the beautiful Marktkirche in Wiesbaden. I enjoyed working on other repertoire aside from opera, including sacred pieces by Schubert and *Exultate Jubilate* (Mozart). I also took part in a concert celebrating 1700 years of Jewish life in Germany, which was conducted by HSW's chief conductor at the time, Patrick Lange.

With no rehearsals running for June or July, I prepared a *Liederabend* with William Kelley, a friend I had worked with in Berlin during the Berlin Opera Academy in 2016. William and I put together a program of pieces by Schumann, Strauss, Debussy and the *Hermit Songs* by Samuel Barber and presented the concert in the HSW Foyer on 27 June. It was a joy to work together on this project. It felt like a farewell concert as it was quite intimate and a lot of friends and colleagues from my two years in Wiesbaden were there to support.

In July I spent a bit of time travelling to Stuttgart to look for a new apartment (unsuccessfully!) and packed up all my belongings and prepared my apartment in Wiesbaden for the next GAOG awardee, Darcy Carroll. He kindly let me leave my things in the basement, and by the time I had flown back to Australia to visit my family after two very long years, I found a furnished apartment through a past GAOG recipient, Sarah Jones. Her colleague at the opera theatre in Stuttgart was taking a sabbatical for a year and the apartment happened to be just a short walk from my new workplace.

While at home I put on a concert in the Clarence Valley, where my family lives, with Sarka Budinkska, a friend from the Gold Coast. It was wonderful to sing for the community I grew up in and also to perform a piece with my father John on the harmonica.

The first few months of my new job with the SWR Vokalensemble have been quite the change. There are currently 28 singers in the ensemble led by the youngest conductor for radio choirs in Germany, Yuval Weinberg, who is my age. I have most of my weekends back, except when travelling to perform. The support I have received from my colleagues is like nothing I have ever experienced before. I really do feel as if they have taken me on to guide me and help me to develop as a singer and a performer.

In the first two weeks we rehearsed and recorded quite a large number of Hungarian pieces for a CD production in the studio. I had never sung in Hungarian before but managed to pick it up quick enough. It was a little nerve racking recording as early as 10am each day, and I even had a few solos. After the recording weeks we started rehearsing for a concert with works by modern composers Fredrik Zeller and



Michelle and William Kelley on the staircase of the HSW Foyer after their *Liederabend* on 27 June

Claudio Scroccaro, some of the Hungarian pieces by Ligeti and works by Haydn, Grieg and Rheinberger. There were most likely around six different languages in total. We performed in Stuttgart, Alzenau and Mainz.

I have had to adapt to being an ensemble singer, going from running around on stage using my full voice to suddenly blending in with a group of singers who specialise in modern music and who do some pretty amazing things with their voices while standing quite calm and relaxed. I am really looking forward to the next concerts and recording productions. We will also be performing in Amsterdam and Vienna, as well as celebrating Ligeti's 100th Anniversary with a tour of his pieces to Paris and Milan, performing at La Scala.

Something to add to this year is that I jumped into Oper Frankfurt in March to sing the Fourth Maid in *Elektra*. They called me again in June to see if I could jump in for Zerlina in their last show of *Don Giovanni* but sadly I was unavailable.

I would like to thank GAOG, Hans Henkell and MTO for my two life-changing years in Wiesbaden, as well as the Wagner Society NSW for their support during this time. I would like to thank the Tait Memorial Trust in London for their support this year towards lessons with Yvonne Kenny in the coming months to help develop my voice and continue singing operatically while working in the SWR Vokalensemble. And a big thank you to my family who support me so much while I am living this crazy life on the other side of the world!

**GERMAN-AUSTRALIAN
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A word from Dr David Kram, GAOG's Artistic Director:

It was a fairly long, well-considered process putting MTO-GAOG auditions back on their feet after GAOG's quite innovative on-line auditions in 2020.

Fleuranne Brockway had started her Wiesbaden season in August 2019 after scooping the GAOG and Audience Awards in 2018, only to have the end of her 2019/2020 season cut off by the first lockdown in Germany. Thanks to the good graces of the HSW, Fleuranne was engaged as a guest artist – again and again – and is still one of the Wiesbaden “Aussie clan”, mentored in that lovely city by GAOG's first awardee Sharon Kempton.

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GAOG:
“The Gateway to an International Career”

The last live auditions before Melbourne lockdown – or was it a sliver of light between lockdowns – was Michelle Ryan, who also scooped the GAOG and Audience Awards in Melbourne in August 2019. Now it was Michelle's turn to suffer. Her departure for Wiesbaden for Season 2020/2021 was delayed and delayed, so that GAOG and HSW decided to award her a second season (2021/2022).

Definitely no live auditions in August 2020 – this was the techno-zoom year, when Darcy Carroll received the GAOG Award - but no Audience Award, because no audience. As Michelle was in residence in Wiesbaden 2021/2022, Darcy agreed to delay his departure until COVID had died down sufficiently for him to leave these shores in May 2022 after a stunning appearance at the MTO Fundraising Dinner.

By this time, Michelle had secured a coveted position with the Südwestrundfunk Vokalensemble (the Radio Choir based in Stuttgart). I heard on the grapevine that the auditions are so difficult that they would make singers here gasp - so congratulations, Michelle!

Darcy, like many of his forebears, was a great hit in Wiesbaden, so the HSW and GAOG came to a similar arrangement to award him another year, like Michelle. So Darcy is at this moment in his second season. In July this year I had the pleasure of interviewing Darcy during his summer vacation in his home town of Melbourne. Darcy made the following points: Firstly, this is not a Young Artists Program – it's a job. During his first year, Darcy had auditioned for some of these programs and had been told it would be a step back for him in his career. Secondly, he was kept very busy with many roles but always had the support of the music and production staff. Thirdly, he was able to sing in all the standard operatic languages and also had coaching in Czech for one of his roles in an opera by Janáček.

So this brings us to 2023, after Hans Henkell had made a trip to Germany, thanked outgoing Intendant Uwe Eric Laufenberg and met the new Co-Intendantin Dorothea Hartmann, whom we welcome this year at the Opera Finale. In March it was decided to reinvigorate the live auditions, resulting in a flurry of work, including a trip I made to Brisbane, Sydney, Perth and Adelaide to conduct masterclasses and presentations there as well as in my home town Melbourne. Thanks to the opera companies in those cities for their support. There was an excellent standard of applicants, including some Australian residents overseas. The Selection Panel met on September 18. We noted with regret the suffering of that generation of graduates whose performing experience had been cut off by COVID.

And so here we are, very excited that GAOG survived the challenges - and very grateful to our supporters and singers, who have kept the faith.

Fleuranne Brockway - 2019 -

Since my time as the GAOG recipient for the season 2019/2020, I have joined the full-time principal ensemble at HSW. I was able to have great success in many international singing competitions including winning the Concorso Lirico di Portofino, Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonynge Bel Canto Competition and being the first Australian laureate in the Queen Elisabeth Vocal Competition. Last year I got to attend the prestigious Accademia del Belcanto "Rodolfo Celletti" in Martina Franca.

Alongside my busy schedule in Wiesbaden, I have also started to do more guest work, including making my debut with Oper Frankfurt as La Ciesca in *Gianni Schicchi*, Carlotta in *La scuola dei gelosi* (Salieri) in the Festival della Valle D'Itria and most recently as Suzuki in *Madame Butterfly* with the Bregenzer Festspiele. Most notable performances in Wiesbaden include my debut as Charlotte in *Werther*, the title role of *Carmen* and debuting the role of Fenena in *Nabucco* (Verdi) alongside Anna Netrebko.



Fleuranne as Krista in HSW's production of *Věc Makropulos* (Leoš Janáček)
(production photo: © Karl and Monika Forster)

Roles performed in this time: Charlotte in *Werther*, the title role of *Carmen*, Hänsel in *Hänsel und Gretel*, Dorabella in *Cosi fan tutte*, Fenena in *Nabucco*, Maddalena in *Rigoletto*, Wellgunde and Rossweiße in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Krista in *Věc Makropulos* (Leoš Janáček), Zweite Dame in *Die Zauberflöte*, Dritte Magd in *Elektra*, La Ciesca in *Gianni Schicchi* and Tebaldo in *Don Carlos*. I also sang the role of Sharon in *Oryx and Crake*, the world premiere of Søren Nils Eichberg's opera based on the novel by Margaret Atwood, which was performed at HSW in February 2023.