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Wesley Diener

Arts Award Outcome Report

FAVA: Immersion in French Opera, Art Song, and Language

As planned, I spent July and August of my summer training and performing opera and classical art song in France with the Franco-American Vocal Academy. The Academy offers weekly voice lessons, daily French classes, multiple opera coachings and staging rehearsals daily, and open masterclasses with guest artists, which included a prominent living composer and faculty from the esteemed Paris Conservatory. Additionally, performance opportunities were generous, including art song recitals, aria concerts, and three fully staged operas. I had the distinct opportunity to participate in both rounds of masterclasses, sing in three different concerts, and also sing two full roles in Gounod's *Mireille*, a fully-staged five act opera with orchestra.

My experience with FAVA was even more educational and transformative than I could have anticipated. Shortly before departing for France, the directors requested that I prepare a second role in *Mireille* to perform on the night that I would not be performing my primary role. This meant that I got to participate in more performances than the average student, which was valuable in contributing to my performance experiences. I found myself becoming more confident, especially in performing staged work. Opera productions have the potential to offer more challenges for singers, demanding greater physical mobility and flexibility, and the extended rehearsal process provided the time and space with which I could integrate my vocal technique into my dramatic interpretation. Positioning recital performances so close to operatic performances greatly assisted in my own understanding of these two forms of performance. While a recital atmosphere is most closely related to my performance opportunities in the music

department at the University, operatic performances call upon my training in the drama department. There are many considerations when singing in these different spaces and environments. A small recital room requires a deep intimacy and subtle nuance in interpreting the music, but occasionally recitals can take place in larger spaces, like church sanctuaries. The aria concert was held in a large, lofted church that featured extremely live acoustics. This meant that the control of consonants had to be much stronger in order to avoid a lack of clarity. Finally, operatic settings require an overall greater attention to both large and small musical elements for full clarity in a large setting. I am grateful to participate in all these types of performances in close proximity, as a means for truly understanding the different approaches as a singer.

In addition to performative familiarity, I acquired substantial technical skills as a musician and singer. Daily French classes focused on lessons that addressed needs for singers regarding musical language and poetic elements. This directly complimented the material that was addressed in coachings, especially pronunciation of French words. I was pleasantly surprised to receive extremely positive feedback regarding my French pronunciation in song, and now feel that my French diction is close to perfect. In fact, after singing a French art song in a masterclass, the teacher assumed that I was a native French speaker and conducted the entire masterclass in French. I learned new concepts about vocal technique from my voice teacher, Hubert Weller. He introduced me to a concept of “declame” that I can use to prepare songs and we discussed and developed my breath control at length. I feel extremely technically advanced compared to my vocal state before the program began.

Beyond the scope of technical and performative lessons within FAVA’s curriculum, I formed numerous personal and professional relationships that are truly priceless. My primary coach, whose specialty is musicality and language skills, became one of my best friends during

the program. This friendship compounded my experience into a socially immersive education in French culture, language, and music. Furthermore, my connections with other faculty members have continued into my return to the United States. One of the coaches, Trevor Chartrand, wrote recommendations for me for summer programs, and I am still in contact with my French voice teacher and director. I know that I can ask them for assistance at any point moving forward in my career, and I have grown so much as a singer and artist from the individual guidance and mentorship I received.

Furthermore, the international component of this immersive musical experience greatly enhanced every other aspect of my learning process. I took advantage of every opportunity to practice my language skills in public. At restaurants, grocery stores, and other excursions, I mastered skills in conversational French, and I was thrilled to find that the native residents were very enthusiastic in their dialogues. I cherished opportunities to travel, therefore immersing myself in the culture, architecture, food, and art of Europe. I traveled extensively in the Bordeaux region where I was staying, as well as Paris, Lyon, Zurich, and Geneva. Thanks to the Art Scholars Award, I was financially able to attend various operas, which was a notable educational experience. I feel that the extensive time spent in Europe truly facilitated a culturally immersive experience that likewise enhances my understanding of European music.

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