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Wesley Diener

Art Scholar Fourth-Year Award Application

Bel Canto in Tuscany: Learning the Italian Art of Vocal Technique and Expression

I am applying for a Miller Art Scholars Rising Fourth-Year Award to support my participation in Bel Canto in Tuscany, an intensive and immersive opera training program in Italy. This program, focused on advanced study in Italian vocal traditions, features a month of comprehensive vocal, musical, dramatic, and linguistic study.

The Italian tradition of Bel Canto, which literally translates to “beautiful singing”, serves as the foundation for contemporary notions of technical and expressive singing. This phrase specifically references a school of vocal thought that thrived in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Robert Toft, who wrote an Oxford University Press book entitled *Bel Canto*, characterizes this golden style by “beauty and evenness of tone, legato phrasing, and skill in executing highly florid passages”. The Bel Canto period is most strongly associated with well-known opera composers such as Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini, but its tenets can be widely applied to vocal repertoire ranging from Handel’s baroque opera seria to contemporary atonal compositions. Most importantly, this teaching perspective facilitates ease of vocal production and expressive fluency, marrying the musical and dramatic expertise that full opera productions require.

An immersion in this Italian art form is only heightened by a simultaneous immersion in Italian language, music, and culture. Situated in a rustic Tuscan town, Bel Canto in Tuscany offers the most of musical and cultural exposure with native faculty members and minimal local tourism. Musically, this program also offers the ideal experience in regards to both curriculum and faculty. Most importantly, the curriculum is centered on daily instruction. For this reason, I will be guaranteed daily voice lessons, musical coachings, Italian language classes, acting classes, and related lectures. This opportunity to reinforce technical and musical nuances on a daily basis is invaluable in my young musical development. Additionally, there will be numerous performance opportunities to apply the skills learned in classes, including a special recital in a local winery.

I am most excited to join Bel Canto in Italy this summer for the incredibly experienced and renowned faculty. A key component of summer young artist programs for singers is the connections made while abroad, and I am confident that these faculty members will become important figures in my vocal development and professional endeavors in coming years. In addition to numerous singers whose resumes include performances at the Metropolitan Opera, Giovanni Reggioli, who is native to Tuscany, leads the renowned faculty with decades of experience as Placido Domingo’s assistant conductor. Additionally Dona Vaughn, international opera director and Artistic Director of Opera Programs at the Manhattan School of Music, brings a dramatic vibrancy and William Crutchfield, an awarded musicologist, offers intellectual insight that compliments my academic training at the University. These renowned individuals bring not

only an individual specificity of wisdom but also a breadth of experience that compliments my interdisciplinary study, including music performance, theatrical analysis, musicology, and European history. Due to the program's extremely low student to faculty ratio, I am guaranteed extensive personal interaction with each of these notable artists, unlike many programs that offer less faculty members for more student density.

The undergraduate years of a young singer's vocal development are possibly the most important and also challenging to position oneself for a successful career in the future. In addition to technical training at the University level in voice lessons, performances, and music courses, it is essential to participate in summer programs, where young singers can acquire real experience in performance roles, learn from a completely different field of instructors and peers, and sharpen necessary language skills in an international program, such as Bel Canto in Tuscany. As a University of Virginia student, this performance participation is even more important; I truly cherish and appreciate the highly academic instruction that our music department offers, but this means that seeking external performance instruction and experience is absolutely vital to position myself for future opportunities in such a competitive industry. However, this also means that young singers must acquire the necessary funds for these summer programs. With thousands of dollars expected in tuition and housing, I am so grateful and fortunate to have programs such as the Miller Art Scholars that can alleviate these financial burdens. With the possibility of this grant, my operatic aspirations become more realistic.

Timeline

Spring

February-July: Prepare repertoire with Pamela Beasley for participation in Bel Canto in Tuscany

Summer

July 31-August 18: Attend Bel Canto in Tuscany program, including daily voice lessons, coachings, language classes, masterclasses, and opera/recital performances

Fall

November: Present a recital to the public featuring technique and repertoire developed during the Bel Canto in Tuscany program

Budget

Tuition & Housing - \$4,500

<http://www.belcantointuscany.com/details-fees>

Transportation - \$2,000

Airfare (roundtrip Washington DC-Florence, Italy) - \$1,750

Train (roundtrip Florence, Italy-Greve, Italy) - \$250

Meals - \$500

20 days x \$25 estimated average cost

Music - \$200

Opera scores: 4 x \$50

Miscellaneous - \$300

Cultural enrichment (tickets to performances, events, etc.)

Additional travel, tourism, etc.

Laundry, supplemental materials

Total – \$7,500

The program's costs clearly exceed the amount available through the rising 4th year Art Scholars awards; I am requesting \$5,500 to cover all of my fees excluding transportation. I am prepared to assume the remaining \$2,000 for transportation from personal savings that I have accumulated from my part time employment as a desk supervisor at Old Cabell Hall.