

Miriam Endersby – 2019-20 Travel Award winner

Report: Opera conservatoire training placement, Cremona, Italy

In 2020 I was privileged to receive a Travel Award from Royal Holloway, in support of a five-month trip to Cremona, northern Italy to pursue vocational training as a classical singer, and to improve my Italian as part of my degree. I applied for the award partway through the placement, after a change to my Erasmus contract left a hole in my budget: core singing lessons which were originally to be included within my tuition agreement would now cost several hundred euros. The Travel Award allowed me to cover most of this additional cost, and the rest I made up by taking on additional part-time work teaching English and music at a local nursery.

During the placement, I worked for five months as a secretary, publicity officer and translator in the office of the Istituto Monteverdi conservatoire in Cremona. In addition to this work, I attended all classes for the bachelor's-level opera singing course. These included Dramaturgy of Opera, Acting, Acting for Opera, Usage and Care of the Body in Performance, Sight Reading, Ear Training, Choral Singing and Semiotics (the history of musical notation). As well as these group classes, I took weekly individual singing lessons with the soprano Federica Zanello and additional one-to-one tuition with the bass-baritone Mario Luperi and the soprano Maria Billeri. I sang in the conservatoire's newly-formed choir, as a soloist at religious services at the convent where I stayed, and at a concert of opera arias performed in one of the town's historic theatres. I was also able to attend several professional opera performances at Cremona's opera house, the Teatro Ponchielli, including *Aida*, *La Sonnambula*, *Gianni Schicchi* and *L'Heure Espagnole*, as well as a concert featuring acclaimed English tenor, Ian Bostridge.

When I arrived in Cremona, I already had several years of singing lessons and two of Italian studies under my belt, but I lacked direction. I was uncertain what kind of singer I was – soprano or mezzo, lighter or heavier-voiced, more suited to early or recent repertoire – and I lacked both the confidence and the training to begin the process of applying for postgraduate vocal study. Thanks to the intensive programme of singing lessons that the Royal Holloway Travel Award helped pay for, I was able to make huge strides in improving my vocal technique and finding my own unique voice. The academic group lessons were also invaluable, advancing my existing knowledge of music theory and adding some completely new skills, like reading ancient Gregorian chant notation, to my arsenal. The study of Dramaturgy in particular taught me a lot about the history of opera and music in the theatre, helping inspire my love for the baroque and renaissance opera repertoire which I now specialise in both as a singer and academically: my final-year dissertation will explore the relationship between gender and power in Italian baroque opera. My spoken and written Italian also improved immensely, as I was totally immersed in the language in all my classes and work, and I feel confident going into the final year of my languages degree as a much more fluent Italian speaker.

This autumn I will audition for masters' programmes at British conservatoires, with the intention to pursue full-time study as a professional soprano from next year on. I am extremely grateful to the College for this award, without which I would have struggled to fund the training to pursue such an ambitious career path, and I can't wait to apply what I've learned in the upcoming audition season!