

# Trip to Rome is a dream come true for opera students

Three-week program offered intensive training in opera, art song and musical theater.



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Danielle Lugo performs in Rome as a part of the OC Ars Vocalis Academy.

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**By KAITLIN WRIGHT** / FOR THE REGISTER

This summer, the Orange County Ars Vocalis Academy sent 13 young artists to Rome for three weeks to study opera.

Founded by Dubravka Zubovic in 2012, the academy offers training to advanced high school and college singers in opera, art song and musical theater. This intensive program seeks to "unleash (students') unlimited creative potential."

Zubovic, a mezzo soprano who has sung in opera houses around the world, now teaches vocal performance at Saddleback Community College. Scott Farthing, professor of music at Saddleback, lauds Zubovic for her "ability to make people feel special, important and good about what (they) do." When Zubovic came to him with the idea of starting a nonprofit intensive vocal academy that would allow students to study in the ancient city, Farthing knew he wanted to be a part of it.

After they arrived in Rome, teachers and students immersed themselves in the culture of a city overflowing with an immense history and a respect for classical vocal performance.

The singers lived and took classes at the Domus Pacis hotel, just 3 kilometers from Vatican City. Their days began at 9:30 a.m. with either an Italian language class or a private voice lesson. **Trinidad Cano** and the other students went from having one 30-minute private lesson per week when in the United States to having one 45-minute private lesson per day while in Rome.

The personal instruction from Farthing was Cano's best memory of the trip. "He pulled the passion and energy out of me and taught me to utilize my feelings in my aria." Teachers worked on everything from breath control to vowel shape and even proper facial musculature.

The students also performed three concerts at St. Paul's Within the Walls Episcopal Church. Because of the way sound carried in the church, **Ivory Ligons** learned that he had to focus on feeling each note rather than relying on hearing each note.

As the youngest member of the academy, **Danielle Lugo** said that she occasionally felt like the elephant in the room among the more mature singers. "Not many 16-year-olds get a chance like this," Lugo remarked. The student at JSerra Catholic High School said she appreciated that, in Rome, "There isn't a big list of pop stars like in America. There, the people recognize the classics."

One evening in Rome, the students attended a performance at the Roman Opera House during which the singers were booed by the audience for their renditions of the arias. **Lauren Graham** realized then that "the people in Italy take opera personally."

Danielle Lugo's sister, **Lauren**, added that "being in a city with so much cultural celebration of classical music was very different than being in a classroom." Studying in Rome set students up to be inspired by the same scenery that inspired many of the greatest opera composers.

Aside from full days of classes and rehearsals, some students said, the best parts of the trip were the impromptu dinners with the instructors. Graham initially thought, "Give me a bed and some singing lessons and I'll be happy." But she received a lot more when opera greats like Zubovic and Milena Kitic shared stories and advice over pasta and pizza.

Farthing described this quality time by saying, "So many programs only care about peoples' next step, but these opera divas are real people. (They are) gentle, loving humans that believe in the students."

The students believed in each other, too. "We are all striving toward the same goal, and we know what each other are going through" observed **Scott Dilbeck**. "Some people don't

understand what we do, but we have to help them understand that art is important and that it gets people thinking."

**Jose Zamarripa** agreed, adding that singing allows him to express himself. He takes on different characters and emotions with each song to communicate different stories.

All of the students had to make decisions regarding how they were going to make the trip to Italy fit into their lives.

"We know these students struggle financially, but somehow they trusted in my idea and in me as a person," Zubovic said.

**Eric Ayala** lost his job because of the trip, but he and the other students don't regret any sacrifices they made. Baked goods, flan, spaghetti dinners and benefit concerts funded many of the students' trips to Rome. **Sophia Ahwazi** even created a Kickstarter account online and raised \$1,500 after asking people via video to send donations.

"We were very cognizant that students trusted us with their money and their summer" Farthing said. The faculty felt a responsibility to provide the best experience possible to the young artists.

For the academy's third and final performance at St. Paul's, the rain brought in countless passers-by off the street to enjoy the music. Singing to a packed house was an unbelievable way to close the three-week program, students said.

"I made a wish in the Trevi Fountain that I'd return to Rome someday," Graham said. "And I think it's going to happen. Once you sing in Rome, you feel like you've really made it."

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