



## Young Pacific Opera Star Wins Top Music Award

University of Auckland music student Pene Pati has won the top prize in one of Australasia's most prestigious singing competitions.

The 21-year-old Samoan-born tenor has taken out the New Zealand Aria competition in Rotorua. The event is the second largest competition in New Zealand after the Lexus Song Quest and launched the careers of some of the country's finest young singers.

Pene, a third-year music and arts student, sang *Questa o Quella* from *Rigoletto* by Verdi in the first round of the competition. His performance earned him an award for "most promising opera voice" and a spot in the grand final singing with the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra. In the final, he sang Lensky's Aria from the great Russian tragedy *Eugene Onegin* by Tchaikovsky.

Pene says he thought his chances of making the finals were slim and his chances of winning even slimmer. He had only sung in one other public competition before this one – a small singing competition in West Auckland – and some of the other finalists at the New Zealand Aria competition were emerging artists with the NBR New Zealand Opera.

"Winning this award is well above my expectations. I was blown away. I had decided to go down to Rotorua by myself because I didn't think I'd win anything. Luckily, my sisters and brothers decided to come down with me for a holiday and could help me celebrate!"

Pene said he was touched by the audience's emotional response to his singing.

"Many people in the audience were in tears as I sang my second aria. Even though they couldn't understand the words, they could feel the emotion."

As a child, Pene and his siblings sang every Friday for residents at a South Auckland rest home managed by his father. While in the third form at Aorere College in Manukau, his sister convinced him to join the school choir. From there, he rose up the singing ranks quickly, making the Graduate Choir of New Zealand in the fourth form and soon after the New Zealand Youth Choir and New Zealand Secondary Schools Choir.

Pene's performance teacher at the University, well-known soprano Patricia Wright, says her student has a natural gift. "He's a very intelligent, sensitive singer, and he works extremely hard. He has a lovely communication with the audience, and he knows how to use his voice to the best effect."

Dr Te Oti Rakena, Vocal Studies Co-ordinator (Classical) and Associate Dean - Equity at The University of Auckland's National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries, says Pene has a beautiful, natural voice and a vocal strength that is rare in someone so young. He says Mr Pene reflects the wealth of musical talent in Māori and Pacific communities.

"We have 38 students in the School of Music's Vocal Studies Department, and one-third of them are of Māori and Pacific descent, with a significant number of Samoan descent. Pacific students have a huge influence in the classical profession."

The University of Auckland's National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries comprises the School of Architecture and Planning, Elam School of Fine Arts, the Centre for New Zealand Art Research and Discovery (CNZARD), the School of Music and the Dance Studies Programme.