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Madeleine Pierard's early battle with cancer – and what looked like a reprise of her health crisis on the eve of New Zealand's premier singing competition – would not have been apparent to the black-tie audience who filled the Auckland Town Hall for the Lexus Song Quest final in April 2005. They wouldn't have guessed either that the

glamorous mezzo-soprano who swept on stage in the strapless canary yellow dress and carried off the coveted Lexus first prize was the youngest and by far the least experienced of the six finalists.

This September she flies to London to fulfil a young singer's dream – to be taught by her own choice of tutor at the prestigious Royal College of Music, where she is considered "one of the most promising singers to come our way in the last 10 years". Newly married, at Easter to fellow singer Chris Warwick, she's still struggling to get the money together, but seemingly nothing can stop her now.

On the morning of that 2005 final, American judge Grace Bumbry got tough with Pierard. In a meeting designed to test the contestant's commitment to a singing future, she confronted the 23-year-old declaring that for all Madeleine's technical ability, "You don't *move* me". That challenge, which could have rocked a more fragile artist, didn't rattle Madeleine. She's faced down bigger challenges than that.

At six she almost died. She was playing happily in the classroom before school one day at St Patrick's School in Napier when a friend pointed out a "funny" lump poking out of her neck. Says Madeleine, "It had surfaced very quickly, but it must have been growing for a while". Her father, Louis Pierard, then chief subeditor of Napier's *Daily Telegraph* and now editor of its successor, *Hawke's Bay Today*, assumed it was mumps. He remembers taking the phone call that told him a full biopsy had revealed that it was a malignant B-cell non-Hodgkins lymphoma, a particularly aggressive childhood cancer. And at that time only 30 per cent of child cancer sufferers survived. "We talk about people's worlds falling apart. Nothing had hit me between the eyes till that moment," he says.

The Pierards were a young family, the first of their five children having been born when Louis was only 21 and his wife Jane 20; they now ranged from 14 down to five.

Eighteen months of treatment was mapped out for Madeleine and, as the case was managed by the head of paediatric oncology in Wellington, long spells of it were in the capital as well as in Napier.

Madeleine remembers "being scared and shuddering hearing the trolley with the drip stuff, when I knew I was due for chemo – highly toxic chemicals that suck your soul away and make you very tired. I remember not feeling like a kid and being so tired I couldn't will my limbs to move.

"I had to have lumbar punctures nearly every week. I had local anaesthetics at first; then they started giving me the gas mask. The very thought of it would make me vomit. I vomited so much I had scabs on my nose from the plastic cup. Mum would have to wake up every five minutes to hold it up.

“Most of the time in Napier I was in isolation because the chemo meant I had no immune system. When my family visited me, I could never touch them. They all had to wear masks and aprons.”

Going home was dangerous. “Once, one of my sisters accidentally pushed me as she got up out of a chair. I had the tiniest scrape on my hand and had to be rushed to hospital and have a blood transfusion that night. Within 12 hours, I was in the worst condition I’d been in through the whole period. I wasn’t expected to live through the night. The doctors were amazed I was still alive in the morning.”

In spite of having been so close to death, Madeleine insists the rest of the family had a harder time of it than she did. “I had people trying to cheer me up all the time, and Mum would stay by my bed. The other kids had a whole year without Mum and they once caught Dad sobbing.



One effect of child cancer can be to adultify children – that is, make them seem grown up before their time. But Jane Pierard believes her fourth daughter was born that way. “I remember when she was small often thinking she came into the world already in her adult form.” Louis Pierard remembers the very young Madeleine as “a fascinating eccentric with her mannerisms and knowing looks.”

Stoic self-possession came to the fore. Says Jane, “She went into that illness very privately. She never, in front of anybody, showed any sign of distress. She never complained about anything, or about hurting, yet she had day after day of lumbar punctures and injections and chemotherapy.”

Jane remembers the replacement of antibiotics by gas. “They were trying to knock her out with antibiotics and they had to give her more and more because she wouldn’t release herself to it. The doctor explained that

people’s personalities react in different ways. Hers was a very private personality which would not allow anything into her system easily.”

Jane believes the cancer experience reinforced what was there already. “It certainly made her single-minded; it sort of cemented that aspect of her personality.”

Louis remembers thinking she became an “observer of her own treatment. She developed a detachment”. This sense of detachment might be a contributing factor in her remarkable equanimity about success and failure. Says Jane, “If she hadn’t got into the semifinals of the Lexus Song Quest, it wouldn’t have affected her remotely. She goes with things not working out in the same way as if they do work out.”

Jane, now head of music at Napier’s Taradale High School, is particularly aware of this trait because she’s tried to teach her children *and* her students “to treat success and failure as the same type of thing; they are both a step forward”. But she’s amazed how completely Madeleine applies the lesson. “She would never resent someone else doing better than her. It wouldn’t even enter her head. That’s the strange thing. You might control yourself and not let it affect you, but it doesn’t even enter her head to have that reaction.”

Whether inherent or illness-induced, Madeleine Pierard’s maturity amazes many. Ross Harris taught her at Victoria University, where she gained a bachelor of music degree in composition, capping it off with first-class honours in performance voice. He says that until the speeches at Madeleine’s Easter wedding he’d never heard

mention of her childhood cancer even though he'd known her for years and had met her family. "I think it's probably helped to give her enormous strength, which is now a big part of her personality. She's not scared of anything. She's incredibly bold – and she just loves a challenge. I forget she's 24; she's so focused. She's as mature as anybody, and she's raring to go. I really do think she will go far. She has a very pure, very strong voice. The combination of her musical intelligence and her voice is very rare."

"She's sorted," is how Madeleine's aunt, Catherine Pierard, and opera singer in London for the past 25 years, describes her. "She carves a deep groove. She works so hard, and that's 90 per cent of it. To merely sing a song is not enough. You have to know the provenance of the work, why the composer composed it and lots of other issues. There's a massive amount of work required but once you've done that – and it comes naturally to her – the rest of it is sheer joy".

These opera-singing Pierards belong to a very musical family. Father Louis, aside from his editing duties, is also a very good clarinettist. He, his sister Catherine and their <seven> siblings had to learn two instruments to Grade 5 during their childhood, so it's no wonder a number of them play in orchestras in New Zealand and Australia. Their father Monty Pierard was a famous Anglican canon and long-time chaplain at Waikato Diocesan School for Girls in Hamilton. His wife Barbara passed her LTCL after the birth of her <nine> children, and used to put on Bach's *Mass in B Minor* to go to sleep by, Louis remembers.

Jane Pierard once took her own one-woman Edith Piaf show on a North Island tour. All of her children are performers. The eldest, also called Jane, plays the cello – in alternative acoustic and rock bands rather than in an orchestra. Anna is at the De Nieuwe Opera Academie (New Opera Academy) in Amsterdam, and last year married Spanish tenor José Aparicio. She was a finalist in the final Mobil Song Quest (as the Lexus was known in its previous sponsorship incarnation) and a semifinalist in the 2005 competition her sister won. Margot is a jazz singer, and Tom is a member of percussion group Strike. Says Madeleine, "We were never pushed to learn an instrument but we wanted to because that's what we knew." Her mother says she and her husband would be the last people to push their children – and says she'd prefer to hear that they were kind than that they were talented.

Madeleine began violin at eight and the piano at nine. In the sixth form she moved from Sacred Heart College to Havelock North High School because friends from there had told her about the better choir and drama opportunities. She was chosen for the New Zealand Secondary Students' Choir in 1997 and the National Youth Choir two years later. As a university student she sang in multiple choirs including The Tudor Consort, Baroque Voices and Sings Harry.

She enrolled for composition, having "fallen in love" with the work of composer Jack Body and chosen Victoria University because he was there. Lecturer Ross Harris remembers standing with Body, the two of them open-mouthed, as Madeleine brought forth her sister Anna to sing her work. "Her compositions were very dramatic, theatrical, expressive, direct – much like the lady herself. I don't think she had time to work deeply on them. I think she poured them out, and could do it with one hand tied behind her back."



It was a sure measure of Madeleine's poise as well as her talent – because that's not the way it felt for her, and her university years were harder than she made them look.

“Composition is very difficult because you have got to find the inspiration. Some composers can just pour out screeds of music. I had to sit down for ages. It became a big hang-up for me. And then there were the general teenage issues – trying to figure out who I was. I put on a heap of weight. I was flattered with males, and eating foods I was never allowed at home like chips and pizza. I just didn't care. I was stressed out about university and my part-time job in a bookshop and not being able to support myself. I ended up getting sick because I was working so hard. I also had toxic tonsils, which I've since had out, and they were a contributing factor to my general unhappiness and weight gain.” She finally weighed 120 kgs.

She took 2001 off for a trip to the United States with the National Youth Choir – “I didn't feel I'd be able to sustain the big workload as well” – and worked fulltime at the bookshop to raise money for the trip and to pay off her piano.

“And then the boys moved out and my sister Jane moved in. She cooked good meals, and I stopped going to Star Mart for a pie late at night. I didn't go to a gym, or go on a diet, I just changed my lifestyle. I started walking to work. I'd play the piano to calm down, instead of eating. After I lost 40 kgs I started going to the gym to maintain my fitness – and that's good for singing.”

Things kept going up from there. In 2003, she got a part-time job with the man she describes as her patron, retire Wellington epidemiologist Dr Ian Prior, now in his early 80s and probably best known as organiser of the New Zealand branch of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War as well as for art and music patronage.

After an approach from Jack Body, Prior and his late wife Elespie had undertaken to fund Anna Pierard's studies, and then he gave her younger sister the job of cataloguing his book collection. Says Madeleine, “He is my sister's patron, and he changed my life too. I still do administration for him and am paid a part-time wage – so in that respect he is my patron as well”.

Dr Prior describes her role as “getting an unorganised person organised”.

Says Madeleine, “I am revoltingly organised” – revolting, she must mean, to lesser mortals who do not have a colour-coded timetable on the fridge and do not contact those they have gigs with months in advance.

At the end of 2003, on a Tudor Consort trip to the Tolosa Choral Competition in Spain, Madeleine fell in love with a man she'd been singing with in choirs for years – Chris Warwick, 39, for whom music is a part-time passion while he works as a claims technical specialist for an insurance company.

“At night in Spain, after our concerts, Chris and I would always be the last in the bar talking to each other and drinking margaritas. Nothing happened then, but as soon as we had to leave each other at Frankfurt airport we both knew we didn't want to.”

Within six weeks of their arrival home, Madeleine had moved into his Johnsonville house. “It just felt right, I was utterly comfortable in his presence,” she says. Ditto, says Chris. “As I said in my wedding speech, not only do I love her for what she is, but for what I am when I'm with her.”



Madeleine would not have been wearing the bold canary-yellow dress with the pleated, strapless bodice for the Lexus final if she hadn't decided to have a breast reduction operation just two months out from the big night. After losing so much weight, she'd experienced pain and major effects on her singing. "I'd been size 18 to 20 G cup; now I was a 10G," she explains. "I've got very small shoulders and they couldn't cope. It was really hard for singing, having to hold myself up when there was not enough counter-balance in my body."

She had a referral to the public hospital – but that would have meant waiting three or four years – “so I got a loan and had it done privately”.

Her singing teacher Jenny Wollerman asked her not to have an operation which involved a general anaesthetic so close to the competition. But Madeleine was determined to take the risk – and with the anaesthetist using soft tubing to avoid damage to the vocal cords, it all went smoothly.

Then, less than two weeks before the Lexus final, disaster seemed to have struck in the same place twice – Madeleine found another lump in her neck. She got a referral for an immediate biopsy. “But they couldn't gather the cells from it with a needle, so they had to take it out. It was so close to the working of the voice, I was very nervous about it. I asked them not to give me the result until after the competition, but they were so nice they rang me before to tell me it wasn't cancer.”

It was toxoplasmosis, a bacterial infection usually picked up from cats or their faeces, while gardening. Non-cat-owning, non-gardening Madeleine suspects she picked it up from a penchant for eating meat rare (another potential cause).

She faced the competition in the final of New Zealand's premiere singing competition (until 2005 the Mobil Song Quest and having been won by the likes of Kiri Te Kanawa, Malvina Major and Jonathan Lemalu) with lavish make-up masking the still-red and healing scar.

On the morning of the final, each of the six singers had an interview with judge Grace Bumbry, New Zealand Symphony Orchestra conductor Michael Lloyd and Lexus Song Quest artistic administrator Diana Cable. That's when the black American judge – whose career took off in Europe when she was about Madeleine's age and who is now based in Salzburg, Austria – decided to see what the young singer was made of.

Diana Cable remembers Bumbry's comments as being very pointed. “She said to her, ‘You're a very talented musician, you have got a very good voice but quite frankly, Madeleine, you never move me’.”

Jane Pierard surmises that the judge had actually made her choice but decided to test Madeleine's toughness – “but Madeleine didn't let it affect her. She seems to have the type of guts you need. She was less experienced than the others, but on stage she seemed very much the oldest. She was poised, and like a much older woman.”

Madeleine says she wasn't fazed by the challenge. “I don't get put out by negative feedback. I take it with a grain of salt, and I'm grateful rather than annoyed. I thought, if she thinks that, then its proof enough to work on it, and I'll turn it on a bit more.” She did, and the result was the plush Lexus prize of \$10,000 cash and a \$15,000 study scholarship.



Madeleine's audition tour to London six months after the Lexus win was an object lesson in networking. She was scoping out schools and teachers – still unsure whether to attend an institution or have private lessons. Teacher Jenny Wollerman had organised an audition with Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, and Madeleine went to the diva's Sussex home where the Kiwi legend served coffee and croissants, provided her own accompanist and offered voice and career advice, including that going to an institution would be best.



— which she did. “Phillip Thomas got very excited and asked me questions like ‘Do you have a visa?’ and ‘Do you have patriality?’ and asked me to keep him up to date.”

It was Mary King who suggested the best teacher would be Professor Lillian Watson, who was on the panel when Madeleine went for her Royal College of Music audition. “My immediate impression was that she would be perfect,” says Madeleine, but the young singer felt she didn’t quite fit in front of the panel. “So I went and asked Lillian Watson if I could have a consultation lesson with her.”

Unfortunately the time Professor Watson specified was exactly when she was due to audition for the Guildhall School of Music. “I found myself in a big quandary. My gut feeling was to go for the consultation lesson. I knew she was extremely difficult to get as a teacher, and she didn’t select pupils without one.”

Madeleine consulted what she calls her “little book of numbers” and found that of Wendy Dawn Thompson, another New Zealand mezzo-soprano, now based in London and singing internationally. She phoned her, even though she’d never met her, and following Thompson’s advice now has not only her RCM place and a scholarship paying half the fees but also weekly individual lessons with Lillian Watson.

Just two auditions had been set up for Madeleine in London. “The rest I set up from talking to people,” she says. “Whenever I

Catherine Pierard had also organised an audition for Madeleine at Glyndebourne Opera – which did offer her a place in the chorus, but she had to turn it down because of commitments in New Zealand.

Off her own bat, Madeleine had earlier spoken to English conductor Julian Smith who’d been here as music director for New Zealand Opera’s *La Traviata*. He recommended that she sing for English National Opera coaches Phillip Thomas and Mary King – which she did. “Phillip Thomas got very excited and asked me questions like ‘Do you have a visa?’ and ‘Do you have patriality?’ and asked me to keep him up to date.”

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Just two auditions had been set up for Madeleine in London. “The rest I set up from talking to people,” she says. “Whenever I called someone, they’d ask, ‘How did you get my number?’ I’d say who’d given it to me and they’d say ‘Oh, okay’. I’m quite good at that. I just bowl on up and cover all the bases. I have no shame.”

Madeleine will study fulltime for three years for a masters degree in opera studies at the Royal College in Kensington. “I have a realistic view – that I have to work and that it’s my responsibility to achieve what I want to achieve. It’s all up to me.” As a result of her networking skills, she now has a raft of well-placed contacts. “It’s brilliant because I’ve got a network of people who have heard me already in London.”

Mission accomplished, Madeleine came home before Christmas to raise money, carry out her remaining performance obligations here – and get married (at the Wellington Cathedral of St Paul), at Easter. “I loved planning my own wedding, making the cake and the invitations and doing the whole thing myself; it was cool.”

While she will travel to England on a study visa, Chris will be allowed to work up to 20 hours a week as her spouse. She feels that for him “it’s a big ask – selling the house, not having an income. He’s never had to be poor before, never had to live like a student” – while she still has a \$20,000 student loan. But Chris says he’s looking forward to it as the OE he’s never done. He hopes to find a position as a lay clerk – a professional cathedral choir chorister. “I think I owe it to myself to see how far I can take my singing too.”

Madeleine has gained a \$10,000 grant from the New Zealand International Arts Foundation and \$8,000 from Creative New Zealand. Her “patron” Dr Prior has written to potential individual funders and already received contributions from arts sponsors including Jenny Gibbs, Sir Roy McKenzie and the Adam Foundation. But Madeleine needs another \$25,000 to cover this year’s costs – and that’s not even thinking about the remaining two years of study.

This year has already been a performance whirlwind, with a slew of engagements up and down the country, including appearing alongside Jonathan Lemalu and Margaret Medlyn (who also teaches her) as a soloist at the SkyCity Starlight Symphony in February and as the first flower maiden in Wagner’s *Parsifal* at the New Zealand International Festival of the Arts.

Last chances to see and hear her before she takes the big international step will be on June 1 at the Auckland Town Hall in Ross Harris’ *Symphony No. 2*, written specifically for her and the Auckland Philharmonia, for which he is composer-in-residence; in Opera Hawke’s Bay’s *Die Fledermaus* in July and with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra in the Mozart *Requiem* in Wellington in August. She’ll also be back briefly in December for Handel’s *Messiah* in Auckland and Christchurch.

Matter-of-fact Madeleine describes herself as “a fledgling” in opera and will only go as far as to say that she has “a reasonably good chance of making it” in that competitive world. The perfect life would be a fulltime opera career, probably based in London, she says. But living in New Zealand and working mainly here and Australia is an option she’d want to plump for if she had children, she says.

While she’s circumspect about her chances, everyone else interviewed for this story already envisages her on the world opera stage. The Royal College of Music’s head of vocal studies, Dr Neil Mackie, describes her as “a major talent – one of the most promising to come our way in 10 years”. He forecasts that “in time, Madeleine will enjoy an international career at the highest level.”

However high that international career flies, there’s one New Zealand organization that she’s promised to help any time it needs her for a fundraising event. Unsurprisingly, it’s the Child Cancer Foundation.

Story by Jane Tolerton for the North and South Magazine, June 2006



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