When Nelson Ebo ‘12 performed his first solo opera recital in New Hampshire this past March, you would never know from listening to his powerful tenor voice and seemingly effortless delivery how difficult his journey was to that stage. The 24-year-old earned the recital by winning the prestigious Lakes Region Opera Idol competition in New Hampshire in November 2008.

Ebo and his 14 brothers and sisters grew up in the Republic of Angola in south-central Africa during the Angolan Civil War (1975–2002), which took the lives of some 500,000 people. When he was 13 years old, his family moved into a seminary to try to escape the violence. That’s where he discovered opera, thanks to music CDs belonging to the priests.

Ebo listened to famous tenors Luciano Pavarotti and Plácido Domingo, writing out the words phonetically because he did not speak Italian. After listening to the music just a few times, he was surprised to discover he could sing along with the opera legends.

“When I was in my room and I tried to sing opera, my family thought I was crazy,” Ebo says with a laugh. “They had never heard that kind of voice.”

Ebo fondly recalls those moments when his family was together. By the time he was 17, he had lost his mother and nine of his siblings to violence or disease. Two sisters and a brother died of tuberculosis with Ebo by their sides. His father died when he was 21.

At first, opera became a refuge from the hardships of life. But soon Ebo realized singing was a way to help his family. Already working as a fisherman for food, he began singing at a restaurant to earn more money.

One night, Alfonso Barragues, a United Nations human rights officer, visited the restaurant and heard Ebo sing. Barragues, an opera fan, sensed there was something special about the young tenor and invited him to listen to an opera recording. Barragues was amazed when Ebo sang along the second time he heard it.

“His voice was definitely more captivating than the tenor’s on the recording,” says Barragues. “In that very moment, I realized I was in front of a natural prodigy.”

Barragues helped Ebo secure a scholarship to Carlos III University in Madrid, Spain. At the age of 16, he made the difficult decision to leave Angola and his family to study opera. While in Madrid, Ebo was invited to sing for the king of Spain and one of his idols, Plácido Domingo.

“He was a very nice guy, very good to me,” Ebo says simply of Domingo. “He liked my voice.”

Ebo stayed in Spain for eight years, eventually deciding to come to the United States to study. While he was spending some time in New Jersey, a friend suggested Ebo audition at The Hartt School. He traveled to Hartford and sang for Wayne Rivera, Hartt’s chair of opera performance.

“The first thing you are impressed with is his amazing voice,” says Rivera. “That is coupled with a musical soul. Nelson is a person who is able to put a lot of the hurt he’s experienced in life into his singing.”

Ebo enrolled in Hartt’s vocal studies program in fall 2008 with the goal of becoming a famous opera singer. Add to that the fact that his surviving siblings are depending on him for support since none of them has steady employment. It is a lot of pressure, but Ebo says opera helps him get through the difficult times.

“I’m a very happy person,” he explains with a smile. “I don’t like to feel sad because I lost a lot of people. I try to get my mind off it and try laughing and singing. That helps me a lot.”