

THE MELBA

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HOME, SWEET HOME DEBUTS
PATHWAYS OF A REPETITEUR
THE MAKING OF *EVA*

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Melba Opera Trust is a legacy of the visionary soprano Dame Nellie Melba

Nellie once said, ‘in order to succeed in opera, you have to engage in the business of singing. A beautiful voice is not enough.’

This is at the heart of our philosophy: our artists are trained to be *more than a voice*, and are equipped with the skills they need to build sustainable careers. It begins with the Melba Program, our year-long, scholarship-funded training program which supports artists from around Australia with a bespoke course of artistic development, mentoring in business, professional and personal skill development, and performance experience.

Our pathways then extend to support artists at different stages of their careers through the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award, the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award and the Alumni Grant Program.

Following in Nellie’s footsteps, many of our talented alumni are realising their dreams and performing in opera houses around the world.

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The Melba Editorial Team

Copy writing and editing
Katelyn Bannister
Amy Black
Yvonne Frindle
Deanne Sheldon-Collins

Cover
Siobhan Stagg and Nico de Villiers.
Photograph by David Ng.

Designer
Kerry Aker

Melba Opera Trust acknowledges the Traditional Owners and peoples of the many lands on which we work, learn and perform, and recognise their enduring connection to Country. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and to their song men and song women as the original storytellers.

Note from the Chief Executive Officer

Welcome to the Spring edition of *The Melba*. It has been an extraordinary and fulfilling year, shaped by the energy, creativity and generosity of our artists, alumni and supporters. As you’ll see in the pages that follow, the rhythm of Melba life has been both dynamic and inspiring.

In our previous edition, we celebrated the achievements of our current artists. This time, we turn our focus to those who have already walked the Melba pathway – honouring their artistic growth and the wider network that continues to sustain Australian and New Zealand artists throughout their careers.

Melba Opera Trust supports artists at every stage of their professional lives through our core initiatives: the Melba Program, the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award, the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award and the Alumni Grant Program. Each plays a vital role in the continuum of artistic development you’ll see reflected throughout this edition.

A highlight of this year has been the launch of our *Home, Sweet Home* series (see overleaf), a new initiative that embodies the spirit of giving back. It was a remarkable evening – artistically rich, emotionally resonant, and made even more special through the involvement of our alumni. The formation of the Alumni Giving Circle stands as a powerful testament to their belief in Melba’s purpose and their commitment to nurturing the next generation. I offer my heartfelt thanks to them, and to everyone who helped make *Home, Sweet Home* such a success.

It’s a busy time for the organisation as we undertake auditions for the Melba Program, assess recipients of the next round of Alumni Grants, and select

the inaugural recipient of the Michael Bertram Composition Award (more on page 10). Meanwhile, you can hear from our current artists on page 4. We recently farewelled Eden Shifroni who has commenced her studies at the Royal College of Music in London – an opportunity made possible through the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award. Eden has already been warmly welcomed by London-based Melbas and our partners at the Tait Foundation – a wonderful reflection of the enduring Melba connections.

Among the many stories you’ll find here, one that particularly embodies the Melba spirit is the premiere of the new opera *Eva* (pages 6–7). Its creation is rooted in relationships first formed through Melba and beautifully captures the sentiment we hold dear: *once a Melba, always a Melba*.

As the operatic landscape continues to evolve, artistic excellence remains our foundation. Today’s artists must also be resilient, adaptable and grounded in self-knowledge and we are proud that our work extends beyond developing great performers. We are cultivating future teachers, mentors, leaders and advocates who will help define Australia’s cultural story.

Of course, philanthropy remains at the heart of everything we do. To our supporters – individuals, foundations, bequestors and partners – I extend my deepest gratitude. The calibre and impact of our programs, scholarships and awards are only possible because of your belief in our mission. In today’s challenging philanthropic climate, every gift carries immense meaning and impact.

Thank you for sharing this journey with us.



Amy Black, Chief Executive Officer

Image: Phoebe Powell

The great opera quiz

How well do you know your Arias and Divas?

Test your operatic instincts – from backstage gossip to high Cs!

- 1. ‘It’s not over until...’**
Which famous opera ends with one of its main characters singing triumphantly while dying of consumption?
A) *Carmen*
B) *La bohème*
C) *Tosca*
D) *La traviata*
- 2. Who said opera was dramatic?**
Which of these characters *does not die* at the end of their opera?
A) Don Giovanni (*Don Giovanni*)
B) Violetta (*La traviata*)
C) Figaro (*The Marriage of Figaro*)
D) Cio-Cio-San (*Madama Butterfly*)
- 3. Diva behaviour alert!**
Which legendary soprano was nicknamed *La Divina* for her commanding voice and dramatic flair?
A) Renata Tebaldi
B) Joan Sutherland
C) Maria Callas
D) Montserrat Caballé
- 4. Love, Italian style**
Which composer gave us both *Rigoletto* and *La traviata*?
A) Rossini
B) Verdi
C) Puccini
D) Donizetti

- 5. Opera’s undercover agents**
Which opera features a character disguised as a soldier and a music teacher all in one evening?
A) *The Barber of Seville*
B) *Don Giovanni*
C) *Carmen*
D) *Turandot*

- 6. Opera goes to Hollywood**
Which of these films *does not* feature opera music?
A) *Pretty Woman*
B) *The Dark Knight Rises*
C) *A Room with a View*
D) *Psycho*
- 7. Previously on Figaro**
Mozart composed *The Marriage of Figaro* – which opera is the prequel that takes place before Figaro’s wedding?
A) *Così fan tutte*
B) *The Barber of Seville*
C) *Don Giovanni*
D) *The Magic Flute*

- 8. High notes and higher stakes**
Which opera features an ice princess, riddles, and the show-stopping aria ‘Nessun dorma’?
A) *Turandot*
B) *Aida*
C) *Tosca*
D) *Madama Butterfly*

- 9. Melba magic**
Dame Nellie Melba, Australia’s operatic icon, lent her name to which famous dessert?
A) Pavlova
B) Peach Melba
C) Lamington
D) Fairy Bread

- 10. Curtain call**
Which of the following best describes the Melba Program today?
A) A scholarship for pastry chefs
B) A career development program for emerging opera artists
C) An international competition for conductors
D) A historical archive of Dame Nellie Melba’s gowns

Score yourself!

8–10: Bravissimo!
You deserve a standing ovation (and maybe a Peach Melba).

5–7: Applause!
You know your arias from your overtures.

0–4: Don’t worry!
Even divas have to start somewhere – consider this your opening night.

The great opera quiz

Answers

- 1. D) *La traviata*
- 2. C) Figaro (*The Marriage of Figaro*)
- 3. C) Maria Callas
- 4. B) Verdi
- 5. A) *The Barber of Seville*
- 6. D) *Psycho*
- 7. B) *The Barber of Seville*
- 8. A) *Turandot*
- 9. B) Peach Melba
- 10. B) A career development program for emerging opera artists

An unforgettable debut

STORY KATELYN BANNISTER

In August, we proudly launched *Home, Sweet Home* – a new performance series developed to honour our alumni while raising vital funds for Melba’s programs. The inaugural event was a sold-out success and an unforgettable evening of music, meaning, and celebration.

HOME SWEET HOME

Images: David Ng



Within the historic surrounds of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, guests were welcomed with champagne beside an open fire and treated to surprise performances from Melba Artists Aidan Hodder (also our entertaining Master of Ceremonies), Syrah Torii, and alumnus Stefan Cassomenos.

Guests then moved to the A C C Farran Hall, breathtakingly transformed into a recital space for the evening’s pièce de résistance: Melbourne’s only performance of the acclaimed *Echoed Voices*, featuring Siobhan Stagg and Nico de Villiers.

With consummate artistry, Nico drew us into the world of composer Richard Hageman, made all the more poignant with a surprise unveiling of the Oscar that Hageman was awarded in 1940 for Best Music, Scoring of the film *Stagecoach*.

It was a stunningly intimate performance, with Siobhan’s luminous voice and storytelling bringing to life the poetry of the music.

The celebration continued over dinner with giveaways, a silent auction, and an encore by Siobhan and Nico. The encore, an auction item purchased on the night, took us to Café Momus as ‘Musetta’ wove her way through the tables, delighting guests with ‘Quando m’en vo’ from *La bohème*.

Thanks to the combined efforts of our audience, alumni, event partners, and sponsors, the evening raised vital funds for Melba’s programs. At Siobhan’s request, all proceeds will be directed to the Mentor Program, supporting the development of emerging singers and répétiteurs.

Capturing the essence of the *Home, Sweet Home* series, Kate Shelmerdine, Chair of Melba Opera Trust, spoke to the room: ‘This initiative represents an ongoing homecoming – one that honours the past, celebrates the present, and invests in the future of Australian artistry.’

We take this opportunity to sincerely thank our guests for supporting the event.

***Home, Sweet Home* – a nod to Dame Nellie Melba’s favourite encore – has only just begun.**

The generosity of our event partners

Trinity College, Shelmerdine Wines, The Art of Floral Studio, and Champagne Pommery played a vital role in bringing the evening to life. We remain deeply grateful and also thank the many industry partners and friends of Melba who generously contributed to the silent auction.

EVENT PARTNERS



Artists supporting artists – the Alumni Giving Circle

Home, Sweet Home is more than a performance series – it’s about reciprocity: artists giving back to the community that shaped them, and audiences joining that circle of generosity.

As part of the series, we proudly launched the Alumni Giving Circle, inviting Melba Alumni to reconnect, give back, and support the program that helped shape their careers.

The Circle reflects the heart of Melba – those who understand its impact investing in the next generation. Embodying our ‘more than a voice’ ethos, it’s inspiring to see young artists not only leading on stage but also embracing philanthropy, ensuring support flows to those who follow.

Melba CEO Amy Black reflected, ‘I am so moved and grateful for how enthusiastically the alumni have embraced this idea. I think it’s a reflection of their character, and of the strength of our community: artists supporting artists.’

We proudly acknowledge and thank the following alumni who have joined the Giving Circle:

Shauntai Sherree Abdul-Rahman	Chloe Harris
Stacey Alleaume	Louis Hurley
Morgan Balfour	Fiona Jopson
Nathan Breeze	Stephen Marsh
Bronwyn Douglass	Michael Petrucci
Emily Edmonds	Georgina Powell
Lauren Fagan	Matthew Reardon
Amir Farid	Siobhan Stagg
Samantha Hargreaves	Stacey Yang

Voice to voice

Conversations between the Melba Artists

Over the past year in the Melba Program, the artists have shared stages and rehearsal rooms, faced challenges, and experienced moments of revelation. In the following conversations, they turn the spotlight on each other – interviewing one another and reflecting on the year that shaped them.

These are Melba Artists, in their own words.



Image: Phoebe Powell

Jack Bolton

John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship
Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship

Caitlin Forrest

Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship

Sophie Hamer

The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship

Aidan Hodder

John Wegner AO Opera Scholarship
Max & Jill Schultz Opera Society Scholarship

Chloe James

Ruskin Opera Scholarship
Jo Horgan & Peter Wetenhall Opera Scholarship

Eden Shifroni

Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship
Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award
Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship

Syrah Torii

Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship
Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship



Eden interviews Aidan

Looking back at your time with the Melba Program, what's been the biggest standout moment for you?

Any time we had a director for our concerts. This year we had Lois Redman and Stuart Maunder, two titans of the industry who really bring out the best in us.

What's been the most challenging part of the year? Musically, personally, or both? And how did you work through it?

Moving from Brisbane to Sydney was a pretty seismic shift. Figuring out how to keep a clean house with a full fridge for my partner while finding new work *and* keeping the whole music thing going was really tough. Having mentors and coaches who gave me a little patience while I cobbled it all together was a godsend.

Do you have a particular process or ritual that helps you prepare for performances or Melba intensives?

I like to close my fist in front of my chest and grab all my nerves in a big bundle. Eyes shut, deep breath. Nerves are good; they show you care. A few big breaths while thinking about all the kind, wise people who've helped me and I feel supercharged.

The program is intense and pushes us hard. Have you found a sense of balance, and if so, how do you manage it?

I've basically been living out of a suitcase

for seven months, so it hasn't felt like balance. It's felt like another horse on the merry-go-round. Eventually you get to a point where you learn to accept and grow within the mayhem.

Was there a fear you've overcome this year, either on stage or off?

Honestly, I was afraid all the wonderful people I met through Melba last year would vanish, but I've seen practically everyone again, even those who live overseas now.

What's one thing you've learned about yourself through Melba that you didn't know before?

My eyeballs! Until people started relentlessly pointing it out at Melba, I had no idea my big cheeks would squash my eyes out of sight. Sharing your soul with the audience doesn't work when the windows to it are shut ... I'm getting better at avoiding that.

And on a lighter note – what's been a fun or funny moment from the year that you'll never forget?

The times we all got ice cream together. I'm glad we learned pretty early that we could be friends and hang out off the clock.

Aidan interviews Syrah

What a year. I think the intensives were even more intensive than last year! Out of all of us, you're always cool as a cucumber. How do you stay so collected during busy rehearsal and performance periods?

A lot of it comes as a result of the work done before the rehearsal and performance periods. I try to prepare artistically to the best of my ability, I plan my days, make lists, meal prep, and use visualisation. Once the busy periods arrive, you have to trust the work you have done, be present and flexible. And make sure to build in downtime for recovery!

There were a lot of new faces in the program this year. Were there any mentors that stood out for you?

I adored working with Nicole Car, Étienne Dupuis, Marie-France Lefebvre, and Johannes Fritsch! I learned a lot, had so much fun in each of their sessions, and walked away feeling inspired!

What's a trait or virtue you believe is essential for a successful singer?

Being kind and being organised!

2025 was a year of watershed moments for a lot of us, and I know that a lot of us returning artists felt we had unfinished business at the end of 2024. Is there something you conquered or mastered this year?

I wouldn't say I have 'mastered' it yet, as it's a lifelong process – but my technique and my German have both improved a lot this year!

You didn't go straight into opera like some Melbas, you started with language. Opera isn't exactly the easiest thing to dive into. What's a piece of advice you would give to your past self at the start of their journey with opera?

Take lots of notes on everything. It will make for a treasure trove of knowledge in the years to come, and a beautiful record of your progress as an artist.

This is just one for flavour – we're all creatures of habit – do you have a favourite pre-show or post-show snack?

I get a box/tub of Maltesers that I can share with my castmates pre-show or during interval! Post-show, I'll have a high-protein nut bar or whatever I threw in my bag earlier that day, and eat it on the way home.



Aidan Hodder

Chloe interviews Caitlin

What were some fun, light-hearted moments from this year as a group?

I think we have such a special bond as a cohort. When someone is feeling down, we can bring each other back up again. A highlight for me was the Melba Pilgrimage to Coombe Cottage. We got to relax and enjoy each other's company.

Where would you like your career to take you?

I would love to end up somewhere in Europe. I'm not sure where yet, but I'm planning to take a trip next year to find out what my options are. I'll be looking at Germany, France, the UK, and maybe even Italy.

I'm in the process of relocating to Sydney, which is where I feel I need to be at this stage in my career. I'm really looking forward to developing every single skill, performing more, and learning more.

What has been a particular challenge for you in your second year of Melba?

The biggest challenge is taking on what I learned last year, building on it, and setting my expectations even higher. But equally important is making sure I recognise the growth I've already made, reminding myself that I am fully capable of being a good artist.

What role or piece of classical music do you believe captures your essence?

Cherubino is so lovable and cheeky, and he resembles me in the fact that I can be very chaotic as well ... he always seems to find trouble even if he doesn't mean to.

What core piece of advice would you like to take from Melba into the rest of your career, and your life?

To be a successful artist, of course you need to have solid technique and musical preparation, but you also need to be a proactive businessperson. After recently planning and performing a few recitals of my own, I've realised the importance of running and promoting yourself as a business, and that is what makes a performer an artist!



Caitlin Forrest



Syrah Torii and Chloe James

Syrah interviews Chloe

This was your first year in the Melba Program. What's been your favourite memory?

I'd have to say our final Melba Artists in Concert performance! It was great to see how much everyone has grown throughout the year, and I personally felt a real sense of accomplishment.

The Melba Program offers a lot of new information for us to reflect on throughout the year and incorporate into our own toolkits. What was the most impactful thing that helped you grow this year? Why did it resonate with you?

Sharolyn Kimmorley once gave me the advice, 'Be young, there are strengths to being the youngest of the group.' It can be hard not to compare yourself to older, more experienced singers. But really, the most important thing you can do is build on your own unique strengths and cherish the now.

As a Melbourne-based artist, what does a day in your life look like during the intensive weeks?

I try to have a good breakfast, either porridge or eggs. My commute is about 40 minutes, so I'll often read over music on the train. Intensive days are long, so once I'm back home, I'll either go for a short walk/gym, or collapse in a heap. After dinner I'll prepare for the next day, do some stretches, and go to bed.

Following on from the last question, what are some of your reflections on how to manage busy schedules in the future?

Meal prep is a big must for me! The mornings are often early with long days, so preparing colourful, hearty meals and yummy snacks is essential. Also, prioritising wind-down time before bed so your sleep is restful.

You mentioned your love of cooking in a previous Melba interview. If you were to describe yourself as a dish, what would you be? Why?

This is so tricky! My gut is saying something spicy ... maybe a nutty chicken korma. At home I make it with crushed cashews as a base in the sauce, then served with yoghurt and pickles for added fun.

If you were to program a concert with your favourite music, what are some pieces it would include, and who would be performing?

I tend to have eclectic taste ... possibly a mixture of schmaltzy late 19th-century French Mélodie, and then some wacky Bernstein/Britten/Bolcom cabaret pieces. Preferably performed by the one-and-only Joyce DiDonato!

Jack interviews Sophie



Sophie Hamer

What aspects of this year have really stood out to you?

Working with the legendary Australian soprano Yvonne Kenny was one of them. I've greatly admired Yvonne and turned to her recordings for inspiration and guidance, so to have the opportunity to learn from her was so special. Another standout has been my regular coachings and rehearsals with Sharolyn. I have learned so much from Sharolyn this year; I have discovered so many new aspects of my voice and artistry.

What's been a particular challenge that you have had to overcome through this year with Melba?

Our dance classes. The incredible Tracie Morley is our teacher, and she sure knows how to work us hard! Another challenge has been becoming more confident with my Italian speaking skills. Regular lessons with our amazing teacher Dr Giuseppe D'Orazzi have definitely helped!

Do you think that the idea of balance is achievable for us young artists?

The idea of balance is achievable. I discovered some golden time management tips this year from our wellness mentor Susie Edmonds. There are so many aspects of our lives that need to be nurtured to allow for overall fulfilment – spending time with our loved ones, exercise and movement,

socialising, and hobbies. We need to allow time for these cups to be filled, in addition to our practice and study routine, as this is what feeds our artistry and inspiration.

What is something surprising that you learned about yourself this year?

I have learned just how great a source of inspiration classical music is for me. If I am having a bad day or feeling flat, turning to the practice room to sing through some of my favourite pieces, or listening to ABC Classic in the car, or planning ahead for concerts and shows that I'd love to watch, really brings me so much joy and a sense of curiosity.

When you think back to your year at Melba, what comes to the front of your mind?

I think about a year of discovery, reflection, and growth. I also think about the wonderful mentors I have been lucky enough to work with, and the lifelong friendships I have made with my fellow Melba Artists.

What are the fun things that you can rely on to help get you through the intensives?

I always look forward to our group breaks. A current favourite pick-me-up? A Gingerbread Chai Latte. It is the perfect sweet treat!

Sophie interviews Eden



The idea of balance – is it achievable?

I often wonder what 'balance' really means. For me, music isn't just work, it's a huge part of who I am. So I don't feel like I'm trying to juggle two separate things. What I do think about is self-care. Taking time to recharge is essential, whether that's cooking, hiking, being in nature, or spending time with people I love. Those things feed into my singing just as much as practice does.

Do you have any processes when learning new music?

For me, it's always 'slow and steady'. As soon as I know what I'll perform, I start by speaking the text to feel its rhythm and meaning. Then I layer in the music, which transforms the emotional world. The more prepared I am, the calmer and more present I feel on stage.

What have been some standouts from your time in the Melba Program?

One highlight was working with Nicole Car and Étienne Dupuis in masterclass. It was such a privilege to spend time with two of the busiest, most inspiring artists, and I felt so grateful for their generosity. Another big moment was working with Stuart Maunder again. He directed our Gilbert and Sullivan

scenes near the beginning of the program and then returned for my final concert. Seeing the growth between those two moments really showed me how far I've come.

Do you have a fear that you have conquered?

I've learned not to be afraid of asking questions. I used to think it showed weakness, but I've realised that curiosity and openness only make me stronger as an artist and colleague.

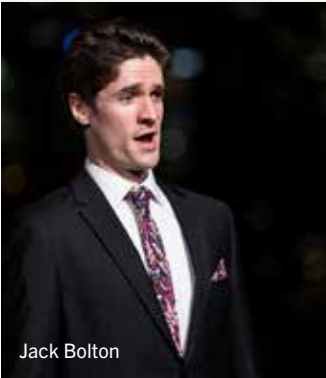
What is a particular role that you connect with?

I really connect with Sophie from *Der Rosenkavalier*. Performing her scenes felt like stepping into a big new world, just as I did when starting Melba. Like Sophie, I've grown and matured so much through the journey.

Looking back on your time with Melba, do you have any light-hearted reflections?

There have been so many joyful moments – especially performing with Aidan Hodder, who always brings humour and energy. Most of all, I treasure the friendships. This industry can feel isolating, but through Melba I've found a family. Knowing there are alumni waiting in London makes the world feel smaller and much kinder.

Caitlin interviews Jack



What were some standout moments for you this year?

All the wonderful performances we did this year as a part of the Melba Performance Program. Working with Stuart Maunder and Lois Redman as directors to stage some really jovial, fun, and emotionally dense solos and ensembles.

What's been a particular challenge this year as a second-year artist? And is the idea of balance and consistency achievable?

The challenge over the last two years has been twofold – understanding what's expected of me and the idea of balancing priorities as a singer. With work commitments as Orchestral Operations Coordinator at the Canberra Symphony Orchestra, balancing the constant trips to Sydney for coachings and lessons, language development, exercise, eating well, and still being

able to socialise has been a challenge. Being a part of the Melba Program, I understand what is required and practise trying to find the right balance in a safe environment surrounded by mentors that help.

Where would you like your career to take you?

I want to be able to perform for a living and create wonderful art. In the coming year, I hope to make my way to Germany. It is going to be a big jump! Moving to Europe and seeing where this art form has really blossomed, becoming one with the creation of it, the culture of it, and then hopefully being able to bring that back to Australia at some point.

Some fun, light-hearted moments/reflections from the year together.

I love the moments before a performance and when everyone is a bit tired. Being able to sit down, sometimes with Sharolyn too, and just have some

silly conversations. They happen quite often and they're lovely moments. Us Melbas are very close – we spend a lot of high-stress time together and we've ended up becoming great friends.

What do you know now that you didn't know before?

So many people have said in masterclasses and industry chats to 'find your circle'. Which means to find three to five people that you can trust and let them speak about your development truthfully and honestly. At times it may be brutal but it is also caring. Being a part of Melba has helped me find those people in my circle.

What is fun to you and what does your downtime look like to you?

I've really dived into reading the classics. I love Jane Austen and I'm currently reading *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, which is wacky but I'm really enjoying it!

I often wonder what 'balance' really means. For me, music isn't just work, it's a huge part of who I am.

Eden Shifroni



Nathan Lay, Mary-Jane Gething and Jeremy Kleeman

The making of *Eva*

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

‘It’s like *Titanic*,’ explains Jeremy Kleeman. ‘At the beginning and end of the opera you have old Eva, Eva 1934, reflecting on a voyage from her youth. Then there’s young Eva, Eva 1878.’ The comparison seems even more apt on arriving at the final line in the score: ‘Because I survived, my strength will go on.’ Unlike James Cameron’s *Rose*, however, Evelyn (Eva) Carmichael is a historical figure, as is the young man in the opera, midshipman Tom Pearce. And unlike Jack Dawson, Tom survives a night clinging to wreckage off the Victorian coast.

Dramatis personæ.

JOSEPH (JOE) SAMBROOK, a scientist with a love of opera

That love lives on in the Melba scholarship named for him, and now in the opera Eva.

MARY-JANE GETHING, a retired scientist with a research addiction and the soul of a poet
Discovered opera after meeting her husband-to-be, Joe, and in what might be the coolest lockdown project ever, wrote the libretto for Eva.

STEFAN CASSOMENOS, a composer, pianist and artistic director
A Melba alumnus (Associate Repetiteur, 2014–15), he is the composer of Eva.

JEREMY KLEEMAN, a bass-baritone whose star is on the rise
A Melba alumnus (2014–15) and inaugural recipient of the Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship, he sings Captain Gibb/Hugh Gibson in Eva.

Scene.

The Loch Ard ship, the Gorge (later renamed Loch Ard Gorge), Melbourne, and Port Fairy in present.

The story of the wreck of the *Loch Ard* and its two survivors is a romantic one, but not a romance. As Mary-Jane Gething AO recalls, the first dilemma she and husband, Joe Sambrook, faced in bringing Eva’s history to the opera stage was that ‘apart from the wreck itself, there are no real emotional highs and lows’.

It was Joe — a ‘Darwin fanatic’ — who came up with the dramaturgical solution. He noted the date of the wreck, 1878, aligned with the *Origin of Species* (by 1872 in its sixth edition), the revised *Descent of Man* (1877) and the continuing furore over Charles Darwin’s ideas. ‘Joe thought we could get some tension into it by making Eva and her father followers of Darwin,’ says Mary-Jane, ‘while her mother and older sister would follow the Church’s teachings and be anti-Darwin.’ As she writes in the dedication of her libretto: ‘Joseph Sambrook . . . stood in front of the Carmichael grave at Loch Ard Gorge, looked at the dates and thought of Darwin and then dreamed of an opera.’

‘Dream’ is right — creating a new opera is one of the most ambitious things you can do. But *Eva* is no overnight dream — it has been 40 years in the making. The idea was sparked in the 1980s, when Mary-Jane and Joe, visiting Melbourne from Texas, found the gravestone of Mrs Carmichael and Eva’s older sister — the only bodies from the family of seven that were recovered from the *Loch Ard*. ‘There was no Trove,’ says Mary-Jane, ‘so we drove to Warrnambool Library to look for contemporaneous news articles. We found more at the State Library — big, shiny pages printed from microfiche. Then we went back to our busy life in the States and didn’t do much more than talk about it from time to time.’

Nearly 25 years later, now living in Melbourne, Joe fell ill. Around this time they made plans for a Melba scholarship in his name, with Jeremy Kleeman the inaugural recipient in 2014. They also met Stefan Cassomenos, Melba’s repetiteur that year, and in 2015 Mary-Jane heard his *Requiem for the End of Time*. ‘I came home and said to Joe, “We’ve got a composer!”’

And the libretto? This would become Mary-Jane’s COVID lockdown project after Joe’s death in 2019. At first she simply agreed to complete the research and commission a writer later.

‘Research has been my life,’ she says. ‘I’m a sort of “addict”. So I research well beyond what I need — I know the genealogy of everybody who was on the ship.’ (And when the chorus sings that Tom Pearce is ‘Not very handsome! But so brave!’ you just *know* Mary-Jane has seen his photo in the National Portrait Gallery.) ‘Eventually, I realised it would be as much work again to tell the story to somebody else. So I gave it a go. I thought you had to be a musician to write a libretto, but it turns out it’s more important to be a great reader.’

Stefan spends a lot of his time ‘in the land of concert music’, but he enthuses about playing in *The Coronation of Poppea* as a student (‘it absolutely blew my brains’), *Nixon in China* (‘inspiring’) and Brett Dean’s *Hamlet* (‘magnificent’). His two years as a Melba repetiteur represented a total immersion and crucial motivation as a composer. ‘It started my brain ticking: What is this thing we call opera? I can’t think of anything more different than *Poppea* and the *Ring* cycle, but they’re both opera, and now there are so many ways to engage an audience. Something like *Hamlet* sets the bar for how powerful an impression you can make with an opera.’

Aware of the fragility of the art form, Stefan has adopted a pragmatic approach for *Eva*: the orchestra is just 14 players; most of the six core cast members take on multiple roles. He and Mary-Jane have worked to ensure the drama will be as satisfying in a semi-staged concert format as in a full production. ‘It *could* be really huge — there’s a shipwreck!’ he says. ‘But I didn’t want it to be too reliant on staging. Opera needs to be more accessible if it’s to survive.’

This is a practical kind of accessibility — ensuring an opera can be affordably produced. But stylistic accessibility is important too: creating the kind of opera that invites a second listening, but doesn’t *need* one to be understood.

Stefan has always wanted his listeners to enjoy new work. ‘I remember getting a real kick out of my peers at school saying, “Hey, I really liked your piece. That was really cool.” Perhaps I might be criticised for being conservative, but there’s room for all styles. And when it comes to composing, you’re not actually coming up with something new — you don’t invent a particular harmonic progression, for example. It’s *discovering* more than *composing*. You’re bringing together harmonies and melodies and forms which serve, and drive, the narrative and the emotional content of the story you’re telling.’



Chloe James



Stefan Cassomenos

There's a third kind of accessibility: engagement and ownership. *Eva* is a southwest Victorian story being told for the people of the region through the Port Fairy Spring Music Festival, and Stefan has involved the local community by including adult and children's choruses in the final scene. This calls for a big crowd, he explains, as everyone went to Port Melbourne to see *Eva* depart for home. 'They all wanted to see what she looked like, and whether Tom Pearce would propose to her, since he'd saved her.'

Melba supporters will recognise familiar faces in the cast: in addition to Jeremy Kleeman, soprano Merlyn Quaife has been a Melba mentor; baritone Aidan Hodder, singing Tom, is a Melba Artist, as is mezzo-soprano Chloe James; with alumni baritone Nathan Lay (2011) and tenors Damian Arnold (2017) and Louis Hurley (2020–21). 'Mary-Jane was drawn to the idea of involving musicians we'd met through Melba,' says Stefan, 'thinking about who we could envisage in the roles, and the voices I was writing for.'

'The brilliant thing about creating a new piece,' says Jeremy, 'is you're not bound by tradition or precedent – you can create the role through the way you sing it and the choices you make in collaboration with the composer.' It has also been exciting to collaborate with Mary-Jane. 'She was my Melba patron, along with Joe,' he says, 'and we'd often talk about how similar the career trajectory of a scientist and a singer can be. So it has been wonderful to see Mary-Jane embrace her artistic side – constructing the libretto using her scientific know-how. The meticulous, research-based way she's gone about it is quite amazing.'

For both Jeremy and Stefan, *Eva* has been a deeply personal experience. Jeremy recalls how in 2014 they performed in a soirée at Joe and Mary-Jane's home, singing music by two of Joe's favourites: Schubert and Britten. (They would again perform Schubert for Joe's memorial concert.) As it happens, explains Jeremy, Stefan has found inspiration in both composers, especially Schubert.

Jeremy plays two characters. On the *Loch Ard* he is Captain Gibb, who takes *Eva* under his wing, teaching her to navigate. After the shipwreck, he becomes Hugh Gibson, a forward-looking townsman, who, with his wife, also takes *Eva* under his wing. The dual role is a clever theatrical device, and as he develops the two characters, Jeremy has been considering where they stand in the dichotomy of people who supported Darwinism and those who supported the Church. It's just one of several meaty topics that find a voice in the opera. Another is survivor guilt, something that haunts *Eva*.

Ultimately, opera is about storytelling. *Eva* began with the mere hint of a story on a gravestone. Joe and Mary-Jane nurtured the scientific and historical underpinnings of the narrative. Stefan, Jeremy and the rest of the cast are bringing it to musical life. And in the process they're creating something relatively unusual in the opera repertoire: the story of an independent-minded woman, a story of survival and resilience. As *Eva* 1934 sings, 'My strength will go on.'

***Eva* made its world premiere at the Port Fairy Spring Music Festival on 12 October 2025.**



A privilege and a pleasure

Talking science, opera and philanthropy with Mary-Jane Gething AO

Opera and scientific research are worlds apart, but Mary-Jane Gething AO loves to talk about the parallels: the career trajectories, the demands, the need for more than 'talent'.

Mary-Jane's background wasn't especially musical, but then she met fellow scientist Joe Sambrook, an opera fanatic. Their professional partnership became a partnership in life with classical music a central aspect. Late in their careers they carried out research that yielded an improvement patent for a drug used to treat heart attack and stroke, and they decided to use the royalties to support musical and scientific causes.

This kind of philanthropic giving has been a privilege and a pleasure, says Mary-Jane, and she considers herself as much a beneficiary as those who receive the support. Not only has she acquired a kind of extended family and formed deep friendships, but these relationships have been key to her own creative project, the opera *Eva*.

Discovering Melba Opera Trust about 12 years ago, Joe and Mary-Jane were attracted by the affinity with their own ideas. 'I liked the Melba model,' says Mary-Jane, 'because young scientists have that same difficult gap: the transition from PhD and postdoc to running your own lab.' The first gift was a scholarship established in the final years of Joe's life. He'd been adamant about not wanting a gravestone, but liked the idea of a living memorial. And as it turned out, he experienced the joy of getting to know the first three scholarship holders (Jeremy was the first, followed by Shakira Tsindos and Cleo Lee-McGowan) and witnessing their progress. The scholarship continues to be offered annually.

Mary-Jane recalls how, when Joe was bedridden and could no longer play piano himself, he could listen to the Melba coaching sessions in their home. He left the grand piano to Melba, but for now it's still in their front room, and Mary-Jane hosts Artistic Manager Sharolyn Kimmorley AM when she comes to Melbourne. 'I feel I've gained a family,' she says, 'and it's growing with each cohort.'

Mary-Jane subsequently became a catalyst in helping to establish Melba's Alumni Grant Program, endowing two grants: one named for her daughter Honor Sambrook, the other in her own name. These have already supported eight alumni, with Shauntai Sherree Abdul-Rahman and Brenton Spiteri the current recipients. More recently she has confirmed a bequest through Melba's Will Bequest Circle. She especially endorses the idea of making a major gift in one's lifetime, as Joe did. 'It's a lovely way to do it, and it's exciting to watch the development of these young singers within this marvellous program.'



Joseph Sambrook, Cleo Lee-McGowan and Mary-Jane Gething

A year of growth

Launched in 2021 and generously funded by our donor community, the Alumni Grant Program is a way for Melba Opera Trust to continue supporting artists as they progress in their careers. Nineteen grants have been awarded since the initiative began, including six in 2024. We spoke with two of those recipients about their projects – highlights, challenges, and the impacts they are already seeing.

STORY DEANNE SHELDON-COLLINS



Image: Marshall Stay



Image: Lena Filleböck

Alexandra Flood

Opera Society Alumni Grant
2014 Melba Artist
(RJ Hamer Opera Scholarship)

Alexandra has established herself as not only a performer but also an emerging arts leader: the Australian soprano is founder and Artistic Director of the Queensland Art Song Festival, a thriving educational initiative for singers and pianists. Alexandra's Alumni Grant project focused on her management skills, funding her enrolment in the Oxford Women's Leadership Development Program.

'When I got this grant, I felt so supported,' says Alexandra, who finds it 'enriching and encouraging ... that Melba continues to support my career outside of singing.' When she joined the Melba Program in 2014, it was with a background in journalism as well as music. The ethos of 'more than a voice' spoke to the young singer, who already understood the need for a diverse skillset but benefited from a greater focus on her vocal training. 'It was at Melba that I learned to take singing more seriously.'

Taking the Oxford course this year, Alexandra was the only arts representative among a cohort of corporate and STEM professionals. Far from feeling out of place, she relished the opportunity to connect with women from a range of specialisations. 'That was really exciting and also made me realise how important it was that I was doing it, because we need more investment in the structural development of arts leadership.'

Alexandra's performance career has also benefited from leadership training. 'I worried on some level it would be a distraction,' she says, 'but in fact having a new passion, something that drives me, has been an enrichment of my singing life.' She notes parallels between her leadership development and artistic development, such as the increased confidence and negotiation skills that have improved her auditioning. In particular, though, she was struck by the lesson that – in both business and performance – a person's point of difference is their strength.

'Business leadership theory has proven time and time again that it's better to lean into the things you're good at, the things that make you special,' she explains. 'That was a real revelation. Prior to the Oxford course, I had this sense that I had to do everything and be good at everything. Good leadership is about what makes you special as a leader. It's the same with singing ... The most successful careers are the ones where the singer has found their niche and leaned into what makes them special.'

Alexandra grapples with what she describes as 'perfection-born procrastination' – a tendency to

put off tasks until she knows she can do them well. 'This course forced me to confront that mindset,' she says. Working through weekly essays and readings in an intense academic setting, she had no room to avoid things she could not do perfectly. 'It was just about doing it. That was a very big learning curve for me, but it was healthy and became an important skillset that I then took away. It's the same with leadership, with a festival ... A lot of it is learning as you go.'

Alexandra is already seeing the effects of the training, in both tangible and intangible ways. Now in its third year, the Queensland Art Song Festival recently secured multi-year funding to continue, which Alexandra credits to the skills she gained through the Oxford course.

Her soprano career also continues to flourish: she has extended her principal soloist contract with Vienna Volksoper, and 2026 will see her debut with Opera Australia as Valencienne in *The Merry Widow* at Sydney Opera House and Musetta in *La bohème*. Next year she will also tour *Dame*, a recital celebrating the voice of Dame Joan Sutherland OM AC DBE, with Opera Queensland – and more performances to be announced.

'Opera is about life,' says Alexandra. 'In order to be an interesting opera singer, you have to know about life. That's part of why these Alumni Grants are so important. They're helping us to learn about the world and learn about other things outside of opera, which can only enrich and inform our ability to convey those things on stage.'

Brenton Spiteri

MJ Gething Alumni Grant
2012-2014 Melba Artist
(John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship)

'Being a singer is all about habits – setting patterns of behaviour and being consistent,' says Brenton. 'Also identifying things that you want to achieve purely in terms of your musical and vocal abilities. Being able to meet those challenges and being supported to do that is a really wonderful thing.'

An Australian-Maltese tenor, Brenton has been based in London for six years. His Alumni Grant supported vocal evolution and a move into new repertoire, which he put into practice with performances he describes as 'a bit of a departure' from his usual work. These included TESTAMENT, a production at the Grimeborn Opera Festival, which Brenton not only performed in but also put together and pitched to the festival.

'It was a step in a new direction, producing and being behind the scenes,' he says. 'I had assistance

from a great team but ultimately had a lot of offstage responsibilities, which was very new but really interesting and exciting.'

The program featured Monteverdi's *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, Janáček's *The Diary of One Who Disappeared*, and the premiere of Libby Larsen's *Try Me, Good King*. 'I sang in two of the pieces and they're extremely difficult ones,' says Brenton, 'so obviously a lot of work and study was needed to go into that.'

The Diary of One Who Disappeared, a 40-minute tenor and piano piece, was a particular challenge due to its being in Czech – a language with which Brenton had not worked before. Being able to focus on his training was invaluable as he navigated the new repertoire. 'Both [pieces] presented different vocal challenges, so I was able to take those challenges on confidently knowing that I had the support of the Alumni Grant behind me.'

Brenton notes that it is a tough time in the industry, which requires artists to be creative in how they approach their careers. Branching out into production and behind-the-scenes work gave him useful new skills, but he also remained focused on his vocal development.

'Having any sort of personal financial support to be able to support my singing ultimately helps with all of these projects,' explains Brenton. The Alumni Grant allowed him to continue working with his team of coaches, mentors, and teachers, staying in practice and further refining his skills.

'That's half the battle,' he says. 'Just staying in lessons and continuing to gently push the boundaries of your technique and repertoire and the things that you consider to be your comfort zone, to move the lines slightly.' Part of that boundary pushing is accepting that new repertoire is simply not going to be perfect straightaway. But while 'singing practice is always a test of patience and humility', the results of persevering are worth it.

'I've always gravitated towards the Italian repertoire and Bel Canto type singing, which I love to do,' says Brenton. 'It's kind of my favourite thing.' But he has also been expanding his skillset. Brenton won the Herald Sun Aria when he was only 23, at a time when his voice 'was not fully cooked'. In the years since, as his vocal technique has developed, he has grown confident learning new repertoire and taking 'more risks in what I'm doing'. In the vocal evolution that his Alumni Grant supported, he has grown comfortable embracing lyric tenor repertoire, which he not only enjoys but also finds to be a good fit for his voice.

'That's been really nice, to feel like the sounds I'm making are the sounds I want to be making,' he says. 'It's good to have a reminder that ultimately it pays off to keep working hard.'

Once a Melba, always a Melba.



Image: Nick Yates



Letter from abroad

Pathways of a repetiteur...

You never know where life will take you. I landed in New York City in mid-2016 with two suitcases, minimal contacts, a sense of adventure, a feeling of fear, and an open canvas of potential paths and opportunities to further develop my career as a pianist. Although things got off to a steady and somewhat promising start, it was a rare opportunity to meet the renowned pianist and head of The Juilliard School's vocal department, Brian Zeger, that really paved the way for establishing my true identity in The Big Apple.

My name is Amir Farid, a pianist from Melbourne. I studied solo piano performance at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, the Australian National Academy of Music, and the Royal College of Music in London. I have enjoyed a successful career as a soloist and chamber musician, playing concerti with major Australian orchestras, playing with well-established and celebrated chamber groups and musicians in Australia and abroad, and recently making my solo recital debut in the beautiful Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, New York.

What makes me truly feel at home, however, is my love of the vocal repertoire. Throughout my career, I have been lucky to have significant opportunities to develop my skills as a vocal pianist, but nothing compares to the giant leap of development brought forth by Melba Opera Trust. Since its inception, I have been involved with Melba as a pianist for events, lessons, masterclasses, coachings, and fundraisers. But this was only the beginning. In 2012 it was announced that Melba would be offering a repetiteur scholarship to a pianist. I was honoured to be selected as the inaugural recipient, and under the dedicated mentorship of Sharolyn Kimmorley, during two years of study I developed a solid armoury of skills that thoroughly prepared me to thrive as a repetiteur.

Fast forward to New York in 2017 and my meeting with Mr Zeger. A coffee eventually turned into an audition offer – I was to prepare some lengthy excerpts from a few major opera scenes and come back in a month to play (and sing!) for him and a colleague. Well, my heart started to race, but I also knew I'd be okay. All the work I had done at Melba gave me a feeling of confidence. I knew what I was capable of; I had to trust my training and be the true artist that I am. Merely a few months later,

after many hours of preparation and enormous patience on Sharolyn's part (who had generously dedicated her time to me over video call sessions), I was walking down Broadway on the Upper West Side to my first day of work as a staff pianist at The Juilliard School's vocal department – a position I still hold to this day.

As well as my role at Juilliard, I have had the privilege of working on numerous striking opera productions, notably with the New York Philharmonic (NYP). One of these was David Lang's 'Prisoner of the State', conducted by the NYP's chief conductor Maestro Jaap van Zweden. The thrill of working so closely with such a celebrated American composer, and one of the world's most renowned conductors, was an unforgettable experience. Having Lang, van Zweden, and others high up in the organisation seek my opinions and thoughts on specifics of the production is a feeling I will never forget.

Another important person in my New York career is the highly esteemed pianist and art song specialist Steven Blier. I am truly humbled that Mr Blier, director of the hugely popular New York Festival of Song, personally selects me as somebody he wants to share the stage with, especially for these iconic concerts that have become a cornerstone of art song culture in the city.

I can say with great certainty that my professional identity in New York is, first and foremost, that of a well-respected and sought-after vocal pianist. The bulk of my work, and livelihood, comes from the singing world, be it opera, art song, choral, musical theatre, even pop. I have Melba to thank in a big way for entrusting me with the opportunity to develop my skillset that I couldn't have known at the time would be so invaluable to my future.

The vocal world, arguably more so than any other musical discipline, is so heavily reliant on specifically skilled, competent, and reliable pianists to function. Singers always need a pianist: for their concerts, lessons, coachings, auditions, diction classes, acting classes, managerial checkup sessions, helping with art song transpositions, recordings – the list goes on. It takes a great deal of knowledge, training, patience, and experience to develop such a skillset – not to mention substantial finances.

I do not know of many (if any) programs in the world like Melba, which focus solely and specifically on developing artists of this calibre in such a highly specialised discipline. While I am honoured and blessed to have been the first to experience this support firsthand, Melba continues to work with Australia's finest and brightest emerging pianists to prepare them for the real world.

I'm not sure where I would be without that generosity. It has objectively been the reason behind my successes over the years. It's always exciting to see extremely gifted Australian singers and pianists find their own paths and extend their contribution on the world stage.

I love coming back to Australia whenever I can, to share my music and experiences with you all. I look forward to catching up with as many of you as possible and watching with eagerness and excitement as past, present, and future Melba Artists make Australia proud!

Amir Farid

I have been lucky to have significant opportunities to develop my skills as a vocal pianist, but nothing compares to the giant leap of development brought forth by Melba Opera Trust.

Amir Farid

From strength to strength

Looking to the past as we plan for the future of the Indigenous Opera Scholarship.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

When Melba's Indigenous Opera Scholarship was inaugurated in 2012, it was both pioneering and unique. A chance meeting while working on a regional engagement program in Armidale, resulted in soprano Deborah Cheetham Fraillon AO approaching Amy Black with the idea of creating an Indigenous Opera Scholarship. As Deborah, a Yorta Yorta/Yuin woman, explained at the time, the new scholarship was significant for its recognition of talent and potential within the Aboriginal community, and Melba Opera Trust represented a perfect fit given its mission to 'fill the gap' in the education of aspiring opera singers.

That gap has been especially yawning for Indigenous singers. 'For want of a better term,' says soprano Nina Korbe, 'there's a hole when it comes to funding that supports First Nations performers. But now I'm seeing the rest of the industry pivoting to see how they can support the next generation of First Nations artists coming through. It's a testament to Melba that they've led the way with this scholarship, and I'm very proud to be an alumna and to champion the program at every opportunity.'

Nina Korbe, a proud Koa, Kuku Yalanji, Wakka Wakka woman, held the scholarship in 2023–24, and the latest in her list of starry achievements is the lead role of Molly Johnson in the QPAC/Opera Australia/Oombarra Productions *The Drover's Wife*.^{*} Another former scholarship holder, Wiradjuri soprano Shauntai Sherree Abdul-Rahman (2014–2015), will sing the role of Black Mary. Shauntai has also sung roles with Short Black Opera, Australia's only national Indigenous opera company, and she is a composer too, last year premiering a string quintet, *Wula Murun*, at the Port Fairy Spring Music Festival and currently writing a musical inspired by the life of her father, the boxer Wally 'Wait a While' Carr. Joining Nina and Shauntai in the Opera Australia ranks next season is Biripi tenor

Elias Wilson (2022) – a current OA Young Artist, in 2026 he will sing Triquet in *Eugene Onegin*.

Given the holistic approach of the Melba Program, it should be no surprise that alumni of the scholarship have followed diverse paths. Wiradjuri soprano Georgina Powell née Hall (2017, 2019) operates Black Honey Vocal Coaching on the Central Coast of NSW, teaching the future generation of singer-storytellers.

Meanwhile, bass-baritone Tiriki Onus, the inaugural scholarship holder in 2012 and 2013, has emerged as a leader in the arts and academic communities. A Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung man, Tiriki is not only a visual artist, performer and filmmaker, but Head of the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development at the University of Melbourne and a member of the Melbourne Theatre Company Board.

Tiriki is especially well placed now to lead the advisory board charged with planning the future of the scholarship in collaboration with Indigenous community leaders close to Melba Opera Trust. As a result of this work, the Indigenous Opera Scholarship will adopt a new name and the organisation itself will seek to bring culturally informed values to everyday work practices. But the defining strengths of the scholarship will remain unchanged, for these are intrinsic to the Melba ethos.

'One area where Melba particularly succeeds,' explains Nina, 'is the capacity for flexibility around all of their artists. And that's especially the case in acknowledging the circumstances of First Nations performers. Training has not always been easily accessible for First Nations singers, and Melba's strategy of tailoring the program around the individual, while beneficial for any singer, is especially valuable for us.'

^{*} QPAC Brisbane (May 2026), Sydney Opera House (August 2026)

The Drover's Wife

NINA KORBE COMMENTS EDITED FROM A CONVERSATION WITH YVONNE FRINDLE

In Opera Australia's 2026 season, two Melba Alumni, Nina Korbe and Shauntai Sherree Abdul-Rahman, will appear in the world premiere of *The Drover's Wife*, a new opera by George Palmer with a libretto by Leah Purcell. Nina was approached to sing the lead role of Molly Johnson back in 2022, even before her time with Melba, obliging her to keep this fantastic opportunity a secret. Now the embargo has been lifted and Nina's able to share her excitement:

I'm really looking forward to Australia being able to hear this incredible story, and it's so encouraging to see that our national company is really behind championing First Nations stories.

The opera is based on a classic short story by Henry Lawson – in other words, a story showing a white man's perspective. But Leah Purcell, who is also the director, took that story and rewrote it as a play, which showcased the Indigenous perspective. The play was incredibly well received, and it became a novel, and then a movie, and now it's an opera. And what's so beautiful is that in each retelling a slightly different perspective is highlighted and amplified.

One thing that's particularly powerful in the opera is the element of the Dreamtime, and the relationship between the Elders and the spirits and ancestors speaking through Molly. As a medium, opera is especially suited to this because we're used to suspending disbelief, to seeing more 'fanciful' elements on stage. Particularly for our First Nations audiences, I think there's something profoundly spiritual in being able to see that aspect of our culture represented on stage.

It was a beautiful collaboration with the composer George Palmer and Aunty Leah. We could explore questions such as: How does Molly fit in my skin? Where does my version of this character emerge? How can we tailor that on stage to be truthful in the context of this performance? And on a practical level, George was able to tailor the writing to my voice. That's not an opportunity that you get a lot in opera, but my goodness, it was so enriching!

Composing for the lyric voice

The inaugural Michael Bertram Composition Award aspires to develop new voices in Australian opera.



STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

The classical music industry worries about cultural relevancy. When programming is dominated by a canon of (old) work by dead composers, it's easy to feel nostalgic for a past age when audiences were eager for the latest thing. How exciting (and how risky!) it must have felt for Handel, Mozart, Rossini, Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, Strauss, et al, to prepare for the opening night of a new opera – that meeting of creative and entrepreneurial imperatives. How exciting (and, yes, risky) it must have felt to be in the theatre.

New work keeps our art form vibrant. New work is central to the evolution of opera. Talking with composer Stefan Cassomenos about his opera *Eva* (see article on page 6), the conversation took a detour as he enthused about operas that had moved and inspired him: Brett Dean's *Hamlet*, Mary Finsterer's *Biographica* ... Talking with bass-baritone Jeremy Kleeman, I removed my journalist 'hat' to rave about Elliott Gyger's *Oscar and Lucinda*, which I'd seen him perform in a thrilling night in the theatre.

But who is supporting new work in opera? And who is supporting emerging composers of opera? The answer to the first question is opera companies primarily, pooling resources in co-commissions that allow both a greater investment and more performance opportunities. Festivals and venues have a role: QPAC is a partner with Opera Australia in the forthcoming *The Drover's Wife* starring soprano Nina Korbe (see article above). And private philanthropy plays its part.

There are relatively few supporters and programs, however, dedicated specifically to the development of opera composers in Australia. By contrast, we have a strong track record in *orchestral* composer development, with training, workshops and commissioning projects designed not only for post-tertiary composers but teenagers. And many of these have been initiated or shaped by composer and conductor Richard Mills AO.

It makes sense, then, that Richard is a panellist and guide for Melba's inaugural Michael Bertram Composition Award (MBCA) – a commission, workshop and performance opportunity. Joining him on the panel is the long-time friend of Michael Bertram, pianist Michael Kieran Harvey, and Sharolyn Kimmorley AM.

The new biennial Award was made possible by a bequest from pianist and composer Michael Bertram, who in his daily life was a professional accountant, as well as a busy volunteer (Musica Viva and ANAM benefitted from his skills) and former chair of the Melba Conservatorium of Music. As Richard describes him: 'a great aficionado of music and contributor to the culture of Melbourne.'

Nowadays, Michael's music-making would be described as a side hustle. Despite reaching the state finals of what's now the ABC Young Performers Awards as a pianist in his 20s, and composing works for artists of the calibre of soprano Margaret Haggart OAM, he took a pragmatic approach to his musical career, treating it as an 'after-work' activity and not turning to composing full time until after his retirement in 1995. As his daughter Alex explained when the Award was launched, Michael was

motivated by a desire to provide opportunities that he hadn't been given himself as he'd struggled to balance his professional and creative life.

The MBCA is intended to support composers who aspire to opera, but like Michael, Melba has taken the 'sensible and practical' approach. The recipient will be expected not to complete an opera but to compose a 15-minute song cycle for one or more voices and piano, to a text of their choice in English, Italian, French or German. Opera in essence, with a focus on the lyric voice.

Once complete, the new song cycle will be workshopped by 2026 Melba Artists, developing the work for what Richard calls 'the reality of the performing situation' and its premiere in a dedicated concert. The hope, of course, is that the new work will enter the repertoire for the lyric voice. And while, as Richard explains, 'no amount of legislation or planning' can ensure a continuing life for a commissioned work, Melba's holistic approach, now transferred to the creative sphere, aims to establish the environment in which 'musical excellence creates its own need'.

Meet Madison Nonoa

2025 recipient of the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award

Madison Nonoa has just been announced as the 2025 recipient of the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award, which provides funding to an opera singer in the early stages of their career. We spoke with her about the impact of the support, her love of performing at home in New Zealand, and what's coming up next.

STORY DEANNE SHELTON-COLLINS



Image: Steven Godbee

'It's an incredible gift at a very important time,' says Madison. 'I'm really thrilled.'



Don Giovanni by Mozart, new production of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence
Conductor: Sir Simon Rattle, Stage director: Robert Icke, 2025 Festival d'Aix-en-Provence © Monika Rittershaus

The New Zealand soprano is already developing an impressive résumé: a graduate of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, she has performed across Europe, England, New Zealand, and Australia. Most recently, she debuted as Zerlina in *Don Giovanni* for Aix-en-Provence Festival, featured in Birmingham Opera's *woman. life.song*, and performed Mozart's *Requiem* for Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and Rossini's *Stabat Mater* for New Zealand Symphony Orchestra.

Yet Madison's success also highlights why it is so important for emerging artists to receive the kind of support offered by the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award.

'These awards, these scholarships have such a life-changing impact,' she says. Madison is at a crucial point in her career — one in which it is easy for a singer to burn out, prioritise work over their health, or face financial stresses.

'Auditions are such a massively expensive part of being a young, coming-into-being-established singer, but they're also just vital,' Madison explains. 'This [funding] actually enables me to feel okay taking on these opportunities.'

The Award is a legacy of Dame Heather Begg DNZM OBE (1932-2009), a New Zealand mezzo-soprano who had a long and thriving international career. Established through her Estate in 2013, the Award offers \$25,000 each year to support an early-career singer from Australia or New Zealand.

Madison notes that, while the Award is an investment in her at this particular point in time, it is also an investment in classical music more broadly and has supported the careers of 'trailblazer' alumni. Those alumni are eleven singers who have received the Award over the past twelve years: Samuel Dundas, Janet Szepei Todd, Amina Edris, Jeremy Kleeman, Emily Edmonds, Lauren Fagan, Nicholas Jones, Fleurance Brockway, Filipe Manu, Nathan Bryon, and Anna-Louise Cole.

Like Dame Heather herself, Madison remains connected with home despite her overseas success. 'I love performing in New Zealand and Australia,' says the soprano, whose upcoming roles include her Pinchgut Opera debut as Abel in *The First Murder (Il primo omicidio)* in 2026. As rewarding as she finds her experiences in Europe, 'it's just so wonderful to be able to come perform at home and to tangibly give back, I suppose, to the performing community around Australia and New

Zealand. There's so much going on and so many artists to celebrate.'

Finding out that she had received the Award was completely unexpected but welcome news. 'I felt like the sun had come out, to be honest.' Establishing herself as a professional singer, she has come to understand how important maintaining her vocal health is — and how many resources go into that maintenance. Working with voice specialists and performance psychologists is an investment that young singers don't always factor into their career plans, but that she increasingly realises are necessary. Another challenge is staying on top of her mental health, which often takes a back seat to the career choices she must prioritise.

'I travel so much,' she says. 'I'm very infrequently in the same place for long. And while that's wonderful and glamorous, I've found it to be incredibly mentally and emotionally taxing.' This funding will allow Madison to manage the emotional as well as physical challenges of being a professional singer, by enabling her to find productive experts she can work with. 'I have the ability to deal with this at the moment, and I'm going to.'

As vital as the financial support will be, Madison's gratitude is not only about money. 'I feel really honoured to have the faith put in me,' she says. An Award like this 'comes with a responsibility to honour the original person who it's all about. People have gone, "We see something in you. Please take it forward, please do your best, please let us help you." These initiatives are so important, and I really am so grateful for everyone involved in making it happen.'

By establishing this Award, Dame Heather Begg ensured an enduring avenue of support and encouragement. As the latest artist to carry on that legacy, Madison appreciates the 'really beautiful concept' of paying it forward to the next generation of singers. 'I would love to be able to do the same thing one day,' she says. 'That is the goal.'

As she looks to the year ahead, Madison reflects that this Award has come at the ideal time. Instead of worrying about career expenses and the immediate future, she can enjoy the excitement of her upcoming projects and say yes to the opportunities that come her way. 'These awards really are so important and so necessary,' she says. 'And the impact that they have goes far further, I think, than people realise.'

MELBA'S WILL

LEAVING A LEGACY

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To find out about including a gift in your will, or to receive information about our Melba's Will Bequest Circle, please contact Catherine McElhone on (03) 9944 2100 or cmcelhone@melbaoperatrust.com.au

A Sydney soirée

As the sun set across Sydney Harbour, guests gathered in the Belgiorno Room of the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

With the iconic Harbour Bridge in the background, the scene was set for a very special soirée – one that celebrated Melba’s current artists, honoured its alumni, and paid tribute to the legacy of Dame Heather Begg DNZM OBE.

For some in the room, this was their very first taste of Melba. They were treated to exquisite performances and heard the stories and voices of those who have lived the program – artists whose careers have been shaped and sustained by Melba’s unique support.

One of those voices was alumna and Melba Board Director, Siobhan Stagg. Sixteen years ago, she was a 22-year-old student from Mildura on the cusp of graduation, wondering how to transform her passion for singing into a real career. On a busy Melbourne street, she received a phone call that changed everything. It was from Melba Opera Trust, offering her one of the very first scholarships in what would become the Melba Program.

‘It’s hard to convey what an endorsement like this means to a young person at a pivotal crossroads in their life,’ she shared. ‘In one short

phone call, my destiny changed from being a lost and unemployed music graduate – to an emerging artist with a plan.’

That opportunity not only helped to launch Siobhan onto the world stage but also forged a lifelong connection to Melba. Today, she stands as one of its greatest advocates, giving back as a mentor, Board Director, and more recently as a donor. Siobhan initiated Melba’s Alumni Giving Circle, leading by example with the first donation, and encouraged her peers to join her in supporting the next generation of Melba artists. ‘It feels good to help amplify the talents of these young Australians and to witness their voices blossom along the way,’ she reflected.

The evening also showcased the talent of current artists. Soprano Eden Shifroni and bass Jack Bolton, accompanied by Melba’s Artistic Manager Sharolyn Kimmorley AM, performed a heartfelt program that captivated guests. Their music was even more poignant as Eden revealed it would be her final Sydney performance with Melba before relocating to London to continue her studies and career.

A highlight of the night was a special appearance by alumna Emily Edmonds, past recipient of the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award – a prize established through Dame Heather’s Estate to nurture early-career professionals. Serendipitously, Emily recently appeared alongside Siobhan in Opera Australia’s *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Emily also shared her personal journey, describing Melba’s ongoing support: from scholarship recipient and Award winner, to receiving an Alumni Grant that helped her to relaunch her international career post COVID.

‘Melba has a unique understanding of what it takes to build and sustain a meaningful career in opera,’ Emily said. ‘Their support has come at critical points of transition, and that has allowed me to keep growing my international career and developing my mastery in a sustainable way. It’s visionary, generous, and grounded in the realities of being an artist in 2025.’

It was a night that brought Melba’s mission to life: celebrating artistry, honouring legacy, and affirming the organisation’s commitment to supporting artists not just for a season, but for a lifetime.



A special thanks to our event partners Kawai Australia and Coombe Yarra Valley.

Emily Edmonds, Eden Shifroni, Jack Bolton and Siobhan Stagg
Image: Katje Ford

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