

THE MELBA

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REPETITEUR IN THE SPOTLIGHT
A TRIBUTE TO JOHN WEGNER AO
MEZZO TO MEZZO

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About Melba Opera Trust

Melba Opera Trust delivers Australia’s premier opera development program, built on Dame Nellie Melba’s philosophy that ‘a beautiful voice is not enough’. Supported today by a community of dedicated donors, the Melba Program prepares a new generation of exceptional Australian artists for opera’s world stage.

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Copy writing and editing

Katelyn Bannister
Amy Black
Yvonne Frindle
Bruce Raggatt
Deanne Sheldon-Collins

Cover

Jesse Linke performing at The Salon Series Launch, Pentridge Prison.
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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 30th edition of *The Melba* magazine. This bi-annual publication was first released in 2009 and I take this opportunity to thank many of our readers who have been involved with Melba since the first edition. We are extremely fortunate to have such a vibrant community of artists, mentors, colleagues and supporters underpinning all that we do, and I hope you enjoy the latest updates in the pages to follow.

It's been a busy start to the year for Melba. Our new cohort of artists have settled into their year-long scholarships in the Melba Program, and you can read more about what they have been up to on pages 4, 5 and 6. This is such an exciting time for these artists, most of whom have only just completed their tertiary studies. Throughout their year with Melba, they will have the opportunity to focus on their artistic, personal and professional development. This will give them the space to grow, to realise who they want to be artistically and personally, and to hone the essential skills they need for success, both on and offstage.

The learning that takes place in the Melba Program reaches beyond preparing any one role in a single production. It teaches the artists the skills and the

best practices to apply to any rehearsal room, in any situation, with any company in the world.

As the proverb says, ‘give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime’. Our objective is to help these talented artists to forge fulfilling, sustainable careers that will be competitive at an international level.

In taking this approach, we had always hoped that the foundations laid at Melba would, in turn, enrich other performing arts companies around Australia and abroad. It is such a joy to see so many Melbas appearing with Australian opera companies, and as part of an ever-increasing number of Melba Alumni performing around the world. In fact, close to 85% of our alumni are either furthering their operatic studies overseas or engaged professionally in the industry – an outcome we are enormously proud of.

We could not do the work that we do without philanthropy. Each year we rely on the generosity of our donors, so that we can offer the highest standards of training and preparation to our gifted artists. I realise it is a difficult climate for giving, and that makes every gift that we receive – no matter the amount – all the more precious. I sincerely thank our donors for making the choice to support our artists.

We are also working closely with the community to revitalise legacy giving through our Melba’s Will circle. We have experienced first-hand the impact bequests can make through our namesake. Just as Dame Nellie Melba’s bequest helped pave our way today, I consider our notified bequestors to be the guardians of our future. In the coming months we are looking forward to speaking more with the community on how they might become more involved in this vital area of philanthropy.

Finally, in closing, it is with deep deep sadness that I pay tribute to one of Melba’s brightest ‘guiding lights’. Earlier this month we said farewell to our great friend, Dr John Wright-Smith. John could always be counted on for the loudest ‘bravo’ at Melba performances, his passionate conversations about

music and boundless enthusiasm for our work. He will be remembered for his commitment to the artists and for his encouragement that was delivered with characteristic warmth, generosity and gusto.

Together with his wife, Liz, John first became involved with Melba in 2010 when they established the John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship. Over the years they became visionary supporters of many Melba initiatives, including the Mentor Program and the Alumni Grant Program. They were awarded a Melba Medal to acknowledge their remarkable contribution in 2014.

John and Liz are woven into the very fabric that is Melba Opera Trust. We shall be forever grateful for the many lives that they touched with their generosity, and it is our honour to champion their memory for generations to come. Our love and thoughts are with John’s family and friends. Vale.



Dr John Wright-Smith with Melba alumnus Brenton Spiteri.

An update ... Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award

Since we last caught up with 2023 recipient Nathan Bryon, he has continued to go from strength to strength.

Nathan remains at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM), where he is studying for an Artist Diploma. Alongside his studies, Nathan is making the most of being in the United States, auditioning across the country and participating in voice competitions. One of these was the Metropolitan Opera Eric and Dominique Laffont Competition, where he was awarded the 2024 winner of the San Francisco District.

This year Nathan also joins the prestigious Merola Opera Program at the San Francisco Opera. One of

the foremost training programs for aspiring young opera singers, Merola furthered the development of many household names, including two Melba mentors, Thomas Hampson and Stuart Skelton. Nathan’s repertoire includes covering Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni* and scenes from *Lucrezia Borgia* and *La bohème*.

In recent news, Nathan has just been selected as the recipient of The Opera Foundation for Young Australians’ 2024 Michael Byrne Vienna State Opera Award, commencing in early 2025.

We look forward to announcing the next recipient of the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award in the Spring edition of *The Melba*.

The Alastair Jackson International Opera Award

Current recipient of the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award (AJIOA), Georgia Melville is busy continuing her studies in the opera program at the Royal College of Music (RCM), London, and keeping a busy performance schedule.

Most recently, she performed the role of Hanna Glawari in the RCM’s *The Merry Widow*. The musical numbers were in German with English dialogue. Georgia confessed ‘It was a little bit of a brain teaser I must say!’ Nevertheless, it was a fantastic opportunity to sing the role in German while communicating the humour to the audience in their own language. Georgia says ‘the role of Hanna Glawari was a gift. I have improved so much over the last three months.’

Earlier this year she was a recital soloist with The Mozartists, an acclaimed London-based company which stages productions of many

of Mozart’s operas. Soon Georgia will do some outreach with The Mozartists, singing in high schools and workshops, taking opera to people who might not otherwise have the chance to hear it. Other projects in the pipeline include preparing a recital program, again under the auspices of The Mozartists, as well as studying Fiordiligi in Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* at the RCM. ‘So, lots of Mozart, basically ... a summer of Mozart!’

In other AJIOA news, Melba is preparing to host its inaugural round of auditions to identify the next recipient of this prestigious award. Open to Australian and New Zealand applicants, auditions have been scheduled for late October 2024 and will be carried out by a panel of experts, including the RCM’s Head of Vocal and Opera, Nicholas Sears.

More information will be announced via Melba social channels in the coming months.



Nathan Bryon, Melba alumnus (2020-22) Ruskin Opera Scholarship and the Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship.



Georgia Melville, Melba alumna (2020-21) The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship.

A tribute to John Wegner AO

This year we proudly announced a new scholarship in memory of revered bass-baritone John Wegner. The annual scholarship, established by John's widow Mignon, will support the development of young Australian singers in perpetuity and ensure that John's contribution to the operatic community will continue to be remembered for generations to come.

We asked his friend and colleague, Moffatt Oxenbould AM, to share some memories and stories about John.

STORY MOFFATT OXENBOULD AM

In 1979 Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was performed by the then Australian Opera at the Palais Theatre in St. Kilda. Conducted by Richard Bonyngé AC, CBE, a very distinguished cast was headed by charismatic American bass-baritone James Morris fresh from the Metropolitan Opera in New York, who was to go on to become one of the most internationally acclaimed Wagnerian *heldenbaritons* of his time. The chorus for this production was made up of a small group of singers from the Victorian College of the Arts and included a young bass – John Wegner – who spent most of the time he was not actually on stage, in the wings, intently watching and listening to Morris, Dame Joan Sutherland OM, AC, DBE, Margreta Elkins AM, Neil Warren-Smith and their colleagues. He was a serious young man, obviously enthralled at being on stage among such artists. In hindsight, it's whimsical to think that Jim Morris and John Wegner would go on to sing many of the same challenging dramatic bass-baritone roles in some of the greatest theatres in the world. During the *Don Giovanni* season John did a successful audition for the Australian Opera that led to an invitation to join the company at the beginning of 1981.

The Australian Opera was a perfect company in which John could grow. Over the next decade, he was given roles large and small, in different languages and styles – ranging from Handel and Mozart to Britten and Meale. He encountered many different conductors, directors, vocal coaches and teachers of performance crafts. He was hungry to learn, always wanting to improve. He enjoyed researching his roles, preparing his work well in advance and maintaining 'match fitness' physically and mentally. He was respectful to his senior colleagues and popular with his peers and staff members. He quickly became an audience favourite.

In 1986 he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship and in 1987 the Bayreuth Scholarship, enabling him to expand his artistic horizons, hearing notable artists while attending performances of repertoire to which he was beginning to aspire.

As well as doing a high number of performances each year, he covered many roles and was always ready in case of illness or emergency. I especially remember the evening in Sydney when he sang Boris Godunov for the first time. He was performing a different role in the opera but also covered the title role. At comparatively short notice he had to go on. Although only appearing in three major scenes, Boris is a hugely demanding undertaking – musically, vocally, dramatically and emotionally. It's a mountain that only the bravest can climb. John was excited but warily calm. He was realising a dream! It began well and got better and better. Nobody who attended that performance could doubt that John was going to succeed in taking on more of these 'monolithic' dramatic roles for his voice type. And so, he did!

John remained a company member until 1992 at which time he based his burgeoning international career in Germany. But Australia was always important for him, and he returned regularly to sing with the companies and many of the colleagues with whom he had learnt and polished his craft.

His first contract in Germany was in Karlsruhe where his debut role was Jokanaan in *Salome*. This success led to invitations to sing as a guest in many of Europe's major opera houses. He made his debut at the Bayreuth Festival in 1997 and



John Wegner in OA's *Tosca* (2013).
Image: Prudence Upton.

'Those of us who enjoyed working with John over the years recall a gentle and thoughtful man who incongruously seemed destined to bring opera's darker and more sinister characters so vividly to life on stage.'

Moffatt Oxenbould

sang leading roles at the festival in five subsequent seasons. In 2000 John joined the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf. He was then firmly established in Europe as a much-admired Wagnerian *heldenbariton*, singing Wotan, the Wanderer and Alberich in the *Ring*, Telramund in *Lohengrin*, Kurwenal in *Tristan und Isolde*, Klingsor in *Parsifal* and the title role in *Der fliegende Holländer*. He also sang many of these great roles, together with Scarpia in *Tosca*, Escamillo in *Carmen* and Méphistophélès in *Faust*, in Australia, where he received several major awards for his performances and was always welcomed 'home'.

John was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2014, which devastatingly brought his thriving career to a premature end and led to his death in 2019.

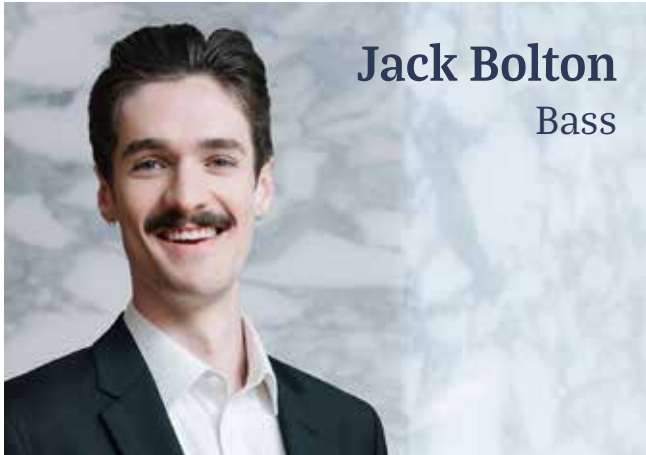
Those of us who enjoyed working with John over the years recall a gentle and thoughtful man who incongruously seemed destined to bring opera's darker and more sinister characters so vividly to life on stage. Colleagues and admiring audience members never doubted that he would succeed at an international level. While we are still around, John will never be forgotten. Mignon Wegner's loving and generous endowment of a perpetual Melba Opera Trust scholarship in John's memory ensures that his name and artistry will be meaningfully remembered for generations to come.



Pictured is Edgar Wegner (John's nephew), Aidan Hodder (inaugural recipient of the scholarship) and Mignon Wegner.

Meet the 2024 Melba Artists

STORY DEANNE SHELTON-COLLINS



Jack Bolton
Bass

John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship
Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship

Jack was drawn to opera because ‘it is such densely packed, emotional music. To be an instrument, be a melody, be a part of it and be able to make that music with other people is one of the loveliest experiences to have.’

A role he would love to play some day is King Philip in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Don Carlos*, which has ‘one of the most dramatic bass-bass duets . . . It would be lovely to sing that.’ For a young bass, King Philip is a few years away; Jack will see significant vocal change in the future, and he explains that he is still ‘figuring out where my voice is heading’. Rather than being limiting, though, this gives him the chance to learn as much as he can in preparation for where his career will move next.

A recent graduate of the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, this year Jack looks forward to ‘singing in incredible venues for a variety of different people with a variety of different repertoire’. Several months into the Melba Program, he has also found the industry chats and alumni talks especially helpful for ‘figuring out what needs to be done’. They establish ‘the basis of where we need to be at the moment . . . setting us on the right trajectory of thought, planning and delegation of tasks to see, okay, what is my next step forward, how am I going to best use this time?’

Jack recognises how invaluable it is to reflect on his next steps while polishing his craft. ‘How do I really set in stone what I need to do with the technique I’ve got at the moment, with the growth of voice I’ve got at the moment, really making use of everything to its fullest extent?’

In the long term, Jack hopes to continue his studies in Germany – partly because he loves hiking. ‘I can just imagine going out early spring, it’s still quite cold, there’s dew on the trees, and just walking through those lush forests . . . You can figure out why so much poetry and Lieder were written about the forests. You just get to feel what the composer felt.’



Caitlin Forrest
Mezzo-Soprano

Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship

Caitlin literally fell into opera: as she was walking to her classical audition at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), she tripped down the stairs. ‘It was a bit funny’, she admits, laughing at the memory. Far from being a negative experience, the fall gave her a burst of energy that she carried into the room with her. ‘I went into the audition and had the best time . . . I got an offer, and that’s how I got into opera.’

Before training at WAAPA, she hadn’t considered classical singing as the focus of her career path. ‘It wasn’t until I got the opportunity that I was like, okay, I love this. It really hit me when I performed Hansel . . . I thought, *this* is what I want to do.’

Caitlin grew up in country Western Australia on a dairy farm and now lives in Perth. Since joining the Melba Program, she has flown to the East Coast several times for intensives and performances. ‘When I started, I probably had only been on a plane five, six times . . . that’s definitely changed in the last few months!’

Recognising that travel is a major part of a professional performer’s life, she is grateful to be experiencing it first-hand and to be supported with strategies to cope with the pressure through wellbeing sessions. ‘Being away from home has been hard . . . but it’s also been good, because you’ve got to make new friends and get used to living away.’ As her career develops, she hopes to pursue opportunities both globally and nationally, but ‘Perth will always be home to me’.

Looking to the year ahead, Caitlin is keen to work on languages. Growing up in a regional area, she had limited access to Italian lessons, and she is eager to focus on improving her conversation and diction. She is also excited about ‘working with other likeminded, wonderful, talented artists’ and ‘learning a bit more about myself as a singer . . . It has been overwhelming, but it’s been a good overwhelming.’



‘It’s important to work on both your weaknesses and strengths, and I think in this program I’ll be able to do both.’

Eden Shifroni



Aidan Hodder
Baritone

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

When it comes to being an artist, Aidan is a self-described ‘jack of all trades’. What he is most looking forward to this year is the specificity of the Melba Program and having the opportunity to deep dive into his development and hone skills to the next level. Already he is enjoying the focus: ‘It’s all so precise without being completely inapplicable to anything else.’

He is especially excited to work on languages, acknowledging the importance of learning to speak a language conversationally whilst developing his diction for performance. His priority is Italian and German, and he particularly enjoys learning the latter. ‘I really like the German language. I love Lieder. I think some of the more interesting arias I’ve done have great German texts’, he says. ‘There’s some fantastic, beautiful consonant combinations that you don’t get anywhere else.’

Language is not Aidan’s only interest, however. A self-taught composer, he loves to share music. ‘It can start in different places, but I like to start with a story’, he says. ‘If a story is worth telling with music, then the music will come.’

He ‘got the bug’ for composition after helping to save his Year 12 performing arts production; when he heard it was going to be cancelled, he wrote a musical for the school to put on. ‘We packed that theatre’, he jokes. ‘All forty seats were full!’

Opera Queensland had delivered an intensive at his high school, and it made a significant impact on the young artist. ‘I think helping people to understand, access and appreciate music at that stage of their life is so important’, he says. ‘That’s something we need to nurture. And it made me want to keep going.’

Aidan’s work reflects this: he performs with Dino Encounters, an educational company that uses puppets and songs to teach children about dinosaurs. There is an ‘enormously stark’ difference between classical opera and children’s entertainment, but Aidan understands how to move between the different performance styles. ‘It’s all transferrable’, he says. ‘The idea of your staging, your projection, your connection to an audience. And it all accumulates. I think it is good to perform in a couple of different ways.’

As both teacher and student, Aidan has a deep respect for sharing knowledge. ‘Education shapes everything’, he says. ‘Even now, as singers at a more professional level, we’re still constantly learning. We’re going through different institutions and different countries, and we’re learning from people who’ve been taught by someone else who was taught by someone else.’

‘Education and the transfer of knowledge and the gift of it and making people want to seek it out . . . It’s definitely part of what shapes the arts, and I think it’s part of what shapes being human.’



Images: Phoebe Powell



Jesse Linke
Soprano

The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship

Jesse grew up with music, discovering a passion for it in a way she describes as ‘organic’. As a child, she watched opera and musicals on VHS tapes at her grandparents’ home in South Africa. Her love of song transcended language; even before she could speak English, she and her sister would sing Rodgers and Hammerstein songs in the car.

After moving to Australia, she joined a school choir and realised how much she loved to sing classical pieces when she performed ‘Panis angelicus’ at her Year 6 graduation.

‘Before this, I thought I was going to be an air force pilot’, she laughs. ‘It’s interesting that one musical event in my life changed my entire trajectory of what I wanted to do.’

Jesse graduated from the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts and recently completed a Graduate Diploma at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music. Moving to Melbourne was a ‘big personal life change’, but she is excited by the ‘burst of opportunities’ it led to. ‘I’ve never had so much music, both in my life and surrounding me.’

The opportunities continue with a busy year ahead of training and performances in the Melba Program. As a new artist, she has been particularly struck by the variety of mentors – working not only with musical professionals but also benefitting from, for example, sessions on wellbeing and personal style.

‘I feel like I can’t pinpoint just one thing’, she says of what she is learning in the Melba Program. ‘It’s such an example of what Melba means when they say that a singer is more than the voice. I didn’t quite grasp what that meant until I started doing these sessions, and I realised that it’s so much larger than I could have imagined.’



Eden Shifroni
Soprano

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

Eden’s repertoire spans a range of genres, from Baroque to new music. When asked what type excites her the most, she laughs, ‘Everything!’ ‘I am obsessed with music’, she says. ‘It’s on all the time. When I’m pottering around the house, I have to have some music on.’ One of her favourite composers is Mozart, although she wasn’t always the opera enthusiast she is today.

‘I grew up not knowing much about classical music’, she explains. ‘I instantly fell in love with it, and now I’m just addicted to it.’ A graduate of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, she originally auditioned for the jazz vocal course but decided to take a chance on classical voice. ‘And here I am, six years later!’

Eden remains passionate about all kinds of music and thrives on works that bring together diverse musical styles. ‘I think that’s where a lot of the opportunities are, so I think it’s important for young singers not to pigeonhole themselves into one specific expression or style of music’, she says. ‘As long as it feeds you creatively and artistically.’

Her recent projects highlight this love of innovation. Last year she performed in two particularly interesting premieres: the pastiche opera *Track Works* and a re-orchestration of *The Coronation of Poppea*.

‘I felt so artistically alive’, she says of *Track Works*. ‘We were making changes along the way. We were shifting the libretto ... And it felt so cool to ... leave a mark in that way, because you’re part of the process of creating a new opera. And I think that’s special, because you create that legacy.’

The Coronation of Poppea was a collaboration between Sydney Conservatorium of Music and National Institute of Dramatic Art, with contemporary instrumentation arranged by Australian composer Elena Kats-Chernin. ‘I talk about my love for the classics, but I also love new and reimagined works. *The Coronation of Poppea* was one of the first operas ever written, but we created a really relevant and thrilling new production alongside Elena’, says Eden. ‘So that was fascinating, because it was a chance to experiment and collaborate whilst still staying true to certain traditions. I feel grateful that we had that opportunity.’

Eden may be a voracious music lover, but she also looks forward to the skills she will develop in the Melba Program. ‘I think it’s interesting and exciting how much we focus on the business aspect’, she says. ‘Because at the end of the day, we are a small business ... and any business should know how to market itself, should know how to manage its finances, should know how to communicate and network.’

One of her goals this year is to ‘fill in the gaps’ as she transitions from student to young professional. ‘It’s important to work on both your weaknesses and strengths, and I think in this program I’ll be able to do both.’



Syrah Torii
Mezzo-Soprano

Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship
Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship

‘I love masterclasses, coaching sessions and learning different ways of doing things and applying it to my own singing’, says Syrah. As a mezzo-soprano, she has a varied repertoire that can range from the male ‘pants’ roles to leading ladies. Shifting between such different parts requires versatility. For Syrah, the skill is in connecting with ‘the character’s objectives and their intentions: looking at the text, the music and discovering who the character is through what is on the page – and sometimes what is not on the page.’

She enjoys the fun of interpreting these characters, but opera was not always the plan. ‘I have been singing pretty much all my life, but I only started proper classical training when I began university’, she explains. ‘And I just fell in love with it from that point. I started with the intention to learn about vocal anatomy and technique, and then I was very fortunate to have an amazing singing teacher who encouraged me on the path of opera.’

Syrah’s teacher told her, ‘You have a voice’. It was a pivotal moment for the young singer, who credits the encouragement of the people around her for helping her to reach this point.

‘It’s sort of been an accident and also not’, she says. ‘I sort of fell into it, but this is an intentional choice that I made to pursue opera. This is what I want to do. This is what feels the most organic.’

Syrah speaks fluent Japanese and English, along with conversational Spanish, and she is studying German and Italian. She also holds a degree in Linguistics. ‘I’m very thankful that I have been brought up bilingual and had exposure to all these other different languages’, she says. ‘It also helps to know languages from different families because it helps you look at things differently.’

As she prepares for an international career, she recognises the usefulness of already knowing how to move between languages and cultures. ‘It’s helpful that I know two different cultures and two different systems within which I operate’, she says. ‘I think it will help ... when I go work in different countries and they have their different cultures.’

She also looks forward to learning from international perspectives within the Melba Program. ‘I think that’s really valuable for us young singers’, she says. ‘Connecting with so many different people from all over the world, and well-respected and established people in Australia as well.’

‘It’s super beneficial for us to have that performance experience ... and have that be the result of all these coachings and all the preparation that we do.’

Putting learning into practice

Nina Korbe and Stacey Yang

STORY DEANNE SHELTON-COLLINS

Nina Korbe, Soprano *Ruskin Opera Scholarship*

Soprano Nina Korbe is joining the Melba Program for her second year, and her training will serve her well in a busy time packed with exciting professional opportunities. March saw her principal debut with Opera Australia in Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour *West Side Story*, starring as Maria.

It was a dream role for Nina, and one she had her eye on for a long time, having grown up performing 'I Feel Pretty' and other songs from Bernstein's famous score.

'It's been a dream production to be a part of. Walking out onto that stage for the first time, looking across the water and seeing the sun setting behind the Opera House ... it was a pinch-me moment.'

Preparing for Maria, Nina reflects on her time in the rehearsal room. 'There was a really beautiful mixture of more experienced artists but also newbies making their debuts. It was a gorgeous balance of grounded and excited energy, and I could not have asked for a kinder and more supportive environment to work within.'

West Side Story, an iconic piece of music theatre, may seem an unusual choice for a classical singer. However, as Nina observes, 'there are very clear operatic elements in the composition of the piece,

which allows an honest showcase of all those [classical] talents.' In August Nina returns to more traditional opera when she performs Lisette in Victorian Opera's production of *La rondine*.

A proud Koa, Kuku Yalanji, Wakka Wakka woman, Nina visited her ancestral lands last year to perform in the Festival of Outback Opera. 'There was no experience quite like going out to Country for the first time and singing on those lands. It was and remains one of the most spiritual experiences of my life.' She returns for the 2024 Festival and is 'so looking forward to going back out there and feeling all of that energy around me again'.

With these professional engagements in the calendar, her training in this year's Melba Program is as important as ever. 'The second time round, you always have a bit more of a grounded footing', she says. 'You know what to expect, so you can better prepare for sessions and perhaps tailor repertoire. There are also fewer first coaching jitters to get through.'

Some of her favourite sessions last year had a business focus – finance in particular. 'Having the nuts-and-bolts conversation about that part of our career is valuable, especially considering we work across such diverse portfolios.'

'Whenever I'm asked about my experience with Melba, I can never say enough about how fantastic the program is', she says. 'I could highlight every single thing we do as valuable, so it's very difficult to choose one thing.'

'It's been a dream production to be a part of.'

Nina Korbe

Images: Keith Saunders Photography

Stacey Yang, Repetiteur *Southey Shelmardine Repetiteur Scholarship Margaret Schofield Opera Scholarship Mel & Nina Waters Award*

Repetiteur Stacey Yang rejoins the Melba Program with a renewed passion for the work ahead. 'After a very intense, challenging first year, now I feel much more confident', she says. 'More prepared.'

Last year Stacey performed in a number of notable productions, including the inaugural *Track Works*, a site-specific pastiche opera at Mortuary Station in Sydney. 'It was intense and a very eye-opening experience', she says of the performance, which completely sold out. Her Melba training had laid the groundwork as repetiteur for the project, which spanned two months of rehearsals and preparation on site.

One of her key focuses this year is to refine her language studies – particularly Italian, which she began learning last year. Already fluent in Mandarin and English, she has also just started German and French. 'I enjoy languages very much', she says. 'It's exciting. For this job, it's just not negotiable – you have to be fluent.' Coaching singers is an important aspect of being a repetiteur, and 'you can't do diction properly unless you really understand the language.'

Coaching, too, is a skillset Stacey hopes to keep developing in the Melba Program. 'I just thoroughly enjoy this learning and training process', she says. She aims 'to be more confident in an authoritative role, to help the singers instead of just being behind the piano playing the notes. That's the desire and the goal.'

'It's a busy year, but I feel very inspired and still motivated.'

Stacey Yang

Images: David Ng



Stacey already understands the perspective of both teacher and student, being a piano and organ teacher. Though there are differences between working with students and with professional singers, she notes that both require patience and an understanding of 'each tiny step' of the learning process.

Stacey herself is an example of someone constantly learning: she started piano when she was very young, but in her twenties she also branched out into the organ. Now an accomplished organist, she has played at venues around the world, including Antwerp Cathedral and the Hong Kong Cultural Centre.

'The technique is different', she explains of the difference between organ and piano. The organ can more 'closely replicate orchestral sound' and

often has a 'solemn, theatrical context', but it can be connected to opera 'if you shift that emotion'. She laughingly describes her move into opera as 'more mainstream', given that the organ is still an underrepresented area of music.

Specialising in collaborative piano was an unexpected shift Stacey made several years ago, and she notes how special the Melba Program has been in developing the 'complex skillsets' repetiteurship requires. The tailored approach to study, especially, helps artists to develop 'the insight and wisdom' they need to 'cultivate [their] own education'.

Looking to the months ahead, Stacey says, 'It's a busy year, but I feel very inspired and still motivated.'

'I'm so grateful for this journey.'

Repetiteur in the spotlight

A new scholarship shines a light on an essential but often invisible role in opera.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

Ask an opera repetiteur to give an ‘elevator pitch’ for their job and they’ll be praying for a high-rise building. The list of functions and responsibilities can be long; the necessary skill set even longer. This is not the kind of role you can sum up in 30 seconds.

Or perhaps you can. At its core, says Sharolyn Kimmorley AM, the major function of the opera repetiteur – always a pianist – is to ‘be the orchestra’ during the rehearsal process.

The term is borrowed from the French *répétiteur* – literally ‘repeater’ with the concepts of ‘striving’ and ‘making demands’ hidden in the etymology – and French students typically use it to refer to an academic tutor. From this comes the next most important function of the opera repetiteur: the coach who supports singers as they learn and rehearse every aspect of their roles.

In addition, a repetiteur may be needed to sing chorus parts during rehearsals (‘being the chorus’ as well as the orchestra) and to participate in performances as a backstage conductor or playing keyboard parts in the orchestral pit. In companies that present early opera, the repetiteur will also improvise basso continuo parts on harpsichord or fortepiano in performances.

But first the repetiteur is the orchestra. In addition to technical fluency as a pianist and an ability to read complex musical scores at sight, the repetiteur needs a special kind of musical imagination, explains Sharolyn, able to transform the sonorities of the piano into a colourful and expansive sound world that will prepare singers for the experience of singing above 60 or so instruments in the theatre.

The ability to read an orchestral score with its many simultaneous lines and to prepare or edit a piano reduction for use in rehearsals is also crucial. More than simply playing all the notes, this task requires an understanding of the cues singers are likely to hear from the orchestral pit during performance as well as that aforesaid imagination. It can take weeks of work, says Sharolyn, although once an opera has been prepared in this way it becomes a lasting professional resource.

On top of superb musical skills, a repetiteur will need a command of European languages, especially

Italian, German and French. A profound knowledge of the operatic repertoire – every vocal part, every instrument, every word – goes without saying. Stylistic awareness is important, too, and as current Melba artist Stacey Yang points out, the repetiteur needs to have a ‘holistic view, like a conductor’ and the ability to help others solve problems. Very few repetiteurs are singers themselves, but they do need to understand the voice as an instrument. And as a personality, the repetiteur must be supportive, patient, flexible and, above all, enjoy working with singers.

The repetiteur operates primarily behind the scenes. Their big moment isn’t opening night but rather the piano dress rehearsal. That, says Sharolyn, ‘is when you think “this is my show, this is my performance”’. And so it’s hardly surprising that, for all but the most knowledgeable audiences, the role of the repetiteur is a mystery, if it’s known at all. ‘Many people,’ says Melba Chair Kate Shelmerdine, ‘don’t understand the complexity of it, they just see it as an accompanying role.’

Even Australian tertiary institutions that offer programs in collaborative piano rarely devote meaningful attention to the role of the opera repetiteur, focusing instead on chamber music and recital accompaniment. This presents a significant challenge when it comes to identifying and nurturing the next generation of opera repetiteurs. To even aspire to such a career, the young pianist first has to have heard of it; they then need to be trained and mentored in this very specialist aspect of music-making.

This is where Melba Opera Trust plays a crucial role: offering a pathway that in other countries might be found in the young artist programs of professional opera companies. Since 2013, nearly every cohort of Melba artists has included a repetiteur, and the alumni have already made significant achievements. Su Choung, for example, has worked

with Opera Australia, and is a regular member of Victorian Opera’s music team, most recently working on their Sydney Festival production of Puccini’s *Il tabarro*. Simon Bruckard has not only developed into a fine conductor (with credits including State Opera South Australia, Victorian Opera and assistant to the Sydney Symphony Orchestra’s chief conductor Simone Young AM) but has composed two operas of his own.

To date, the Melba repetiteur artists have been supported by the Margaret Schofield Scholarship. While this scholarship isn’t formally earmarked for the repetiteur role, Margaret Schofield’s contributions as one of Australia’s leading pianists of the 20th century gave an elegant logic to that allocation.

This year, an additional, dedicated scholarship has been created: the Southey Shelmerdine Repetiteur Scholarship, established through a generous gift from Lady Marigold Southey AC, an ardent Melba supporter, and Kate Shelmerdine, who is her daughter-in-law.

Kate has a long-standing interest in supporting creative artists at the cusp of a career – ‘honing the skills they’ve learned at university.’ But in this case she also recognised the importance of supporting a niche art form that is ‘invisible but indispensable’. Lady Southey adds that historically it has been somewhat easier to attract scholarship funding for singers, who are ‘more visible’, and both women agreed that the new scholarship will help to bring the role of the repetiteur to the fore and, as Kate says, ‘shine some light on it’.

‘Discovering the role of the repetiteur was a whole new world for me,’ says Lady Southey. ‘I’m always amazed: they have to know every note, every word, and to support the singers. We were delighted to have this opportunity to support a role that’s so vital.’



L-R: Lady Southey AC, Stacey Yang and Kate Shelmerdine. Image: David Ng



‘My time as a Melba Opera Trust artist was revolutionary to my growth as a repetiteur. There is no other program in Australia that offers the kind of support and guidance that is so necessary to pursue a career in opera. I left the program with the insight I needed to become a confident and effective artist.’

Su Choung

Repetiteur Alumni

2013: Amir Farid

Amir is currently working as a collaborative pianist at the Juilliard School of Music in New York. He has a solo recital debut in Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall on 29 May.

‘My time with Melba Opera Trust has shaped my career as a musician in ways I would have never imagined. Not only did it equip me with the tools, knowledge and experience that landed me a job at the Juilliard School, it also helped my passion for opera and vocal music to further grow and develop into a major aspect of my everyday life.’

2014–2015: Stefan Cassomenos

Stefan is a Co-Artistic Director of the Port Fairy Spring Music Festival. In Australia he has upcoming performances with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, Darwin Symphony Orchestra and Corpus Medicorum. Internationally he will be performing in Bonn and London, and will travel to Berlin in June to record his latest solo album.

Stefan has also been invited by InPlace to undertake an Artist Residency at Riverbend House, Garambi Baan, Victoria.

2016: Simon Bruckard

Simon is Assistant Conductor to Simone Young at Sydney Symphony Orchestra and last year was assistant conductor for her production of *Peter Grimes* at La Scala. This year he will also conduct OzOpera’s tour of *La bohème* for Opera Australia. He is currently writing a film score for *The Golden Spurtle*: a documentary about an annual porridge-making competition in Carrbridge, Scotland directed by Con Costi.

‘It’s so important to be training the next generation of repetiteurs and coaches as well as singers, and Melba Opera Trust is one of the few organisations in Australia dedicated to this kind of holistic and real-world education. In my time as a Melba artist, I got to work with coaches and conductors who were working at an elite level, which was an

inspiration to better myself as a musician and expand my horizons.’

2016–2017: Jonathan Wilson

Jonathan is currently working as a repetiteur with Opera Australia.

2018–2019: Adam McMillan

Adam is busy as a freelance teacher and performing as a soloist and chamber musician. He has founded a contemporary music ensemble, Ensemble CANE, which aims to promote and perform works by Australian composers. The inaugural concert is at Tempo Rubato on 8 June.

2020–2022: Su Choung

Su is a regular in Victorian Opera’s music team and this year joins Opera Australia as repetiteur for OzOpera’s tour of *La bohème*. She has just been offered a place as repetiteur in the Global Talent Programme at the London Opera Centre commencing in September.

‘My time as a Melba artist equipped me with so many valuable skills ... the program really helped boost my confidence and self-assurance as an artist, which was important in helping me transition from student to professional musician.’

Adam McMillan



Images: David Ng

In partnership with Melbourne Recital Centre, Melba presented a masterclass with Caitlin Hulcup, an Australian mezzo-soprano renowned for her captivating stage presence. And with Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, we offered a masterclass with Raehann Bryce-Davis, an American mezzo-soprano hailed as ‘striking’ by *The New York Times*.

Serendipitously, among this year’s Melba Artists are two mezzo-sopranos, Caitlin Forrest and Syrah Torii. The masterclasses were a precious chance for our young mezzos to learn from master mezzos who have performed on stages across the world. Following the classes, Caitlin and Syrah had the opportunity to ask the masters some candid questions, mezzo to mezzo!

Caitlin Forrest chats to Caitlin Hulcup

CF: Your hometown is Perth, as is mine. Did you start your musical career in Western Australia and what were some of the early highlights?

CH: I was born in Melbourne, but my family moved to WA when I was four. I really appreciate all the formative interactions and experiences in the small but vibrant Perth music community while growing up. I also owe my first operatic experiences to West Australian Opera where I first sang as Kate Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly* and then as Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

I understand that you first started playing the violin. When did you realise that you wanted to become an opera singer? And how did you find the transition from violin to singing?

I graduated from the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts with a BA as a violinist and was part of an aspiring young string quartet. Only once this group disbanded did I even consider pursuing singing. I began playing as an extra in the violas with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra while



Mezzo to mezzo!

An important part of the Melba Program is connecting artists to industry and helping them nurture professional contacts. One way we do this is through our Masterclass Series, which enables Melba Artists to work one-on-one with acclaimed experts. This year we collaborated with two organisations to share the experience with a wider audience.

STORY CAITLIN FORREST AND SYRAH TORII

taking singing lessons on the side. I auditioned for the WA Opera chorus and also auditioned to take an MA in voice at the Victorian College of the Arts. I was luckily accepted into the class of Anna Connolly, who helped facilitate the leap in focus toward singing.

What roles and repertoire would you recommend for younger mezzos?

Firstly, I would just like to encourage young singers not to overlook the singing of art songs. For younger voices they provide a chance to build up the artistry of conveying sung text while also gaining in technical competence and vocal stamina. With respect to opera, young mezzos often need to try out a range of pieces in order to discover the most fitting repertoire. Some people have easy coloratura right away and might take to those famous Rossini heroines or may gain their first roles in Handel, Gluck and Mozart. Other young singers don’t enjoy coloratura at all and might present with a more lyrical kind of vocal quality or a darker timbre, so it is important to pay attention to what your instrument feels like while singing different kinds of repertoire at this stage. A piece may feel out of reach today but might be just a few stepping stones away in terms of technique. Having a teacher you can trust to guide you in this is essential. Since voices are continually changing, the roles you sing are likely to evolve over time. Keep an open mind and gently try new things out, being sure to seek professional feedback along the way.

I know you’re still busy performing in Australia and Europe. What advice would you give to younger artists about balancing a career between Australia and overseas?



I’d say it is important to meet the unpredictability of freelance work with being as prepared as possible for the demands of the work itself. That may mean making a serious commitment to a period of intensive study and for this I would suggest an ambitious and pragmatic attitude. If we accept that chance and luck are always going to play their parts, it helps to keep an open mind about how your career might unfold. There is no right way of doing things. Whether moving out of Australia or staying based in Australia is ultimately best for anyone is a very personal decision. I now live in Germany, but I feel immensely fortunate to perform wherever in the world the work takes me. I especially love to sing in Australia, of course!

Out of all the roles you’ve performed in your career, what was your favourite role and why?

I have enjoyed a wide range of roles, so it is very difficult to say which was outstanding for me. I certainly loved singing Gluck, Handel, Mozart and Strauss, and more recently I have been getting into Wagner. Mahler is superb to sing, but he didn’t write opera and so I will have to answer that whatever I am currently working on becomes my favourite.



‘In terms of advice, I think it was when I was told that I am the CEO of my company. I’m responsible for getting what I need and creating my own opportunities.’

Raehann Bryce-Davis

Syrah Torii chats to Raehann Bryce-Davis

ST: What do you love most about your job, and more specifically, about being a mezzo?

RBD: I love that I’m in a profession where I get to explore human nature, emotions and beauty in a very real way. I think if I wasn’t a mezzo, I wouldn’t be an opera singer. We get to play some of the most fascinating roles and are often the thinking women (or men) in the show. While the sopranos succumb to tuberculosis or love sickness, the mezzos normally live to fight another day, and I love that for us. I also think we don’t get the respect we deserve. We sing everything from contralto to soprano roles and have to develop a technique with some of the most asks.

Who or what inspires you?

I’m inspired by creativity and storytelling and artists and community builders of all kinds that take risks.

I’d love to talk about your experiences as a young singer. What was the most helpful piece of advice you received? What was the most impactful experience you had?



One of the most wonderful summers of my life was at the Franz Schubert Institute where ahead of arriving we prepared many German Lieder, and then some of the greatest artists in the world would come and spend three days coaching us and then leave. It was just beautiful glimpses into brilliant minds, and you could keep what moved and helped you and throw away what didn’t. We also did acting work with an actress, creating a whole world for each song we sang. It was one of the most challenging and intense growth periods of my artistry.

In terms of advice, I think it was when I was told that I am the CEO of my company. I’m responsible for getting what I need and creating my own opportunities. Voice teachers and coaches are my employees and I dictate the story and growth of my artistry.

You have a very busy international performance schedule in opera, concerts and recitals. What is your process for preparing for each of these? I would love to hear some specific examples, so that I might incorporate them into my own preparation.

I start with translating my text, then writing in beats, especially for contemporary music, then reading the libretto, then learn notes while marking, then make a playlist of several great singers singing my role, then when I feel secure about notes, rhythms, and style, I sing it. Then I’ll take it to a voice lesson, then coach it with a notes and rhythms person, a style person, an acting or character person, a language person, someone who knows your voice with an ear to the health of your singing. Sometimes great coaches can be several of these.

You are a commanding presence onstage and a versatile musician, performing classic mezzo roles as well as originating roles in new works. Out of all the roles you have performed across your career so far, what was your favourite and why?

Amneeeeeeris. I love her. I love being royalty and then getting to roar in the Judgement Scene. It’s the ultimate satisfaction to live that journey of elegance into unadulterated passion. Swoooooon!



Images: David Ng

Meet the Artists

STORY KATELYN BANNISTER

Over two nights in two capital cities, our supporters gathered to hear our 2024 Melba Artists for the first time. Our annual *Meet the Artists* concerts are a precious chance to thank our community and provide a welcome opportunity for the artists to put their hours of preparation into practice.

The events took place in the vibrant precinct of Gasworks Arts Park in Melbourne and in a contemporary space at Sydney Dance Company. Kawai Australia joined us as a new event partner, providing stunning grand pianos for the performances.

Queensland director Lois Redman prepared the concerts and reiterated the important role performances like these have for young artists. 'The role of the singer is a complex one, involving a varied skill set. Artists need to learn to bring all those skills together whilst under the pressure of performing. This experience is an excellent vehicle for helping the artists be even more than their beautiful voices.'

Following a joyful finale from Jacques Offenbach's *La Vie parisienne*, our guests had the opportunity to meet with the artists at a relaxed reception.

We are most grateful to our event partners Coombe Yarra Valley, Kawai Australia and Gasworks Arts Park for their support.



Melbourne



1. Miki Oikawa, Syrah Torii, Melissa Hebbard and Dr Peter Hebbard
2. Diane Haggvist, Margaret Knight, Graeme Parncutt and David Knight
3. Andrew Wallace, Martina Callighan, Loraine Tam and Cat Mapperson
4. Jesse Linke, Charles Allen AO and Malcolm Allen



Lady Southey AC, Lady Potter AC and Stacey Yang

Dr Alan and Rosemary Tait

Images: David Ng

Sydney



Dr Bruce Caldwell and Amy Black



1. Bill Hayward OAM, Jacqueline McLeod, Arik Shifroni and Mimi Shifroni
2. Vanessa Wegner, Manjula Sharma, James Reilly, Peter Wegner, Aidan Hodder, Jack Bolton, Mignon Wegner and Geraldine Wegner
3. Roberta Connaghan, Victoria Fox-Smith, Ruth Matthews and Christina Grover
4. Sharolyn Kimmorley AM, Gail Stewart, Rosemary Roche and Leona Geeves

Images: Anna Kučera

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Main image: Lena Filteböck

‘More than a voice’ Alexandra Flood

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT

Ten years after her time in the Melba Program, ‘very content’ is how Alexandra Flood feels about her artistic life right now.

Having been based in Paris, working as a freelance artist while her fiancé, American baritone Alexander York, was a member of the Académie at the Opéra national de Paris, the couple are savouring their relocation to Austria. She is a fest artist at the Vienna Volksoper while he is a fest artist at the Landestheater in Linz. Alexandra says she ‘feels more at home in the German-speaking world’. And with three major opera houses, four major orchestras, a vibrant and youthful artistic culture and much more, ‘Vienna has everything that you want from a European city’.

But what exactly does ‘fest’ mean? Alexandra shares that, in German, when a bolt is screwed in correctly it is said to be ‘fest’, meaning secure, tightly held. For Alexandra, being a fest singer means being ‘tightly held’ in the best sense as she is now a fully embraced member of the Volksoper’s principal ensemble. And this means the security of a fulltime position as well as the regular salary and working conditions that go with it. Yet the company releases its artists to accept engagements elsewhere, too, encouraging them to continue to grow artistically and enrich the standard of the house. And Alexandra will do just that, making her debut at Glyndebourne later this season, as Pamina in *The Magic Flute*.

Recent artistically satisfying roles at the Volksoper have included Musetta and Princess Fantasia in *Journey to the Moon*. The most challenging, however, was her debut in the virtuosic tightrope role of Queen of the Night. ‘I suffered from the pressure, but I managed it as best I could. It helped me to realise that the person who was putting on the pressure was me.’ But the company was supportive. ‘They knew that I was nervous about it ... the General Musical Director said, “You’re part of the family, so if it is s**t, we’ll still let you have another go!”’ Alexandra knew he was half-kidding, but this more relaxed attitude helped take the pressure off.

Despite understandable nerves, only two days of rehearsal, not working with the conductor and orchestra until the actual performance, a recalcitrant foot-tall wig and then her Sarastro colleague fainting and being taken away in an ambulance, Alexandra debuted as Queen. Far from being poo-pooed, the company appreciated Alexandra’s portrayal so much they offered her the role again this season, next season and even the one after that.

Being a fest artist also means stepping in when a colleague can’t go on. Not the official cover, Alexandra had to sing Gretel at five hours notice. ‘That was nuts!’ Only three hours to rehearse and remember the text and the staging. ‘It was Christmas Eve, and the theatre was filled with kids ... the Artistic Director came out and said “the Gretel can’t sing! She’s cancelled!” and everyone was like “Noooo!” but he was like “But Alex Flood is gonna come and save the day!” And everyone was going “Yay!” and that was special. I really felt like I had saved Christmas!’

But performing isn’t the only exciting venture in Alexandra’s artistic life. She had noticed that many Australian students were asking her advice on how to perform art song. Then when Bernard Lanskey from the Queensland Conservatorium chatted with Alexandra following her recital including rare Dvořák and Szymanowski, she reflected that it was strange that institutions lean on art songs as a way to train singers and yet there is no major professional festival in the country dedicated to them. His encouraging rejoinder ‘why don’t you do something about it?’, coupled with his support and that of the Queensland Conservatorium, then The University of Queensland, led Alexandra to develop this music education and professional performance concept. In 2023 the Queensland Art Song Festival was born.

University singers and pianists were formed into duos for masterclasses, career seminars and music



Alexandra as Princess Fantasia in *Journey to the Moon*.

Image: Barbara Palfy / Volksoper Wien

programming. Listening classes helped singers to be more aware of the piano part and pianists to be more aware of singers’ breathing. The pianists had to do dramatic readings of the German poetry; some were ‘shell shocked’ by the expectation they must know the translation word for word. There were even sessions about how to walk on stage and bow. In short, a complete package to prepare a consummate art song musician, which, in several ways, is redolent of the complete career preparation Alexandra herself received during her year with Melba Opera Trust.

‘It was important for the festival to come out guns blazing’, so Alexandra headlined with preeminent art song specialist German baritone Benjamin Appl and English pianist Sholto Kynoch, director of the Oxford Song Festival. After a week opening the students’ minds with interpretative insights, the festival culminated in a recital with Benjamin and Sholto putting into practice what they had preached.

Alexandra is the Artistic Director, laughing ‘that means I do everything!’ Whilst there are tedious elements, ‘managing the festival has been a great joy’. She’s enthusiastic for the festival’s mission ‘to encourage excellence in art song performance and practice’. And to grow awareness of art song as legitimate in its own right, so students can see the professional potential. ‘If you are not the next Pavarotti it doesn’t mean you can’t have an interesting career doing the music you love.’

Both universities have signed on again for 2024. Headlining will be fellow Melba alumna, Siobhan Stagg. Alexandra’s ideal is ‘to show young local students someone who has a similar back story to them, who maybe isn’t 50 years older than them, maybe 15, 10 years older than them, who is really out there doing it.’ The industry evolves so quickly, too. Someone like Siobhan can ‘help a young singer understand what an active career looks like now’.

Always thinking that she would pursue other artistic endeavours alongside her singing, Alexandra didn’t do this earlier, worrying it would distract her from performing. Ironically, Alexandra believes she is singing better than ever and having more success than ever, which she attributes to reducing a possibly unhealthy myopic focus on performing alone. She is more relaxed. ‘I think fear was holding me back, and yet everything in my life is better because I started this festival.’

When I suggest to Alexandra that, in bringing her experience, talent and passion back home to enrich Australia’s musical life, she is emulating the entrepreneurial spirit of Dame Nellie Melba herself, she ‘feels very flattered’ to be compared with her illustrious forbear. (Coincidentally, she has just reread Ann Blainey’s biography *I am Melba*.) And the festival itself is a wonderful example of the entrepreneurial spirit that Melba’s, and Melba Opera Trust’s, philosophy of ‘more than a voice’ exemplifies. Alexandra agrees her thirst to broaden her artistic and professional endeavours will probably see her come ‘home’ more often. And after her debut at Sydney Opera House, she knows now more than ever that ‘there is nothing like an Australian public. There is a warmth that I get from home audiences which is incomparable with anything else I get elsewhere ... I feel like my heart needs that!’

And the festival itself is a wonderful example of the entrepreneurial spirit that Melba’s, and Melba Opera Trust’s, philosophy of ‘more than a voice’ exemplifies.

The Queensland Art Song Festival starts on Monday 5 August and runs until Thursday 8 August.

To learn more visit:
www.queenslandartsongfestival.com

Michael Bertram: a legacy

Australian composer and former Chair of Melba Conservatorium of Music Michael Bertram has left a lasting legacy, establishing an Award in his will to support contemporary classical vocal composition and performance. Bruce Raggatt spoke with Michael Bertram’s son Nigel and daughter Alex to discuss their father’s life and his music, and how these have combined to inspire his impactful bequest to Melba Opera Trust.

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT

Michael Bertram’s English childhood was complicated. Although his adoptive mother was industrious, starting several businesses, life remained precarious. There was never really any money to speak of and, not owning anything, they moved a lot. Whether she acquired a piano or there just happened to be an instrument in one of the houses they lived in is unclear. Either way, Michael started playing piano at the age of four, encouraged strongly by his mother. And, with this exposure to music – a rare chance under the circumstances – his considerable talent soon emerged. Lessons followed at school and the young boy managed to earn a place at the Lichfield Cathedral Choir School aged eight.

‘In those early years his mother played a crucial role in moving heaven and earth to allow him to get access to lessons. It really was a big sacrifice.’ Alex reflects that, perhaps like many of us, Michael didn’t necessarily understand or appreciate parental sacrifice at the time, but he certainly reflected later in his life on what his mother had done for him.

Michael qualified for a scholarship to study piano at the Royal College of Music in London when he was 13. Unfortunately, the financial situation being what it was, he was never able to take it up.

When Michael, his mother and her partner emigrated to Perth, Australia four years later, the young pianist knew he would need to support himself. And, as it turned out, his family, too. Not wanting to be ‘Ten Pound Poms’, they paid for their passage, but there were no jobs lined up. Michael was the first to find work. He also put himself through night school, got a high school certificate and then went to university to get the degrees that would make him employable. After only a year or so, his mother and her partner returned to England, never quite adapting to the new country. (The family story goes that they couldn’t believe a place where the children didn’t wear shoes to school.) Michael, however, knew Australia was his chance to make a new life and ‘there was no way he would return’.

Moving eventually to Melbourne, Michael worked, perhaps in a reaction to his earlier life, as an accountant. Pragmatic and efficient, he worked during the day, composing only at night or on weekends, his musical career ‘going at a sort of after-work kind of pace’. It was his private world. He was forever playing music and composing. Nigel believes his father realised earning your living through composition was ‘a very elite thing to do and a very hard thing to do, but of course a fantastic thing to do.’ His circumstances didn’t allow it.

Michael’s young family were always surrounded by music. He taught Alex the piano for a while before, as Nigel recalls with a chuckle, everyone realised that might not be a good idea. Alex says, ‘it is always tricky when your father teaches you piano!’ It is a bit like driving lessons. Nigel was determined *not* to learn the piano, choosing trumpet instead. They remember their father’s playing of Chopin, Bach, Schubert and Rachmaninov echoing

throughout the house. Their father would also play his own music, including quirky touches like putting ping pongs in the piano. ‘We just thought it was weird!’ Nigel laughs, but adding, ‘it was a musical household that he made, that he wanted’. Alex concurs. ‘A lovely memory I have now that dad has passed, is the sound, every time I play some Chopin or Bach or whatever, it is like he’s instantly in the room because every evening our house would be filled with those sounds ... he would always be composing music for our family, it made it a very joyful childhood for us.’

Knowing that the competition to be a concert pianist was intense and required 100% commitment, in the 1970s Michael chose to shift his energies from performing to composing. And so it was at this time that he started to write more notable pieces. However, it was not until retirement in 1995 that Michael could devote himself entirely to composition.

Impressed by the labour of composing, Nigel vividly recalls his father working things out with a pencil, playing and then writing, then playing and writing again, meticulously recording his complex notation. Like any creative process it is hard work to get it right. Then, at the end, his father would produce these beautiful sheets of paper, sent off to the printers to be turned into sheet music. Her father’s methodical approach and organisation made an indelible impression upon Alex, too, everything perfectly lined up on his meticulous desk. She says, ‘we have all been trying to recreate his desk in our minds ever since!’ and Nigel adds, laughing, ‘it wasn’t like a crazy bohemian studio!’

A special friendship, born out of musical collaboration, Nigel remembers how his father prized his working relationship with Australian



L-R: Alex, Nigel, Michael and Wendy Bertram.



Michael Bertram with Michael Kieran Harvey.

pianist Michael Kieran Harvey. Michael relished the process of getting feedback from Harvey about the playability of this writing, what worked and how things could be finessed. This was a critical part of composing perhaps his most significant work, the Fantasie Sonata for solo piano.

Michael drew upon his finance management skills, volunteering to help Musica Viva and ANAM. Fittingly, Michael became Chair of the Melba Conservatorium, guiding the organisation for several years, not long before it became Melba Opera Trust. Aligned with Melba’s philosophy, Michael believed that ‘the skills you need are so much more than just those of the craft’.

The Michael Bertram Composition Award was created through Michael’s will. To be awarded every two years, the Award provides a sum of money for the commissioning or performing of new vocal works. The annual income returned from the invested corpus of funds will ensure the Award in perpetuity.

The inaugural call for applicants is set to be late in 2025 and the selection panel will comprise Australian composition luminaries and Michael’s peers.

‘It’s a generous gift that has a double impact’, says Melba CEO Amy Black. ‘Michael’s vision secures a pathway for contemporary vocal composition and at the same time enables Melba to be more of a participant in encouraging new Australian works.’

The first composition will be workshopped and premiered by artists in the Melba Program. ‘This will be a unique opportunity for our artists to be involved in the creative process with the composer. Preparing contemporary music is a specialised area and will add an exciting new layer to the Melba Program.’ And it echoes Michael’s own collaborative relationship with Michael Kieran Harvey.

When I ask her what she thinks would have motivated her father to set up this Award, Alex says ‘he wanted to give an opportunity to people that he didn’t have himself.’ It would have been his dream to give that to people because he struggled so hard to balance his professional life with his creative life. ‘It was a beautiful thing to have done. I am really proud of him.’

‘A lovely memory I have now that dad has passed, is the sound, every time I play some Chopin or Bach or whatever, it is like he’s instantly in the room because every evening our house would be filled with those sounds ...’

Alex Bertram

Melba’s Will Learning about legacy

On Friday 1 August Melba is hosting a casual information morning to learn more about including charitable giving in estate planning.

JBWere’s John McLeod will share valuable insights on current trends and structures in philanthropy, whilst renowned lawyer and estate planner Tony Kelly will be available to answer questions on the process.

Guests will also enjoy a short performance from current Melba Artists and refreshments with the speakers.

To register your attendance please contact Catherine McElhone 03 9944 2100 / cmcelhone@melbaoperatrust.com.au

The Salon Series



A new partnership between Melba Opera Trust and National Trust of Australia (Victoria) is bringing young voices to historic spaces. The 2024 Salon Series draws audiences into the halls and ballrooms of heritage sites around Melbourne, showcasing the operatic talent of Melba Artists in intimate settings.

An extension of our Performance Program, these ticketed events are open to the public, inviting new and familiar audiences alike to hear Melba Artists perform and to meet them over afternoon tea or evening drinks.

The Salon Series launched in April with a performance at Pentridge Prison in Coburg, Melbourne, featuring Jesse Linke, Syrah Torii and Stephen Marsh accompanied by Sharolyn Kimmorley AM.

The dramatic backdrop of hard walls and floors created rich acoustics for classical voices to fill the space with music. Non-traditional settings ‘can be challenging because it puts us out of our comfort zone’, explains Jesse. ‘As opera singers, we tend

to be very comfortable in a theatre with a perfect stage. With spaces like this . . . that’s more daunting. But it’s exciting because you get to experiment a little bit more.’

The program, under the stage direction of Stuart Maunder AM, utilised the cells, walkways and the distinctive H-division staircase, offering audiences a unique and immersive experience. Audience participation added to the fun, and a highlight was undoubtedly hearing the *Lakmé* Flower Duet, floating down to the audience from the upstairs gallery.

The experience ‘breaks the traditional idea of what people’s perspectives of what opera, opera galas or opera concerts are’, says Jesse.

This performance and the upcoming events highlight the link between Melba Opera Trust and National Trust of Australia (Victoria). ‘We’re thrilled to be partnering with NTAV to deliver this Salon Series’, says Melba CEO Amy Black. ‘It’s such a natural fit: bringing an age-old artform back into stunning venues of another era.’



Upcoming

Saturday 27 July
Labassa Mansion, Caulfield
1pm and 3pm
Performance and afternoon tea with the artists

Friday 13 December
Como House, South Yarra
Evening, time TBC
Performance and meet the artists

Find out more
www.melbaoperatrust.com.au/melba_events/2024-salon-series/



Images: David Ng



Thank You

At Melba Opera Trust, we acknowledge the cumulative giving of donors since our launch in 2008.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who has supported our artists and we proudly note the generosity of those who have given within the past two years.

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Your support helps us to deliver world-class training today and to build an endowment for tomorrow. Together, we are creating a precious pathway for Australia's next generation of opera greats.

To make a tax-deductible donation or discuss leaving a gift in your will please contact Catherine McElhone, Philanthropy Manager, on (03) 9944 2100 or visit melbaoperatrust.com.au/support

