

THE MELBA

MAGAZINE OF MELBA OPERA TRUST

Edition 23 Spring 2020

2020 ARTIST INSIGHTS
A NEW DIRECTOR FOR MELBA
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS ON COVID-19

Melba

Contents

Page 2
Note from the Acting CEO
A new director for Melba

Page 3
Letter from London

Page 4-5
Emilia Bertolini, Chloe Harris and Louis Hurley

Crisis to resilience:
artist wellbeing

Page 6-7
Rebecca Hart and Su Choung
Maintaining mental health

Is performance possible
beyond venues?

Branching out

Page 8-9
Georgia Melville and
Nathan Bryon
Port in a pandemic storm
Strengthening community
connection

Page 10
The inside word

Page 11
Guildhall: virtual opera
production

Page 12
A centenary celebration

About Melba Opera Trust

Melba Opera Trust is Australia's premier scholarship program for promising young opera singers and repetiteurs.

Driven by Dame Nellie Melba's conviction "a beautiful voice is not enough", the program nurtures artistic development alongside business training, mentoring and performance experience. We are the next step for artists preparing to become professionals on the world stage.

Inspiring Excellence
Realising Potential
Forging Careers

Cover image

Stacey Alleaume (2010 and 2012) at Opera in the Bowl, Sidney Myer Music Bowl, 29 November 2019. Image: James Thomas Photography

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Note from the Acting Chief Executive Officer

This pandemic year has tested us all in different ways, challenging how we approach our daily life with family and friends, at work and how we connect with each other.

That said, to focus on the positive aspects of the year at Melba, disruption has afforded opportunity to rethink, adapt quickly and engage flexibly to put us in a good position going forward. This year we have continued presentation of a high-quality program for the 2020 Melba Artists, with bonus sessions from mentors in the opera industry around the world, thanks to sudden schedule availability.

In response to the pandemic, we are putting new policies in place to be ready for in-person activity in a COVID-responsible way when we can, and online when we can't. Governance structures have been reviewed to set up stronger support for our artist community worldwide, underpinned by communications that aim to bring the inner workings at Melba Opera



Olivia Giglia

Trust to you virtually in lieu of the usual event schedule. And we have a special announcement below.

Sustaining us through change has been the Melba's endowment structure, which means that every donation you make works in two

ways: to build the endowment towards an enduring future and to ensure ongoing program delivery to our artists. To that end, the breadth of program we can offer artists annually is directly impacted by the level of investment available from year to year. If you are in a financial position to give within our current environment, we thank you, we value your ongoing support and will continue directing your gift to benefit the artists.

In this reflective edition of *The Melba* you will recognise a strong focus on wellbeing, which has become a cornerstone of the Melba Program recently, as we focus on holistic artist development. Never has it been called on more than this year. Also, as we stand resolutely with our fellow arts organisations who are suffering terribly at the hands of closed venues and cancelled seasons, we're grateful for their insights on what might come next for live connection to audiences in COVID-safe ways. In addition

to updates from this year's artists by way of conversation with Melba Program mentor Graham Abbott, some of our alumni share their stories from around the world, including a wonderful fly-on-the-wall conversation between lockdown flatmates Zoe Drummond and Shakira Tsindos. My thanks to all the contributors to this edition.

As we head towards the end of a most extraordinary year, I thank everyone in the Melba community for continuing to champion our work for artists; to the artists themselves who have shown impressive focus and dedication, their mentors, incredible alumni, generous donors, company members, board and staff. It has been a privilege to serve you all as Acting CEO and I look forward to working alongside Amy Black on her return to the CEO seat, and with you, for our Melba Artists and their future.

Olivia Giglia
Acting Chief Executive Officer

A new director for Melba

Siobhan Stagg is more than a powerful voice for the stage. The soprano – rapidly establishing her name in the world of opera – has also become a voice for the future of her artform.

Siobhan was appointed as a director of the board for Melba Opera Trust this month. It signals her return to the organisation in a leadership capacity, having built a decade-long relationship with Melba since her early scholarship days.

"Melba's mission and values align closely with my own, and it's an honour to be the first alumna to serve on the board of directors," Siobhan says.

Siobhan is Melba's first international board appointment. It's a significant move that will provide an opportunity for the Trust – and consequently, for Australia's young singers – to expand their audience and industry connections on a global scale.

"As my career has expanded across Europe, the United States, United Kingdom and Asia, I've witnessed differing approaches while remaining firmly connected to my roots in the Australian cultural landscape," Siobhan says.

"As the scholarship program goes from strength to strength, we'll continue to expand the Trust's reach so that Dame Nellie's message and Australia's talent can continue to thrive both nationally and abroad."

Siobhan has no plans to stop performing, either. And her diverse portfolio career is testament to her ability to do it all – and do it very, very well.

"I see it less as shifting focus, and more as expanding my contribution towards longer-term visions for the arts sector as a whole," Siobhan says of moving into her new role.

"I believe in fostering more collaborative dialogue between artists and those working behind the scenes. We sometimes see the world through different lenses, but are serving the same goal."

Siobhan's perspective is informed by a wealth of experience. One of her earliest accomplishments was in 2009, when she became the inaugural recipient of a scholarship under the newly created Melba Opera Trust, following the closure of the Melba Conservatorium of Music. Siobhan held the Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship with Melba Opera Trust for four years, spanning much of her time studying music at the University of Melbourne.

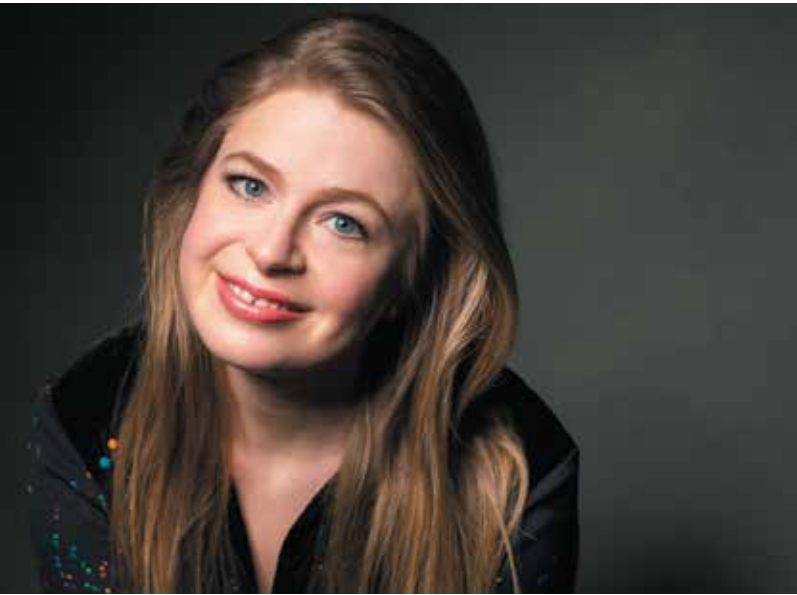
In the years that followed, Siobhan undertook advanced vocal training at the University of Wales Trinity St David on a full scholarship as winner of the 2012 Australian International Opera Award. Beyond her studies and awards, she has a string of performance credits to her name – notably as principal in performances at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, and with the Deutsche Oper Berlin.

"Most of us fall in love with music because of how it makes us feel, but when it becomes your livelihood, being a performer is a lot like running a business," Siobhan has learnt.

"Success is dependent on the consistent quality of your work and the strength of your relationships."

Siobhan has nurtured her relationship with the Trust since her scholarship: "To this day, I still draw upon the lessons I learnt during those years."

Having so successfully applied those lessons to her international performance career, Siobhan has



Siobhan Stagg joins the board of Melba Opera Trust. Image: Todd Rosenberg

"Melba's mission and values align closely with my own, and it's an honour to be the first alumna to serve on the board of directors."

a growing interest in the structures that support the performing arts, namely governance and arts management. She recently strengthened her understanding by participating in Opera Europa's Opera Management Course and the League of American Orchestras' National Conference.

"Being on any arts board is about serving the mission of the organisation. I'll be bringing my artistic perspectives to the table, and contributing from my first-hand experience in performance, community engagement and fundraising."

Through her appointment, Siobhan hopes to introduce young audiences to this artform – continuing her valued and ongoing contributions to the organisation's Melba Program.

"As humans, we have a tendency to gravitate towards things that are familiar to us. So it's important to give young people ample opportunity to engage with classical music in a meaningful way," Siobhan says.

For Siobhan, opera is a sustaining art form that everyone can enjoy, regardless of their age. It can empower its listeners to develop "self-expression, critical analysis, and most importantly, empathy". This might be why Siobhan is so deeply involved in her art: even when she's off-stage, she's always listening.

"Hearing live music and opera is a constant inspiration; it nourishes me, challenges me, and recharges my energy. My wish is for everyone's lives to be enriched by music in this way."

Letter from London: Zoe and Shakira

It has been a month since they left their flat in Hampstead, north of London but, after 20 weeks of lockdown and isolation together, Zoe Drummond (2015–2017) and Shakira Tsindos (2016) still have plenty to talk about.

Shakira: In the first week of March, one case hit home: a Guildhall School of Music & Drama teacher tested positive. I hadn't been exposed, but people in direct contact had to go into quarantine and the school was closed while everything was properly cleaned. I remember a celebration at having some time off school! Then three weeks later, London was much worse, and friends started to flee the country. We had conversations in the corridors... 'Are you staying?' I considered going home, but as I was nearing the end of my degree, I thought if I went home there was a strong chance I would never return.

I was working part time at Wigmore Hall, one of the best concert venues in the world. On 16 March, Wigmore officially closed, and Guildhall announced there would be no more face to face classes. To top it, off my final performances of *Don Giovanni*, scheduled for the following weekend, were cancelled.

Since I lived by myself, I was very unsure about how to spend this possible lockdown time. I asked some of my friends if I could stay with them. Then when you messaged me with 'I don't know, but I have a feeling that things are going to be cancelled. Can I stay with you?' I was like 'YES'!

Zoe: Yes, from messaging to moving in was only two days! I remember first hearing about coronavirus on tour with Scottish Opera on the Shetland Islands. Although we felt extremely remote, we started making changes to our show in order to keep ourselves and our audience safe. One of the things to go was the 'Feedback Tree'. After each show we would have photos taken, shake people's hands and interact with the audience. It was something that we all enjoyed. Then, for our last show in Rutherglen, we added in small things like rubbing elbows instead of shaking hands.

Shakira: Your show really showed the evolution of the pandemic.

Zoe: Definitely, our show changed as the world was changing. Two days after the Rutherglen show, I began a new contract with Scottish Opera: covering Tytania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I watched the final rehearsal with the full production team, children's chorus, the leads, musicians and Scottish Opera staff. The performers were still standing on the marked-up flooring, exhausted and exhilarated from running the show, when the General Director of Scottish Opera Alex Reedijk said 'Well done everybody, this is such a stunning show. It is heartbreaking to say this, but we don't think it will be able to continue.' We all went home,



Socially distanced production of *Cosi fan tutte* at the Waterperry Opera Festival. Image: Robert Workman

knowing that the gorgeous opera we had just experienced would not reach a theatre.

Shakira: So sad. So, you had 48 hours to pack up your belongings and buy a ticket to me!

Zoe: Yep! I felt like the manner in which your contracts and mine were cancelled affected our grieving and made us out of sync with each other. It wasn't like we were on different pages ... it was more that we were mourning for our industry at different points in the lockdown.

Shakira: For me, the last contract cancelled was *Carmen* in France and England where I was singing the title role. The English tour cancelled early, but the French tour cancelled late. It was so difficult to find the motivation to prepare a role that you know will be cancelled; this limbo can affect your mental and musical preparation. The more effort and time you put in, the more devastated you are when it is cancelled. I couldn't imagine if they had said on 30 June: "Okay, in 3 weeks time, you will sing *Carmen* in France in French to French people'. But I knew in my gut it would be cancelled.

The first two weeks of lockdown, between 19 March and 2 April, felt like a novelty. I have lived a very busy and stressful singer life; to have two weeks of nothing was amazing. I have never had guilt-free time off like that. The whole world shut down. For the first time, I didn't have to look forward. I lived in the present.

Zoe: At the beginning it felt like an extended sleepover, where my make-up and jeans were pushed to the back of my cupboard. Having just come off the tour I was quite exhausted, so I appreciated the time off.

Shakira: I had lived in this flat for a year and a half, but I rarely sang there. I think my neighbours knew a young opera singer was living there, but they wouldn't have heard me. So, when you moved in and I found out there would be daily online singing classes, we wrote our neighbours a note. It meant we

could feel free to sing and that if anyone had a problem with it, they could drop us a message.

Zoe: Yeah exactly. Also knowing that everybody else around us were probably working from home too, it just felt better to acknowledge the fact that we are loud! Even we had to have very clear communication between us and be open when asking to book the 'sound space' between certain times.

Shakira: Living together was so easy. We understood each other's journey. Then there was that creature comfort thing ... for example, being able to talk in Australian slang. We had a socially distanced picnic with an American friend and she kept stopping us to clarify what we were saying!

Zoe: It was around mid-April when I started feeling unproductive. I felt I needed to be moving forward in my life. I was really over that honeymoon stage!

Shakira: We had always wanted to do a video together and had talked about how *Hansel and Gretel* would be a great pairing for our voices. So, when Melba helped us make a video for my patron Mary-Jane Gething, we thought it was the perfect piece. Particularly

since our flat was surrounded by such beautiful gardens – it was a forest setting just on our doorstep.

Did you pick up any new skills or hobbies?

Zoe: I think I am most proud of my German language study. I had two and a half months of pretty intense self-driven learning. I would listen to an hour of German radio and catch up on the news, then I would record my own German video diary. I did that for 36 days consecutively, which is the biggest daily streak I've ever had!

Shakira: My big milestone is launching my design business, Fare Designs. For the last 7 years I have been designing websites for companies, but not until now have I made it official.

Zoe: By August we reached the end of our time together. Amazingly, Waterperry Opera Festival decided to put on one of the first live opera productions in the UK since the outbreak: *Cosi fan tutte*. I sang Despina and fellow Melba Damian Arnold was Ferrando. I moved out and went to the Waterperry mansions near Oxford.

Shakira: It felt like we had experienced something that will

never happen again. We gelled together so well, and we actually had a wonderful summer doing our thing and making the most of this weird time. I finished my degree, left my flat and left you – it all felt like a bit much! It was sad for it to an end. To try and house hunt during a pandemic was really difficult. I had to take the tube for the first time in 6 months which was very scary. I went to 8 open houses in one day to minimise the travel – luckily house number 8 was the one!

Zoe: I have contracts booked for a considerable chunk of 2021 and quite a few projects that have been postponed, but not officially rescheduled. I am going to continue teaching English online, keep singing, running, cooking, Skyping – Lockdown: the winter edition!

Shakira: Yes, I am exactly the same. My next lot of work is in June 2021. I am working back at Wigmore Hall for the time being. What has been amazing has been sitting in the Hall listening to live music and watching the audience experience it again. To see their faces and the standing ovations – some even in tears! – there is an overwhelming sense of appreciation that we'll be okay.



above Shakira and Zoe created a music video of 'Brother come dance with me' from *Hansel and Gretel* by Humperdinck as a thank you for patron Mary-Jane Gething top right Zoe in *Cosi fan tutte* for Waterperry Opera Festival in August bottom right Shakira back at work, at Wigmore Hall



Emilia Bertolini

Soprano

John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship
Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship

Slow down

Like all Melburnians, soprano Emilia Bertolini has found the strict lockdowns of the pandemic a challenging experience, but ultimately, she's developed a philosophical approach to underpin her method of dealing with these strange times. "Initially it was painful, but what can you do? I've learned to focus on what you can change and know what you can't."

The great motivation for any performing artist – performance – has been removed, so in its place Emilia has actively sought to find new reasons and new motivations for doing what she does. She found it important early on in the lockdown to create a structure for each day and for her work. This has involved a determined effort to slow down, which seems an odd thing to say. In being forced to slow down by circumstances, why the need to work at it?

Emilia's approach to slowing down has been connected with her work. Now that she has time – more than she'd ever anticipated – it's an ideal opportunity to use that time when she's learning new repertoire to look for more in the text, seek out deeper ways to present the music effectively and weigh up all the options available to an artist. She's developed a greater desire to look into herself as a performer, almost to be her own teacher, to find solutions that she might otherwise have depended on others to diagnose and fix.

Emilia is very conscious that her expectations of herself have changed as a result of the lockdown. In recording herself singing, and watching video of herself singing, she's found that she's become aware of aspects of her performance that she wants to address. This might include musical details, or issues with text, or physical mannerisms she might have been unaware of. The isolation has led her to conduct "self-master classes", and while the process may at times be tough, the end result is that she is able to work solidly on improving her skills as a performer. Without the lockdown she feels she would have been more likely to depend on others to give her this feedback; now she sees it as one of the things for which she can take greater responsibility. She is consciously working to develop her self-discipline.

Like all of us, Emilia has found the mental challenges of isolation easier some days, tougher on others. To deal with them, she and her partner Cameron now rise early and go for a run as part of a daily routine which helps give her day a better structure. Walking is important, as is cooking, to help focus her mind and give practical ways of dealing with unstructured time.

Emilia has also become an avid listener to podcasts on a wide range of subjects. One of these, on German conversation, has a direct connection with her opera studies. But without a doubt, the Melba Program has been a lifeline, and something for which Emilia is incredibly grateful.



Fi Mims Photography

Chloe Harris

Mezzo-soprano

Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship
Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship

Good from bad

A pandemic provides unprecedented – and often unwelcome – opportunities for personal reflection.

Mezzo-soprano Chloe Harris has certainly felt this in recent months, but she's made a conscious effort to find positives in the loss of performance opportunities and forced isolation.

Chloe feels that resilience has been her greatest asset during this year and that, despite the cancellation of work and the loss of in-person interaction with mentors and colleagues, she's managed to make something good out of a bad situation. Pivotal to

this has been the development of a daily structure, giving her a focus and something to strive for.

Apart from learning new roles and arias, she's increased her focus on language study. Even before the lockdowns, languages were going to be a focus for Chloe, as she felt this was an area in her skill base which needed more attention. Aided by continued help from Melba Opera Trust's language coaches online, this is an area in which she feels she's made real progress.

With so many performing artists suffering cancellations, financial loss and an uncertain future in the longer term, counsellors and life coaches who work with creative people have been at the frontline of offering support and guidance this year.

They have witnessed a broad range of challenging emotions among clients – fear, grief and anxiety – yet their work has been crucial in offering significant resources to instil a sense of hope and to foster positive action.

As has been well-documented in the news media, Australia's multibillion-dollar arts sector has been cruelly devastated by the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Estimates of job losses have been as high as 75 per cent in the performing arts, with federal government rescue packages generally seen by arts observers as offering too little and coming too late.

Yet federal government statistics show the creative arts sector contributed around \$111 billion to the nation's economy in 2018, making it a significant contributor to GDP (6.4 per cent) – about six times larger, for example, than the aviation industry. And a recent Australia Council of the Arts survey found that Australians have a vital and growing relationship with arts and culture. This entails a sustained engagement, especially in the performing arts: two-thirds of Australians attended live performances in 2019, the survey showed.

Sydney-based counsellor and life coach Monica O'Brien has found herself at the centre of helping many performing artists affected by the pandemic, while London-based creative performance coach Jacqueline Branson Thom has faced a similar environment, working with artists navigating their way through closures and disruptions in the UK and Europe.

Monica, who this year continued conducting her popular wellness

workshops with Melba Artists, says she has also been working with young artists via her Creative Edge Coaching practice and receiving feedback informally via Creativity Unleashed!, a Facebook group for creatives.

Because the majority of her work is now conducted online, Monica has attracted a steady flow of clients who have used the downtime of lockdown restrictions to develop their self-mastery skills, creative career or business. Many, though, have also struggled with feeling lost without the structure of their creative work, fearing they will lose ground on what they have worked hard to achieve.

Clients have expressed chronic anxiety, and this has been exacerbated by them not receiving financial benefits because of their casual work status. "Some have lost their ability to live independently and have had reluctantly to move back in with parents or family members," Monica says. "They cannot see an immediate solution to their loss of income. Performances have been cancelled and there is real fear about how they will regain lost months in honing their performance skills and developing their talents."

Suggestions to help with all this have included mindfulness practices and developing a robust mindset and appropriate behaviour which aligns with their personal and professional outcomes and goals. "I have encouraged young artists to maintain a regular schedule that supports their overall wellbeing such as exercise, nutrition and adequate sleep, and to make sure they allocate time each day



Chloe Harris studying Italian during lockdown



The new normal walking accessory, worn by Emilia and her partner, Cameron

for building their professional skills and competencies such as regular practice and learning languages, for example," Monica says. "Managing time appears to be a challenge for most of the young people that I have coached or spoken with ... I often hear 'What's the point?' The most challenging part of this pandemic is that artists cannot envisage a future. Many do not have deadlines to work toward and it is easy to fall into the habit of procrastination or to lack motivation or a sense of purpose."

Monica encourages self-regulation and hooking into peer communities and networks in order to create optimum environments to thrive and stay focussed during this time. But she also emphasises the value of older mentors, who can play



Nathan Bryon's one-on-one session with Italian and French diction coach, Teresa Desmarchelier

a vital role in encouraging young artists. "I believe this is a golden opportunity to explore new ways of supporting young artists by opening up avenues for them to communicate with each other and with other adults."

Jacqueline's work was already largely conducted online, but unsurprisingly it has increased with the pandemic. She has continued to work with the artists



Rebecca Hart on one of her many walking expeditions around NSW during lockdown

Conversation with Graham Abbott

to Music on ABC Classic FM from 2003 to 2017. He is also an accomplished conductor. c in a recital or concert setting and gives them insights on how to deal with the media. ons with each of the 2020 Melba Artists to share their year with you.

Chloe has encountered some unexpected hurdles during the pandemic, though. "I'm very driven by performing. I love that adrenalin rush on stage." To have this stimulus removed meant some of her personal drive as an artist was also missing. She found it hard to be comfortable – and thrive – in the practice room. But over recent months she's come to find within herself a means of making private practice and long-distance coaching an exciting experience. And

this process has led to some surprising discoveries, such as how tough it is to sing without accompaniment, and just how strange it felt when she had the opportunity actually to be in the same room as a pianist once more.

Before the lockdown Chloe taught preschool children in the Mini Maestros program. Losing this job was quite a blow as it had provided a means for her to express her creative side. Forced isolation has given her

unexpected opportunities to explore other creative pursuits, though. Cooking has become a way to relax and, like many of us, she's rediscovered the simple joys of reading and walking.

Completely out of left field ("It's so unlike me") has been her new-found involvement in painting. She's found it exciting to discover a new way to move beyond stick figures!

Taking a more philosophical tone, Chloe believes firmly that despite

the difficulty of the pandemic, and all the challenges and curve balls it has thrown, opera is definitely what she wants to do. She is as keen as ever to audition for international opera programs and is grateful to the Melba Program for helping her realise that many different paths can lead to one's goal. The lockdowns have actually given her the chance to do more detailed work on her craft than she may otherwise have done, and in her own words: "There is nothing else I want to do."



Fi Mims Photography

Louis Hurley Tenor

Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship

More practice than ever

A couple of weeks into the initial lockdown period, tenor Louis Hurley realised he needed to step up to the challenge. "It's amazing just how easy it is to lose a day." He realised a schedule was needed, some sort of structure, to give him achievable goals and new challenges. And these didn't always involve singing.

Louis has made a concerted effort to practise, which means practising the extensive technical work and vocal exercises required of singers, the very things which can all too easily slip by the wayside under the pressure of learning repertoire for performances. With performances cancelled, the focus on practice – of developing the instrument itself – has become much more important.

In fact, he regards the lockdowns as a blessing in disguise. "Now I'm so much further down the track to being the artist I want to be," because of the pandemic, rather than despite it. Louis understands, as do all artists, that when you're busy your goal is usually your next performance. But the removal of performance goals has revealed something very special to Louis about singing: "I do it because I love it."

Louis's non-musical challenge in recent months has been related to fitness. While undertaking walks early on in the lockdown period, he remembered that at school he was a runner, so he started running again. Now it's an indispensable part of his routine, and he's been amazed that his speed and times have improved mostly without him realising it. He sees a clear parallel with singing: the results can be improving even if we're not always aware of it.

Like his Melba Opera Trust colleagues, Louis has come to a new appreciation of time as a result of the pandemic restrictions. While the litany of cancellations was rough at first, eventually they became a sort of 'normal'. Moving beyond this, he now sees the removal of performances for the time being as a removal of pressure, enabling him to focus more deeply on his craft, to study and to learn things he would otherwise not be able to. Like his colleagues, he has turned it into a positive.

While "singing more than ever" right now, one of Louis's musical focuses has been to reacquaint himself with art song, a genre he has always loved but which has taken a backseat recently due to his focus on opera in the Melba Program. Art song requires the most delicate touch, focused study and intelligent performance; no time spent on it by a singer is ever wasted. Louis has found this branch of study to be both vocally and mentally stimulating.

So, despite the challenges and the disappointments, Louis most definitely feels that he has stayed on track in recent months. He cites the extraordinary support of the Melba Opera Trust benefactor behind his Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship, Professor Mary-Jane Gething, the teachers and mentors, and especially his fellow artists, in making this possible.

artist wellbeing



Georgia Melville after her first virtual singing competition, the German-Australian Opera Grant



A coffee and a stroll through The Tan is a daily activity for Louis Hurley

on the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at The Royal Opera, the Harewood Artists at English National Opera, some individuals funded by the UK charity Help for Musicians and many other singers at various stages of their career.

Many of her sessions have been around the stress the current situation brings. "Fear of the virus itself, being trapped away from loved ones, sense of loss of freedom and dealing with uncertainty, which of course was always the truth – it was



A typical set-up for Su's practice sessions

just masked by a delusion of certainty."

Even so, Jacqueline says many have discovered gifts amid the situation – time to assimilate material that otherwise can be overwhelming under the pressures of the singing profession; deeply learning new roles; managing their inner life "internally rather than through external factors"; and generally finding new patterns of self-nurturing and inner fulfilment rather than seeking outside approval.

"The mix of responses physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually has been very varied," Jacqueline says. "Some people have really struggled, particularly in the time of strict lockdown, with a few singers who were too



left The silver-linings of home study for 2020 Artist Emilia Bertolini—
below Monica O'Brien and Jacqueline Branson Thom (bottom) are both mentors in the Melba Program

late to get back to their home countries ending up stuck alone in a city room. Others have found it challenging to spend 24/7 with partners when they are accustomed to shorter periods of intense time with each other, while one or both of them are travelling around the world for their singing performances.

"A lot of people have felt rather rudderless and at the mercy of the continued change of timeframe. Watching contracts and performances fall away left people rather hopeless and there are people who have questioned the whole lifestyle." Yet the hunger to perform and connect has brought inspiring stories. Jacqueline reports that one international singer who had performed lead roles at The Met and Royal Opera House had decided to sing regularly from her doorstep for the neighbours, while another singer set up small concerts with international players and singers in a park.

"And a couple of people I work with have chosen to take a year out and have applied for jobs in completely different industries – one in the tech industry and one very established singer who is learning to take blood and do COVID-19 tests until theatres open again." Another, a Jette Parker graduate, became a hospital porter, working on the frontline in difficult conditions.

"Some of the young artists I work with have come from countries where these challenges are not new and it is interesting to see how resilient and how positive they can be. They have practised many years of working and hoping, with no evidence of possibilities."

One of the best ways to handle this situation is in finding the joy in the physical act of singing, which releases endorphins and serotonin, and allows the imagination to flourish. "I am encouraging people to find their way in the moment, of what they can do rather than what they can't do," Jacqueline says. "And how to make the most of this time. It's the time for faith in the sense of doing what you do because you love it."





Rebecca Hart
Mezzo-soprano
 Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship
 Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship
 Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award

A time to learn
 A performing artist is always required to give of themselves, and when that artist is a singer, the self – both body and mind – is paramount. Mezzo-soprano Rebecca Hart has faced the challenges of the pandemic with a deeper understanding of the importance of self-care. “When I’m in a good space I can give more of myself to the music,” is how she puts it, and yet the early stages of the lockdowns certainly challenged this frame of mind.

Rebecca confesses that she found it hard at first to find the motivation to learn new material without the chance of a performance at the end of the process. Instead, singing became lonely, when it used to be so social.

But determined to move beyond this very natural reaction, she set up parameters to make the experience a positive one. Even without a performance in the diary, it’s still good to learn new repertoire to have ready for performances in the future. And when she sings, she imagines the audience, imagines the possibilities the music will present in the future. It’s an investment, and it has worked. “I’m always one to find positives,” and positives she has certainly found.

Rebecca is the first to admit that her focus has been sharpened by the prospect of moving to London to start work in the Guildhall School of Music & Drama Master’s program in September. (This interview took place only a few days before her departure.) Of course, federal government restrictions meant that she wasn’t sure that she’d be allowed to go, and once that permission came through, preparations for London (such as finding accommodation) were uncomfortably last-minute. The program, though, is going ahead and Rebecca is determined to make the most of whatever opportunities she has.

Restrictions and lockdowns in Australia have certainly made her more aware of how easy it is to take for granted what we have. “I can’t tell you how much I miss just being able to sing,” she says, likening the monotonous regularity of crossing things out in the diary to being a form of grief. A focus on what lies ahead in London (“I’m grabbing it with both hands”) has been very therapeutic for her.

Some unexpected redirection of Rebecca’s energies in lockdown has been expressed in cooking. She has aimed to listen to a new song cycle with each new recipe she works on. Desserts, though, are special. “Desserts are quite epic,” and so when making desserts she listens to opera.

Rebecca has been fortunate that, being based in Sydney, she has faced fewer restrictions than have her colleagues in Victoria. This has enabled her to continue in-person coaching sessions. An unexpected bonus of an empty diary has been having the time and freedom to explore music she might not otherwise have considered learning. None of this will be wasted once she is in London, that’s for sure.

Making plans and having an activity to look forward to has worked well for Melba alumni in uncertain times. As Xenia explains, “I have found keeping a clear schedule, planning the week with all I need to do for study and practice, and also other needs (exercise, sleep, breaks!), has truly helped me. The scheduled practice and study are just as important for me as my scheduled walk outside or chat with a friend.”

Similarly, Lauren says: “I enjoyed sticking to a very strict timetable

during the week, as it kept a sense of normality during quite a strange and sad period which could have quite easily become a period of doing nothing. I would try to follow a normal working day at home which would include some singing practice, role study and language work.”

A common theme is the importance of physical wellbeing to overall health. Daniel says of his time in Germany that staying physically healthy has been a priority. He and his partner

Rebecca have been fortunate enough to exercise freely outdoors, taking long walks and hikes.

Likewise, Emily has a deep interest in maintaining and developing her own wellbeing and encouraging these foundations in others. Emily believes a healthy mind, body and spirit is crucial to having a robust creative life. “I feel that to maintain a sense of wellbeing, especially as a performer, one must embody resilience and flexibility in all things.”

Lauren has maintained her always impressive focus on training and personal wellbeing. “[During lockdown] I would wake up most mornings about 6am and either go running around Hyde Park or do a workout video at home.”

For some, being able to exercise with their loved ones was something they came to cherish. Paull-Anthony explains: “This has consisted of walks and bike rides along the Rhein with my husband, which is a luxury as we ordinarily live in different countries.”

Is performance possible

It seems the answer is a resounding yes. Our alumni have coped magnificently in trying times. Here they outline the exciting new opportunities they have explored.

It’s possible Stacey speaks for many when she says, “Like many other artists, performing is what makes me feel whole, and it is a huge part of my identity. However, these unprecedented times have encouraged us to become more innovative and find creative ways to still maintain an online presence.”

Recently, Stacey performed virtually to 900-plus participants on a corporate Zoom call, in which Chris Sebastian (*The Voice*) was also a guest artist; and in April and May she collaborated with Melba alumnus Adam McMillan.

“He is exceptionally talented, and we shared a couple of ‘artists in isolation’ videos of songs, which we recorded individually at home,” Stacey says. “The first song we produced was ‘O Lovely Night’ by Sir Landon Ronald, and it was a tribute to Melba Opera Trust for its tenth anniversary, and to Dame Nellie Melba herself.”

During the period when state borders were open, Stacey travelled to Sydney. “I remember how surreal it felt to walk through a deserted Melbourne airport, to be seated on a socially distanced airplane on the only domestic departure flight scheduled that evening,” she says. Once she arrived, she did an OA | TV (Opera Australia TV) interview with Lyndon Terracini – and performed. “I most certainly did not take the moment of performing together with Tahu Matheson, in person and live, for granted.”

Two alumni, Xenia and Samuel, were caught in Treviso, Italy, at the peak of the pandemic leading to a month in lockdown. Both used the time to solidify areas of technique, language studies, preparing new music and making recordings. On returning to Australia, social distancing had impacted their performances.

Xenia and Samuel have been excited to collaborate with a number of Australian groups

that have found innovative and creative ways to continue making music. The first of these was *Quarantine Così*, which the director of Brisbane City Opera, Chris McNee, mounted with colleagues from the Queensland Conservatorium, putting together what Xenia describes as “a virtual, socially isolated performance” of Mozart’s opera *Così fan tutte*.

“It was a lot of fun but also quite challenging,” Xenia says. “Samuel and I continued our filming and recording while we were escaping back to Australia from Italy. The project was a great success and we had more than 60,000 views on our various platforms.”

Samuel was also invited to perform for Opera Queensland’s An Aria A Day initiative. “I sang and played guitar for this one and had the pleasure of singing one of my favourite songs, ‘Core ‘ngrato’.”

Paull-Anthony currently lives in the artistic hub of Basel, where his neighbours are collaborating to perform locally at a safe distance. He lives right next door to what he describes as one of the city’s most fabulous ateliers housing the Swiss band Les Reines Prochaines. “Do yourself a favour and look them up, they are truly like no other,” he says. “They invited me to do a little neighbourhood concert with them where we alternated between classical and pop music for the afternoon, which the audience loved. With my husband Thom on the piano, and myself and four other singers from Theater Basel, we made music from the roof overlooking the courtyard. It was a remarkable afternoon that was enjoyed by neighbours and a small number of friends.”

In May, Lauren was presented with an incredible and unexpected opportunity: to sing ‘Casta Diva’ from *Norma* in the world premiere of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* – a production by artist Marina Abramović at Munich’s



Daniel Carison, lyric baritone
 Opera Society Vocal Scholarship and Beleura-Tallis Opera Scholarship – 2015
 Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship and Ruskin Opera Award – 2016–17.



Stacey Alleaume, soprano
 Melba Opera Trust Scholarship – 2010
 Amelia Joscelyne Reserve Scholarship and Ruskin Opera Award – 2012



Paull-Anthony Keightley, bass baritone
 Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship – 2018



Lauren Fagan, soprano
 Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship – 2011–12

Bayerische Staatsoper. Opening on 1 September with a live audience of 500 people – hard to imagine in Melbourne, at the height of stage four lockdown at the time – Lauren was thrilled with the enthusiastic response. “It has filled me with hope for the future of opera as all of the tickets sold out in a matter of minutes,” she says. “Whilst I have lost many contracts due to clashes in my calendar, I have now joined this wonderful project which will likely be travelling to many opera houses around the world over the next few years. Being trusted with arguably Callas’ most iconic aria gave me something to focus on

during the lockdown period,” she says. “I had very little experience with bel canto repertoire, so for the past few months I have worked weekly via Facetime from my flat in London with teacher Glenn Winslade and Sharolyn Kimmorley, both in Sydney, to get this aria ready for an audience.

Lauren also performed for Opera Queensland’s An Aria A Day initiative and connected with other Melba alumnus Samuel Sakker with Kiandra Howarth, Filipe Manu and pianist Serge Rybin, to stream a concert for the Melbourne Digital Concert Hall’s High Commission Series, supported by the Tait Memorial Trust.

Emily has moved her performance online too. Recently, she was recording

mental health

ce and positivity to navigate lockdown.

Another strategy for optimum lockdown mental health is engaging in a new hobby. A distraction from the daily news and the pressures of professional life can be essential. Our alumni have found hidden talents in diverse boredom-busters. For example, Samuel has become a gardener, with much success in vegetables and herbs. Stacey has stretched her creative skills to needlework, finding she has an affinity with embroidery, but not so much with knitting! Xenia has

begun drawing and sketching as a much-needed break from the computer screen.

Staying in contact with family, friends and colleagues was identified by all alumni as the key for staying motivated and positive during lockdown. Phone and video calls, writing emails and using social media filled this need, as well as finding ways to connect face to face locally.

As Daniel says: "It is worth mentioning the significance

of company during a period like this. Being so far away from our respective families, both Rebecca and I have been reminded of just how grateful we are to have each other."

Lauren says she has found it vitally important to keep connected to people during this unexpected period, speaking daily to her parents and often to her brother and sister. "I have connected much more with all my musician friends

around the world," she says. "It has brought all of us much closer together as we help and support one another through different challenges which have faced us and continue to face us."

The self-care techniques implemented by our alumni have served them well so far and are possibly examples that could be applied to our own lives to enjoy the same benefits.



Fi Mims Photography

Su Choung Repetiteur

Margaret Schofield Opera Scholarship
Mel & Nina Waters Award

Time, space and growth

Su Choung describes herself as a collaborative pianist, a term which beautifully encapsulates the multiple lives of a pianist who works across many disciplines. Under the guidance of specialists like Sharolyn Kimmorley AM, Su is developing her craft as a repetiteur through coaching and accompanying the singers in the Melba Opera Trust family.

Although pandemic restrictions in Sydney where Su is based have been less stringent, there was a period early on when she confesses to feeling a bit lost. "It's been a bit of a rollercoaster for everyone." She, like most artists, also experienced that stage of feeling guilty for not doing more, even for not doing anything, because of circumstances outside her control.

But despite the difficulties, Su feels that she has learned a vital lesson about herself as a person which connects directly with her work as a musician: the value of time. "I didn't realise how much I was overloading myself with things that weren't really essential to my growth as a repetiteur and as a pianist... It was a great opportunity to step back and realise that I don't love everything that I'm doing."

On the positive side, Su used the short period of lockdown in Sydney to learn new scores and focus more on her repetiteur training. With her new understanding of the value of time, she notices how we are often pressured by our surroundings to use it in ways which make us unhappy. "I'm learning to evaluate what I really want," and the result has been a period of personal growth that she feels good about.

Su counts herself as very fortunate to have been able to continue her teaching job at a Sydney school throughout the pandemic period. Moving to online lessons meant that she was able to maintain contact with her students as well as her income. She also became involved with a small-scale operatic project in Sydney which had been postponed earlier in the year.

Su's involvement in the Melba Program has provided a plethora of new challenges and experiences. She regards herself as a relative newcomer to the world of opera, and opera languages have been a particular challenge. But initial apprehension has been replaced with a sense of joy, something which will no doubt be enhanced with what has been learned during the pandemic.

An unexpected benefit for Su during this time has been "finding the time to be quiet and focus on me". In this regard she is full of praise for the opportunities afforded by working with Sharolyn Kimmorley. "I've always craved having a confidant, someone I can ask those tricky questions... I feel like I can go to her and ask her opinion." This honest relationship with a mentor has clearly been the foundation of Su's development in the Melba Program, despite the craziness of the times.

beyond venues?



Xenia Puskarz Thomas, mezzo-soprano
Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship – 2019



Image: Olive Barda

Emily Edmonds, mezzo-soprano
Dame Nellie Melba Opera Scholarship
Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award – 2013



Samuel Piper, baritone
John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Opera Scholarship – 2017–2019
Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship – 2019

the role of L'Enfant for an innovative e-production of Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, being produced by Vopera and London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO).

"This is one of my favourite roles, and favourite pieces," Emily says. "I performed this role in an equally imaginative production at Komische Oper Berlin last year, and I'm so thrilled that it's with this role I am able to be part of the powerful innovation that's happening in the opera sector – people have been forced to rethink the way opera is made."

After initial concern on his recent move to Coburg in Germany, Daniel was pleasantly surprised within the first few weeks of arriving when the Landestheater produced a supplementary program for its audience.

It encompassed open-air performances from all disciplines including opera, ballet, orchestra and Schauspiel (drama). Daniel attests that this has been a terrific way, as a new member of the ensemble, to connect with the community in Coburg.

"The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and I am very grateful to have received such a warm welcome. I look forward to brighter days ahead and finally to making that elusive debut in Coburg as Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte* in the new year. I am also very excited about putting all my preparation into good use when we are able finally to stage our production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. As a Lieder singer at heart, I am also very much looking forward to presenting a series of concerts and recitals in the coming months."

All corners of the globe have been touched by the dedication of Melba alumni, supported by technology, to continue opera performance wherever possible.

Branching out

While all artists have continued their studies and found new online audiences during the pandemic period, some alumni have branched out into new projects.

Focussing on areas that take advantage of or complement their expertise in opera, Stacey and Emily have found new career opportunities.

At the beginning of 2020, Emily launched a podcast called *Show Notes*, which she intended to function as a resource for performing artists across the globe. The podcast provides robust information and honest conversation about crucial and impactful topics such as vocal health, freelancer finances, mental health and general wellbeing.

The podcast became even more pertinent amid the pandemic. "The response to the podcast has been phenomenal," Emily says. "*Show Notes* has become a powerful space for artist community and support, as I've conversed with artist support schemes, financial advisors, and performance coaches in response to the shifting arts landscape."

Artists from around the world have reached out to express the influential impact of these podcast conversations, and there are now more than 5000 subscribers with listeners spanning more than 40 countries. "I am moved that *Show Notes* has already provided such meaningful community for many, and I'm excited to see it continue to reach many performers worldwide," she says.

Stacey has been using her time effectively by learning complementary skills that will make her indispensable in the arts industry. In particular, she has been learning more about technology and computer programs than she ever imagined which has included setting up sound, microphones, direct video feeds from DSLR/video cameras, joining and syncing videos together and lighting for Zoom calls and at-home videos.

Stacey has completed a short course in Digital Footprints on Coursera, and is now studying for a Certificate III in Business Administration.

New avenues are useful for any artist in the support of their own performance career. With the world's renewed reliance on technology and the need to be flexible in the job market these innovative alumni are future-proofing their careers.



Georgia Melville

Soprano

Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship

New-found appreciation

As the old adage goes, you don't appreciate what you've got till it's gone, and that was a recurring theme in my conversation with soprano Georgia Melville, who listed a few things which the pandemic has swept aside.

Live performing tops the list, of course. The restrictions of recent times have meant the almost complete cessation of performance opportunities for most artists. Plans to travel to Europe at the end of the year – for short courses in Italy and Germany and auditions in London, among other things – have also been postponed. Additionally, Georgia feels very keenly the loss of personal interaction with her Melba Opera Trust colleagues, something which online connection can't entirely replace. The sense of camaraderie among all seven artists in the 2020 program developed quickly at the start of the year and it's evident that they miss being together.

But there have been positives. Living in Sydney, where restrictions have been less intrusive, has meant that Georgia has been able to continue in-person (though socially distant) coaching sessions with Sharolyn Kimmorley. "She has taken all aspects of my singing to the next level... she's opened my eyes to how meticulously prepared your music has to be."

The cancellation of so much which gives a performer the impetus to perform has led Georgia to think deeply about her own motivation as an artist. She feels she's learned important lessons about herself. "Within myself I have the dedication and the passion this career requires... you need a lot of self-motivation and diligence... the cancellation of performances has instilled in me a sense of resilience." Georgia has found the need – and the desire – to dig deep in order to keep growing as an artist, even when immediate opportunities to share that growth have been removed. She cites the loss of connection with a live audience ("the highlight of my music-making") as something that has deeply affected her in recent months.

The outcome? "I feel really grateful for the performance opportunities that I've had... and I think I've got this new-found sense of gratitude and joy when I just think about my next performance with other artists, *on a stage, for a live audience*; it makes me so excited."

Like many of her Melba Opera Trust colleagues, Georgia has found therapy in cooking during the pandemic. Making sourdough and exchanging recipes have been particular pleasures. But perhaps slightly unexpected has been getting into DIY, restoring a desk and setting up a new office and reading space at home.

The idea of a space for oneself physically carries over into other activities Georgia has been involved in during recent months – such as meditation, yoga and Pilates – which make space for oneself mentally. There's been lots of time for reflection and also lots of time to go deeper into her German studies, with private lessons and small group classes on Zoom. None of this will be wasted when those European visits can finally take place.

Port in a pandemic storm

Need is often a driving force for creativity. With the pandemic crippling box office takings, and with limited government support, innovative thinking remains a lifeline to artists.

When COVID-19 hit and venues began closing their doors, Adele Schonhardt and Chris Howlett began receiving reports of their friends and colleagues losing work. It grew from a trickle to a flood, Adele recalls, and so she and Chris were spurred into action. "We couldn't just sit there and do nothing while they struggled to make ends meet."

Founders of Melbourne Digital Concert Hall (MDCH), Adele and Chris are among those who have shown an impressive entrepreneurial spirit in tackling the enormous challenges imposed by the fallout of COVID-19.

Melba Artists and alumni have been involved with both MDCH and another like-minded organisation, Freelance Artist Relief Australia (FARA). Both groups have shown immense courage in refusing to succumb to what at first seemed to be an impossible situation for the performing arts: the closure of venues and the postponement or cancellation of almost all programs and events.

MDCH tackled a new model of concert presentation as a way to revive income generation for artists. Adele and Chris were quick off the mark when the pandemic hit: over the course of a weekend in March, they hatched their plan to create a ticketed streaming platform for the benefit of the whole sector. MDCH was born, and the pair held the Hall's first performance ten days later on 27 March. It has since presented more than 160 concerts and enabled more than 300 Australian artists – including Melba-trained artists – to earn a total of more than \$670,000.

This astonishing success came from the broad experience

Adele and Chris have in this arena, working at the heart of Australia's cultural community. Adele is currently Chair of 3MBS Fine Music Melbourne and the former Media and Public Affairs Manager at Musica Viva Australia, and Chris is a leading cellist and producer. They emphasise MDCH is possible only because several visionary industry colleagues shared their sense of urgency and stepped up immediately to support Australian musicians. These founding partners, offering time and resources to get MDCH off the ground, include Tim Kelly (Managing Director at 5stream), Greg Hocking AM and his team at the Athenaeum Theatre, and Warrick Baker (National Sales and Marketing Manager at Kawai Australia).

As MDCH gained momentum in Melbourne, Adele and Chris were inundated with messages from Australian artists living interstate or abroad, wanting a chance to perform with them. A wider network of supporters has since been established and the Hall now partners with University of New South Wales, the National Art School, Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Perth Concert Hall, the Government House Foundation of Western Australia, Peter Lehmann Wines and many others.

MDCH hosts up to eight concerts a week. Essentially, it streams high-quality concerts live into people's living rooms at no cost to the artists. 'Seats' are sold online, with the \$20 ticket price going straight to the musicians themselves and a modest booking fee of \$4 covering credit card fees and some operating costs. A typical evening might feature two different one-hour concerts, at 7pm and 8.30pm

respectively, showcasing soloists or small groups of socially distanced musicians from around Australia.

Adele says regular favourites include the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra, members of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, artists from Melbourne Opera and Opera Australia, and soloists such as Melba alumni Stefan Cassomenos and Amir Farid, plus many others. She says there are always new highlights to discover and brilliant players to support.

"Internationally, we've collaborated with Tait Memorial Trust to deliver concerts at Australia House in London, have featured cellist Li-Wei Qin in Singapore and have enjoyed a brilliant concert by [Melba alumna] Siobhan Stagg and Kunal Lahiry in Berlin, generously supported by the Australian Ambassador to Germany," she says.

An unexpected consequence has been the way MDCH has become a major disruptor in the performing arts. "In fact, we could never have foreseen how disruptive it would become," Adele says. "We're a two-person start-up, deliberately lean and agile so that we can pass on as much revenue as possible to the musicians. Because the model is so lean, those artists often earn more on MDCH than they would for a regular concert. We have received many requests to host entire subscription seasons online."



Nicole Car. Image: Yan Bleney

Strengthening community connection

Keeping opera alive and supporting young artists embarking on their careers has been especially vital this year. While the Melba community has been unable to attend events to encourage artists, digital updates and virtual performances edited together with technology then shared electronically has kept donors and performers connected.

Melba donor Annie McFarling says this year's cohort of Melba Artists has been quite remarkable in trying circumstances. "Not only have they continued to do the work expected of them, but have gone over and above this expectation," she says. "They have developed new skills and interests

while in their homes and have, at the same time, made career goals and set out to achieve them."

These have included extra language work, learning a challenging role in an opera they love and hope to sing, and maintaining contact with other singers and alumni here and overseas for advice and support. Annie says that Melba Opera Trust's virtual performances have been of the highest standard – "so beautiful, so special" – under the guidance, expertise and supervision of Sharolyn Kimmorley.

"One of my greatest pleasures through lockdown has been the access to virtual operas, concerts



Fleuranne Brockway (2018) with Annie McFarling at the 2018 Meet the Artists event

and ballet," she says. "There have been so many available it has been impossible to watch them all, but what I have experienced came from The Met, The Australian Ballet and, above all, from our own Melbas."

Even though the opportunity for contact with the 2020 Melba Artists has been diminished, Mary-Jane Gething has been delighted with the online concerts and talks they have given. In the past she has loved getting

to know not only the artist with the Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship, named after her late husband, but the other artists as well. This year, she has been in a position to have consistent contact with the Sambrook artist, Louis Hurley, but has also kept up her communications with former Sambrook recipients such as Jeremy Kleeman (2014–2015).

Recently she watched Jeremy singing at Australia House for Tait Memorial Trust and with the



—
Melbourne Digital Concert Hall founders
Chris Howlett and Adele Schonhardt.
Image: Albert Comper

Adele says MDCH also calls into question some long-held assumptions around public appetite for online delivery and people’s willingness to pay for a streamed performance. “We’re here to tell you that yes, ticketed streaming can be done, if it’s approached collectively and with the music itself at the heart of the equation. We’re deeply grateful to our 10,000-strong community of ticket buyers for taking the leap with us and showing our musicians such incredible support.”

“We’re here to tell you that yes, ticketed streaming can be done, if it’s approached collectively and with the music itself at the heart of the equation.”

She emphasises, however, that almost more important than the financial impacts have been the less tangible benefits of happiness and wellbeing. “The joy is palpable onstage when we bring a trio or quartet together for the first time in months, and the messages of support and appreciation that flood in from audience members afterwards are a thing to behold. There might

not be a crowd cheering in the auditorium, but they’re well and truly with us online and making a huge difference to the artists they love.”

Adele believes ticketed streaming will be a game changer for the global arts community and describes MDCH as a tool for collective impact – a ‘castle in the air’ of a venue that can transform to fit any creative vision. “Right now, Chris and I are busily expanding the business

of streaming, plus a socially distanced audience, making the return to live performance more viable.”

In a similarly inspired venture, one of Australia’s most celebrated international opera singers, soprano Nicole Car, who lives in Paris, conceived the Freelance Artist Relief Australia organisation in March and launched it in April, with funds raised through the Music and Opera Singers Trust (MOST), to support artists whose livelihood has been threatened.

Nicole says she saw early on in the pandemic that it would have devastating effects for her fellow freelance artists, so she and her husband, French-Canadian baritone Etienne Dupuis, had a long chat with Nicole’s Australian agent, Patrick Togher, and FARA was born. It operates by connecting artists with benefactors who want to assist in an organised way and it has been making great headway. Nicole says she has been overwhelmed with the positive responses received from artists and donors. “I am thrilled every time an artist writes to say that we have made a difference in their lives.”

Before the charity even went public, it had raised \$150,000.

“I have been as affected by the pandemic as any other artist,” Nicole says. “So I feel that I am in a position to really understand what it feels like to lose a contract you have worked so hard to get in the first place; to not be able to work in a theatre you have been craving to sing in since you first began training; to lose the collaborations with colleagues, directors, companies; and to worry that, when all of this is over, perhaps there won’t be an industry left. It is scary and artists need to feel that they are seen, they are heard and they exist as much as any other profession. This is why FARA exists and this is why I will keep fighting as hard as I can to help.”

Many Melba artists, current and alumni, have rallied around Nicole to promote the fund, including Siobhan Stagg, Emily Edmonds, Lauren Fagan, Alexandra Flood and Morgan Balfour.

Siobhan, now based in Berlin, told *The Age* in April that she was helping the FARA fundraising effort, noting that expats – a group including many Melba alumni – often don’t qualify for government benefits. As a result, the FARA fund will be accessible to any Australian singer around the world. Because Siobhan is a permanent resident in Germany, she fortunately qualifies for government assistance. “I’m in a safer position so I’m thrilled to team up with Nicole to hopefully reach our goal of \$1 million. It reminds me of Nellie Melba, famous as the most successful singer of her generation, who raised huge amounts in the First World War for soldiers’ families.”

Entrepreneurial thinking from MDCH and FARA, alongside their care for the Australian musical community around the world, has extended livelihoods and, by extension, a lifeline to many.



Fi Mims Photography

Nathan Byron Tenor

Ruskin Opera Scholarship

Finding the joy

2020 has been a year of many transitions for tenor Nathan Byron. In addition to dealing with the challenges of the pandemic, this year saw him enter the ‘young professional’ stage of his career after finishing his undergraduate studies in 2019. And spending some weeks at his parents’ farm in Geurie, near Dubbo in New South Wales, gave him the chance to spend extended time with family for the first time in many years.

Moving into the Melba Program has meant a change of mindset for Nathan. His attention to the music he studies now is so much deeper and in much more detail than before, and this was even ahead of the enforced isolation of lockdowns. Undergraduate life had ‘training wheels’, while now, “the level I require of myself is much higher”.

Then came the cancellation of performances and the loss of personal interaction that we’ve all endured. Nathan confesses he found it a shock actually to have spare time, and it was initially a challenge to find ways of keeping the brain active, establishing a structure, and taking on more responsibility for personal growth. But the discovery that he is able to change his own goalposts has been immensely positive.

Integral to this has been the realisation that slowing down can be helpful, but when you’re used to a hectic life, it’s also difficult. “When I’ve got a lot on, I find it easier to chip away at many things. But in this time, when I haven’t had a lot on at all, just sitting down, slowing it down, and not going like a bull at a gate has been a challenge. But I think it’s a really important step that I’ve taken.”

Nathan has worked at making sure that, even if he can’t plan everything, at least he has structured bookends for his days. This has included online yoga sessions at the end of the day with some of his Melba colleagues. In fact, Nathan is full of praise for the entire Melba Program, and his fellow artists, for providing a positive focus in difficult times, and for enabling him to stay on track with important elements of his development as a singer.

Nathan also revealed some of the ways in which the Melba Artists have been supporting each other while they’ve been unable to meet in person. Sessions of group ‘iso-baking’ have seen identical recipes attempted across the country (with varying success!), and one group session online evolved into a mass ukulele performance when it was revealed that Nathan wasn’t the only one who could play the instrument.

In addition to learning new repertoire as an investment for the future, Nathan has been reading (singers’ biographies are a favourite), planting herbs, and indulging his obsession for cleaning. Looking for positives and understanding that you are not alone have been pivotal to his plan of attack during the pandemic, and that’s got to be a good thing.



above left Cleo Lee-McGowan (2017–2019) and Mary-Jane Gething at the 2018 Simon O’Neill ONZM master class **middle** Peter Griffin AM (centre) with Sue Logie-Smith AM and former Chair Rob Logie-Smith AM at the launch of Melba Opera Trust’s 10-year anniversary in August 2019 **above right** Garry Fehring (right) with Tony and Liz Rayward



London Handel Players at a small church. “I am actually getting to see more performances than usual,” Mary-Jane says. “I am hoping things like Melbourne Digital Concert Hall will carry on alongside the live performances. On the cold winter nights, you are getting to concerts without having to go out into the elements. There is an almost overwhelming amount of music that is available. You could spend your life watching operas that are now available online.”

Garry Fehring has enjoyed keeping up with what alumni are doing and has been especially impressed with work by Stephen Marsh (2018–2019). While firmly in the school of thought where “online performance will never excite my imagination as does the live performance of stage or concert”, Garry has been inspired by how Melba alumni now appear in houses throughout the world.

“One of the things that I like seeing is the alumni ‘pop up’ on

Facebook, with updates on what they are doing. It’s reassuring that they are still working and learning whilst they deal with 2020.”

Peter Griffin has equally enjoyed the online content from Melba Opera Trust, but echoes Garry’s sentiment that “recorded sound can never replace the glorious experience of the human voice”. He is hopeful that outdoor opera and concerts will begin as a first step once restrictions start to ease.

“For our Melba Artists it is even more important, in this new restricted space, that they receive support to be able to continue to advance their careers,” he says. “We are now seeing in Europe that concerts are resuming with limited audiences. We have missed seeing, hearing and meeting our talented Melba Artists at various locations, and already look forward to the same in Australia.”

The inside word

How will the opera industry take tentative steps forward in the COVID-19 world?
Artistic directors who are regularly involved in the Melba Program share their insights.

In March, Erin Helyard, Artistic Director of Pinchgut Opera, and cast were about to move into the theatre for final rehearsals. Making his professional US debut at Portland Opera, conducting his own edition of Vivaldi's *Bajazet*, he couldn't have been more thrilled. But when Richard Tognetti from Australian Chamber Orchestra shared a podcast about the seriousness of COVID-19, Erin knew the world was about to change. Soon after, when the Ohio Governor prohibited gatherings of 250 or more, Portland Opera had to cancel *Bajazet* and moved to help international artists get home. "Oh no, you'll be back. It's just like the flu," said the flight attendant to Erin, but he hasn't flown since. Then his Japanese debut was cancelled and Pinchgut cancelled its entire season.

Back at the Sydney Opera House, Opera Australia's Artistic Director Lyndon Terracini AM was in an equally unenviable position, looking out over an almost empty auditorium. He knew people were staying away through fear of the virus. A few days earlier the company had opened its production of Verdi's *Attila*, the rarely staged work being heard in Australia for the first time, in a pioneering coproduction with Teatro alla Scala. Reviews praised the cast, including local singers Natalie Aroyan and Diego Torre. Having been an OA young artist, the fiendishly difficult role of Odabella was, in many ways, a culmination of Natalie's development within the company. But, after a terrific opening night success, the show would have to close and Opera Australia has not performed since.

It has been the same story around Australia. As the pandemic worsened, Victorian Opera, Opera Queensland, State Opera of South Australia and West Australian Opera cancelled their seasons, one after another. VO's Artistic Director Richard Mills AM knows too well that his company is dependent upon box office sales. "That's how we earn our income... we perform to give people pleasure, to take them on a journey in the context of live performance. And we can't do that at the moment. That's really hard... It has been an horrendous blow to the industry and that should not be underestimated."

The major priority for all the companies has been to look after staff and artists as best they can. Opera Australia has been trying to sustain 500 people and it has affected finances enormously. Having sold the Opera Centre in Melbourne and exhausting the proceeds supporting employees and artists, OA is now selling its Sydney warehouse. But Lyndon knows this cannot continue, using the farm analogy that, if you keep selling off your land, you'll soon have nothing left but the homestead. VO has a "paying it forward" scheme, sending meal vouchers to artists to let them know they are not forgotten. Stuart Maunder, Artistic Director at SOSA, says they've worked to put its artists in touch with support schemes. And, inspired by



top (L-R): Patrick Nolan, Opera Queensland. Image: Glenn Hunt. Lyndon Terracini AM. Image: Opera Australia, Dr Richard Mills AM, Victorian Opera. Image: Charlie Kinross above (L-R): Stuart Maunder AM, State Opera of South Australia. Image: Greg Bowker, Dr Erin Helyard. Image: Brett Boardman

Portland Opera's decision to pay their artists out – "Such a mark of respect" – Erin asked Pinchgut's board to follow suit, ensuring all performers received cancellation fees. "A lot of people were thrilled we were able to offer that." OQ also paid cancellations fees, as a matter of principle, aware that artists had already devoted many hours to preparing their roles and this could be their sole source of income.

Even so, the toll on artists has been unimaginable. Patrick Nolan, Artistic Director and CEO of Opera Queensland, has had numerous conversations with extremely significant artists, some of whom have been in tears saying that they don't know how they can continue to commit to a career to which they have dedicated their lives.

All these artistic directors believe the federal government's prohibitions on international travel will lead to more opportunities for local artists. And that is a good thing. But both Richard and Erin acknowledge that when there is a paucity of particular voice types here repertoire choices will be affected. And Stuart says that, while state borders remain closed, it is not going to be so easy for him to cast locally as it would be in Melbourne or Sydney.

Moving online emerged as a way to give artists opportunities to perform and to stay connected with audiences.

Early on Patrick and Executive Director Sandra Willis were talking about how to support their artists. One said "an aria a day" and the other said "keeps a doctor

project last year with Google on creating an augmented reality opera. While this was a prototype it shows one of the ways forward.

SOSA has moved online as well with Arias from the Archive, artists recreating moments from past productions such as *Dead Man Walking*, *Little Women* and *Cloudstreet*. VO has created Virtual Victorian Opera with specially curated content, including interviews with Artists in Isolation featuring, among others, our very own Siobhan Stagg.

A highlight of Pinchgut's online presence is Baroque Banter, with Erin interviewing artists and giving informative talks about opera. He concedes there is a challenge for arts companies in the digital sphere: what value should they put on online content? "It's so hard to

Moving online emerged as a way to give artists opportunities to perform and to stay connected with audiences.

Lyndon notes that many artists live in apartments so they can't sing without neighbours banging on the walls. And the novelty of people singing on balconies has worn off. The seriousness of this situation is not short term and that has definitely sunk in. Nevertheless, some artists have decided that it's not going to get to them. "They have come to practise, work with coaches, and what they are doing now is unrecognisable from what they were doing 6 months ago... and that's inspiring to witness."

away". Thus, the extremely well received An Aria A Day idea was born. Knowing that most people would have only a phone to record themselves, it had to be a low-fi concept. Artists were asked to sing music they love, in a space at home where they feel comfortable. Now more than 130 artists have been paid to take part, including several Melba alumni. And the response has been how great it is to see the artists as themselves. Patrick has always been interested in the digital space: OQ did a

answer that because we're so used to free content now, just like with the news." The company's major creative production for 2020 is *A Delicate Fire*, a film of madrigals by Baroque composer Barbara Strozzi, "chopped and changed" to create a new theatrical experience. A "thank you" to the company's generous supporters, it represents a more significant entrée into the digital space. Going back to opera at its roots in the early 17th century – when opera was experimental, with strong

female roles, an emphasis on singers and a very small orchestra – will help Pinchgut find a creative way forward.

Opera Australia's OA | TV, including interviews and operas from the archives, marks that company's move online. While the response has been positive, the message from subscribers is that they are desperate for live performances. Lyndon understands. "Fundamentally opera is a live form. It is the visceral impact of an unamplified voice hitting you in the chest and an orchestra playing for its life." While a digital performance is a solitary performance, opera in the theatre is a communal moment that can last a lifetime.

SOSA will return to staged productions in November with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Requiring a small cast and no chorus, it is a perfect choice for the times. Conductor Richard Mills and Victorian cast members will be allowed to come to Adelaide, but one WA cast member had to withdraw because of the "hard border" restrictions. Stuart is presently directing Queensland Conservatorium students in *Béatrice et Bénédict*, the first COVID-era opera production in Australia. After the disappointment of not directing *The Gondoliers* in Scotland in May, how does he feel? "Joyous! It's so tremendous to be able finally to do something." Observing protocols is second nature for the performers who are "just about bathing in sanitiser". Singers are not required to maintain 1.5 metres distance during the performances. The orchestra will be onstage, with the brass instruments having to be more socially distanced than the violins.

OQ has been presenting studio recitals. People have to register, sit in household or friendship groups, strictly in allocated seats. Patrick says managing the logistics "is like planning for war!" The singers need to be 4 metres from the audience. While conceding it lessens the intention of the studio being an intimate space up and close with the performers, the audiences are so grateful. As to 2021, Arts Queensland has said OQ can budget for 50% houses next year; this will be the model when the company returns to theatres in October. Cutting its cloth to fit, next year will be very lean, but Patrick is determined to present three shows.

Back home isolating in Brunswick, Richard remains optimistic, but not in a Pollyanna kind of way. While 2021 will be a provisional year, he hopes that 2022 will be back to normal for Victorian Opera. He is confident that a vaccine would see the industry return to normal quite quickly. Lyndon also remains positive. "I won't accept that we're not going to have those experiences again. They are what makes life worth living ... After 2020, the annus horribilis will have passed and we'll be back."



Pinchgut Opera's opera film *A Delicate Fire* featuring music by Barbara Strozzi. Image: Brett Boardman



Scott Whinfield interviewing Siobhan Stagg for Victorian Opera's Artists in Isolation series

—
Damian Arnold in the virtual
production of *Sleeping Beauty*
for the Guildhall School of
Music & Drama

Olivia Fuchs director
takís designer
Jake Wiltshire lighting designer



Guildhall: virtual opera production

After completing their Melba Program, many alumni further their study with internationally recognised institutions. Brenton Spiteri (2012–2014) and Damian Arnold (2017) are studying at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London. *The Melba* speaks with Brenton, Damian and the Head of Opera Studies at Guildhall, Dominic Wheeler, about creating exciting ways forward.

Damian Arnold admits that, until the last performance of Guildhall's second term opera *The Angel Esmeralda* was cancelled when a teacher tested positive, he hadn't realised COVID-19 was serious. Then the lockdown was imposed in the UK meaning online classes and no more performances. But where did this leave the students' next project, a double bill of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Respighi's *Sleeping Beauty*?

Having already learnt their music, the students were anxious this might lead nowhere. Dominic Wheeler's response was: "I don't know what we are going to do, but we are going to do something." The decision to proceed was the easier part; more difficult would be how. Guildhall has an educational responsibility towards its singers, but it also has one towards the students in the orchestra, in costumes, set design and manufacture, and those studying stage management. Any solution would have to provide opportunities for everyone.

Without a precedent to follow, Dominic and his staff were open with students about what they were doing. It might just work – as long as the teachers stayed 48 hours ahead of them! The students came onboard enthusiastically; for them, it was better to do something than be home doing nothing. Dominic also decided not to share the show with the public. This meant there would be less pressure and if, at the end of the day, the project didn't work, it didn't matter.

It was decided that the production students would create virtually what would have been seen in the theatre and the singers were going to film themselves. Money earmarked to build a set was used to hire the software that would meld the results.

After abridging the music to an hour, Dominic edited the music into recordable chunks and created a piano rehearsal track which the orchestra could use to practise. If they were performing John Adams, Dominic would have used click tracks, but Respighi's

romantic music needed to breathe. The players needed to feel the music together, even if they were not perfectly together.

Filming would challenge the singers. Damian found rehearsing to the empty green screen was very odd. Much more like film/TV acting, working in front of a camera and being able to see what he was doing led him to feel self-conscious. This was amplified for Damian when he filmed outside in front of watching neighbours!

Guildhall's students cannot be merely voices on legs; they have to learn to tell stories through their music, their use of language and their voices in an integrated way. Watching back their footage allowed singers to see what they were doing. Now they could identify mannerisms that teachers had tried to remove before. Dominic had told Damian that he had a tendency to lean. Damian thought he was being expressive, but when he saw the footage he understood, stood up straight and the singing became easier.

Dominic abides by the motto "I aim for perfection and then settle for excellence". At the same time, by giving them a set time to do their filming and then submit it, he wanted the singers to learn how to turn off their "inner monster perfectionist". Striving for perfection is part of preparation, but in the end the singers just needed to dive in.

Mindful of artists' wellbeing, staff encouraged them to share in rehearsals one thing of which they were proud and one thing with which they were struggling. The drama and movement sessions had to be fun so the singers could let off steam. The worst moment for

them was always when the Zoom sessions finished and the faces all disappeared. An opening night party was held to maintain social interaction. Indeed, it was here that artists expressed how thrilled they were by the final result and their pride in being in a bit of a world first. Everyone agreed to share their show online after all and the response was heartening. People thought it was "amazing" and demonstrated that something of quality can be created in isolation. Excitement arose, too, because now the singers could be seen by more people than could ever have come to the theatre, including agents and other industry players.

Damian felt the finished product was unbelievable. "When I watched it, I had to remind myself that every person involved – singers, musicians, technical staff, production crew – worked alone in their room."

It is amazing to think that one of the Respighi princesses was in New Zealand the whole time. All that said, Damian is impatient to return to the stage. His first role at l'Opéra du Rhin involves live action cameras filming on stage so this Guildhall experience will have been handy!

Brenton Spiteri sang in Guildhall's other online project called *Opera Makers*, three newly composed operas captured on different devices then assembled into a filmed version and a virtual avatar version. His job was to rehearse the music and staging with the director and other performers, then create two different recordings of every scene. "The first was an audio only recording, which I made on the extremely high-tech 'Voice Memos' app on my iPhone, singing along with a



Dominic Wheeler, Guildhall School of Music & Drama.
Image: Paul Cochran

midi file of the accompanying part to keep me in time. The second was a video recording."

Sourcing costumes from his own wardrobe, Brenton was sent a green screen, too. "For all those who haven't hung a gigantic piece of green cloth up on their bedroom wall, I can confirm that it is an incredibly inconvenient process, and I'm very glad there were no OHS officers present ... I'd never built a film set in my home before and I hope never to do so again." Nevertheless, he was certainly proud of what was created.

The lessons for Dominic from this are that artists must embrace smaller scale work as an enrichment, not a restriction. They must get used to being online and filming themselves more. Going forward, Guildhall has invested in more technology for more online creations. While he concedes that Guildhall cannot tell which specific skills artists will need when the world reinvents itself, the school can help artists be imaginative, have integrity in what they do and love working hard. Whatever happens in the world, this will establish them well.



Brenton Spiteri and classmates in their digital performance for Guildhall's Opera Makers virtual opera trilogy

A centenary celebration

At 7.10pm on 15 June 1920 Dame Nellie Melba approached a microphone fashioned from a telephone mouthpiece and wood from a cigar-box to open the first live radio broadcast by a professional musician.

Melba's voice had, up until that point, already been an incredibly potent tool for bringing people together. This auspicious live broadcast, however, had a reach that few could have imagined at the time; from the Marconi factory in Chelmsford England, the recital could be heard on the streets of Paris, in Iran and across the ocean in Newfoundland.

For seven months the 'new normal' for Melba Opera Trust has included delivering a mostly digital version of the Melba Program for our young artists, all staff and board working from home and our events at a standstill. To appreciate Nellie's legacy and this 100-year milestone at this time, a few specific Melba reflections lend us inspiration.

First, we are reminded of what can be gained when innovation



is combined with the right ingredients. While Melba's first experiences recording with the "gramophone people" elicited "disastrous results", their perseverance and Nellie's imagination, hard work and bravery eventuated in recordings that could be sold and then played all around the world. "I have always been one for 'having a shot at things'", Nellie was noted to say on the subject, "and I am glad that I had a shot at this."

During a time when artists' usual means of income are not possible, the challenge of navigating digital and distanced performances – as well as exploring alternative fields for income – requires a steadfast sense of self-worth. This is something Dame Nellie had in spades. Her unshakeable belief in her own worth enabled her to negotiate fees and conditions that set benchmarks which would benefit artists, even today. This legacy has shaped the Melba

Program and, through it, Melba alumni. A Melba sense of self-worth is vital for today's young professional.

The pandemic has reminded us of the potency of shared music. Melba's recordings led to a succession of marriage proposals from people who had heard her sing, yet had never seen or met her. "There was something almost uncanny in the idea of some man in the remote prairies sitting down in

front of a little instrument, listening to the echo of my voice, feeling that he had found his ideal woman and writing to tell her so," she said at the time. While we are not surprised by her various proposals, they reinforce our belief in how music can connect and move us, especially when we are not able to be in each other's company.

Looking ahead to 2021, we're committed to continuing our premier scholarship program, maintaining Melba's focus on holistic balance, nurturing young singers and répétiteurs on their artistic journey, as well as to connecting them with a community of supporters – each group vital to the other.

Dame Nellie's incredible legacy gives us access to a wealth of stories for continual inspiration. There's just one Melba sentiment we'd like to discuss with her in today's vibrant climate of collaboration: "The first rule in opera is the first rule in life: see to everything yourself", because now, more than ever, we rely on each other.

Dame Nellie Melba quotes courtesy of the Nellie Melba Museum nelliemelbamuseum.com.au

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