

THE MELBA

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Nellie Melba

160 YEARS OF AN AUSTRALIAN ICON

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About Melba Opera Trust

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

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Cover image: *Melba, the Grande Dame* by Jessica Cruickshank, 2021

Photography: Anna Kucera, Dean Phipps, Eve Wilson, Wolter Peeters, Prudence Upton

Melba Opera Trust acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which we work and we pay our respect to elders past, present and emerging.

From the CEO

Carrying forward the name of an Australian icon is both a privilege and a great responsibility. This year and every year we honour Dame Nellie Melba by developing exceptional Australian opera singers and répétiteurs through the Melba program. We see her impact in the performances of our alumni throughout Australia and the world.

Melba was a pioneer in so many ways. A fierce proponent of the arts in Australia, she used her celebrity to advance the careers of countless young singers, artists, actors and poets. Her generous spirit is as famous as her voice, as is her love for Australia.

An ‘influencer’ by today’s standards, Melba was an ambassador for Cartier and Louis Vuitton in Australia. A motoring enthusiast, supporter of the suffragette movement, connoisseur of fashion, and an astute, financially independent businesswoman, Melba was a woman ahead of her time with values that belong more today, than they did in the early 20th century.

The Melba program was inspired by her philosophy of developing the ‘complete artist’, one who excels on-stage, and is confident in the business requirements off-stage. Through the program we aim to mirror Dame Nellie Melba’s own keys to success; the pursuit of artistic excellence, a savvy business attitude, the right industry connections and funding to make the journey possible.

While last year had its challenges, we successfully delivered a comprehensive digital program to help Melba artists focus on their artistic and professional preparation. This year we have put that preparation into practice; working with directors and performing as much as possible.



Dame Nellie Melba’s bequest established a scholarship ‘in the hope that another Melba may arise’. It has been her shining example and her generosity that has paved the way for future generations to follow in her footsteps.

As a not-for-profit organisation, we rely on generosity to deliver the Melba program and we are extremely grateful for the support of the philanthropic community. Together we continue the legacy of this great icon through the program we deliver and the exceptional artists we support.

AMY BLACK | Chief Executive Officer

If you would like to discuss how you can support Melba Opera Trust or provide a provision in your will, please contact me on 03 9944 2100 or email ablack@melbaoperatrust.com.au

Board announcements

We asked our recent board appointments to reflect on the mission of Melba Opera Trust and what they will bring to the Melba board.



“I have a long association with Melba Opera Trust through the Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship. I enjoy watching the artists grow to become an important part of the opera world. I bring to the board strong organisational skills and experience learned through many years of working in the not-for-profit sector. I look forward to spending more time with the donors who make the program possible, and introducing new audiences to the remarkable artists that Melba Opera Trust develops.” – **VICTORIA FOX-SMITH**



“I look forward to continuing the legacy of one of Australia’s great musicians and entrepreneurs. Melba Opera Trust’s exceptional program is best supported administratively, financially, and personally by a board with a passion for the arts. I am a keen amateur musician with a deep and heartfelt interest in the pursuit of excellence both on and off the stage. My decades-long involvement with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Patrons Program, among others, has given me insight into what lies ahead.” – **DR MITCHELL CHIPMAN**

The enduring synergy of art and music

Artistry of all disciplines thrives in like-minded communities, so it is with pleasure that we announce our new event partnership with the Victorian Artists Society, original home of the Melba Memorial Conservatorium of Music.

Strolling down Albert Street East Melbourne in the early 1920s, there's a good chance you would have heard opera soaring from the windows of number 440. You may even have heard Dame Nellie Melba herself.

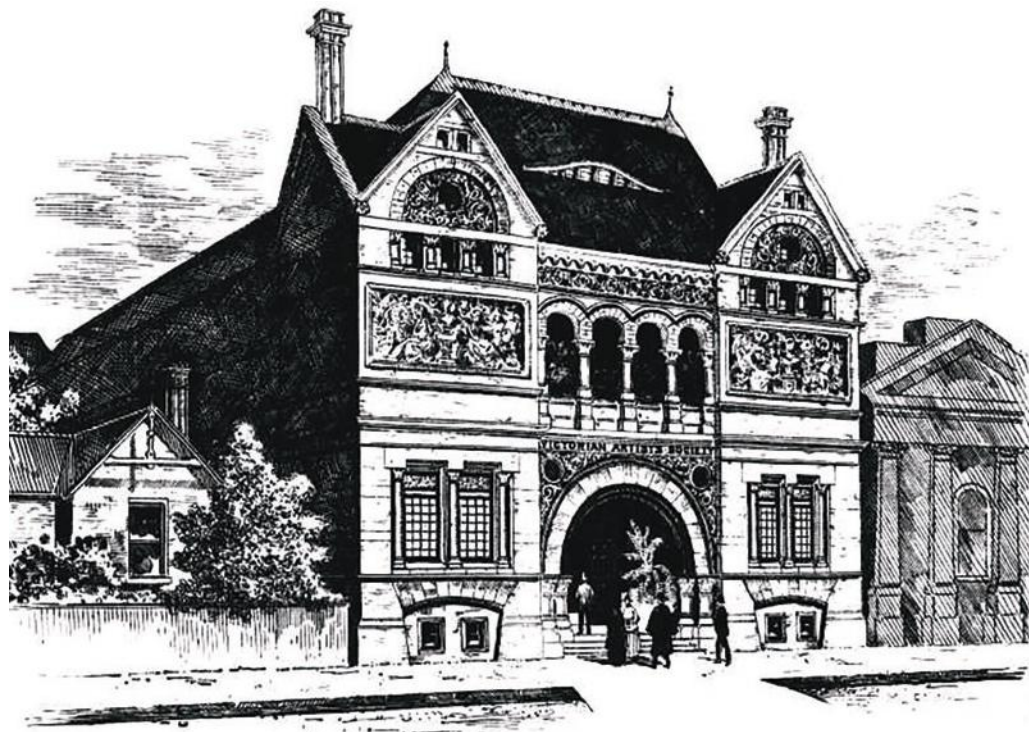
Established in 1870 by a formidable group of painters, the Victorian Artists Society remains an institution of Australian art and a place where some of the nation's most celebrated artists have learned, taught and exhibited. Among them, impressionists Arthur Streeton and Frederick McCubbin (who also served as President), and modernists Albert Tucker, Charles Blackman, and John Perceval.

During its recent renovation, President Eileen Mackley AM discovered a great deal about the early days of the society, the artists' connections to one another and to the artistic community in general.

"It's so important to know your history. In those early days, they connected music and visual art. The object was to educate people about the fine arts," says Mackley.

In 1917, it became the site of Dame Nellie Melba's newly-established singing school which would expand significantly to be known as the Albert Street Conservatorium and later, the Melba Memorial Conservatorium. It was here that Melba taught until her death in 1931, the funeral procession passing by the front doors, while her students lined the street, singing. The Conservatorium remained at the premises until 1973 and during its tenure Albert Street, some of Australia's best-known musicians received formative musical tutelage, including Indigenous tenor Harold Blair.

"The front rooms is where the students were taught, then they performed in the galleries upstairs," says Mackley. It is rumoured that Melba herself was known to sing from the second floor balcony as crowds of people formed on the steps below.



Lithograph of the Victorian Artists Society from *The Argus*, 1892. Public Domain.

Today, the heritage building is home to five galleries and is a thriving hub of exhibitions, art classes and live music events. Mackley believes that collaboration between practitioners of visual and performing arts is as essential today as it has always been.

"It extends the diversity of art. Many people who are interested in visual arts are also interested in music. It's natural to bring these two together, as they were originally together."

It is wonderful to return to Melba's artistic home in her 160th anniversary year, and for the sounds of her musical legacy to soar from the windows once again.

New faces of Dame Nellie Melba

Initial sketches of the two Melba portraits by Jessica Cruickshank

Grande Dame



Prima Donna



In an historic commission, Melba Opera Trust tasked Australian artist Jessica Cruickshank with creating a modern interpretation of Dame Nellie Melba in celebration of her 160th anniversary. Jessica reflected on the process of creating digital portraits of the *Prima Donna* and the *Grande Dame*.



Jessica Cruickshank

"Through my research, I learned that there have only been a handful of well-known portraits of [Dame Nellie Melba], and in most she looks like a fairly serious, even stern person. Given the rare opportunity to draw such an icon, I wanted to make sure I presented her in a fresh, new light. She's such a big character and personality, and it seems like she had so much energy. I used intricate detail and bright colour to bring her to life beyond the historical photos we already know."

"I knew that she was an important figure, not just in opera but Australian history and popular culture in general. I hadn't realised that she was such a fashion icon! In the *Prima Donna* portrait I captured her in the costume she wore for her first success at Covent Garden. I had so much fun hunting down the costumes and jewellery pieces that she wore, and seeing how she responded to changing fashion trends in her own taste and style over her long career as a singer and public figure."

Read the full Q&A here: www.melbaoperatrust.com.au/melba-portraits



On Melba's legacy and the onward journey

The 2021 Melba Artists reflect on what the legacy of Dame Nellie Melba means to them, and what is in store for their year ahead with Melba and beyond.



KATHERINE ALLEN | SOPRANO

Dame Nellie Melba's philosophy that it takes 'more than a voice' is even more significant to me since I commenced my scholarship with Melba Opera Trust this year. Skills in business, marketing, acting, languages, and movement are all essential to successfully navigating the operatic industry and I am so grateful to Melba for enabling me to work hard on these areas.

In September I go to London to commence a Masters of Vocal Performance at the Royal College of Music. I will be studying with soprano Janis Kelly, and I look forward to honing my technique, stagecraft, and languages. I also plan on taking in as much of England's rich musical offerings as I can by attending concerts, operas, and masterclasses.



EMILIA BERTOLINI | SOPRANO

I strive to embody Nellie Melba by constantly working to improve not only my singing, but every aspect of a performance career. Being a singer is like being a business: we need to learn to be every department. I also believe that she understood the value of human connection and community, and I am grateful that my fellow artists, mentors and supporters of Melba Opera Trust create a positive environment for learning and growing as an artist.

I am delighted to have been offered a scholarship to attend the Royal Academy of Music in London to study a Master of Arts commencing in September this year. Moving to London to further my musical education has been my dream for many years and I am thrilled to be taking this next step in my career.



NATHAN BRYON | TENOR

Melba's philosophy is about engaging with all parts of this business, alongside the craft of singing. She was an incredible businesswoman and engaged with many social issues, as well as being an extraordinary soprano. That is something we can all draw inspiration from today. Our work in personal branding, stagecraft and negotiation, as well as many other behind-the-scenes parts of the business, will set us in good stead for the future.

I am currently preparing to audition for a number of US-based postgraduate and young artist programs, and for competitions here in Australia. I'm learning to make quality recordings and submissions. I think it's important to stay flexible in this time, and to see what opportunities arise.



CHLOE HARRIS | MEZZO-SOPRANO

Melba Opera Trust cultivates young artists to reach their full potential. A singer’s role is multi-faceted and my main objective is to communicate meaningful stories through opera. During my time as a Melba Artist, I have been able to grow the important musical, business and linguistic skills I need to succeed as a professional opera singer.

I will begin an intensive one year Master of Arts: Performance as a mezzo-soprano in September 2021, at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Studying in London will provide me with many opportunities to grow and challenge myself, work with wonderful teachers and mentors, as well as performing with a diverse range of artists. I look forward to sharing this exciting journey with fellow Melba Artists and friends.

“Nellie Melba understood the value of human connection and community, and I am grateful that my fellow artists, mentors and supporters of Melba Opera Trust create such a positive environment for learning and growing as an artist.”

- EMILIA BERTOLINI



LOUIS HURLEY | TENOR

In this current operatic climate, I don’t think Melba’s famous “more than a voice” philosophy could have more relevance. We are living in a time where freelance work is the norm, which means we have to be well equipped to function, not only as an artist, but also as a small business. We are so fortunate as Melba Artists that the program is crafted with this philosophy in mind, offering abundant opportunities to work with artistic and professional mentors throughout the year.

I’m looking forward to engaging in a number of very exciting projects in Australia within the next year, and to continuing my work and development with Melba Opera Trust.

GEORGIA MELVILLE | SOPRANO

Dame Nellie Melba’s words of wisdom ring truer than ever after the challenges of 2020. I had a lot of time to work on my vocal and artistic development, but also on the practical skills that I will need to confidently launch my career and run a small business. Nellie was an astute businesswoman – she recognised that these skills are equally as important as a beautiful voice!

The next chapter in my career is moving to one of the world’s opera capitals: London! I am delighted to be commencing study in Voice/Opera at the Royal College of Music this September.



2021 Melba Artists

Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship
Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship
Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award
KATHERINE ALLEN

John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship
Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship
EMILIA BERTOLINI

Ruskin Opera Scholarship
NATHAN BRYON

Margaret Schofield Opera Scholarship
Mel & Nina Waters Award
SU CHOUNG

Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship
Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship
CHLOE HARRIS

Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship
LOUIS HURLEY

Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship
GEORGIA MELVILLE

On the rise

Remaining grounded is a characteristic **Stacey Alleaume** values, despite the great heights of the roles that are defining her career.

WHEN THE ACCOLADES CAME FLOODING in for her gravity-defying performance as Violetta in Opera Australia's *La traviata*, Stacey Alleaume tried not to read too many of them. She was determined not to let it get to her head.

"It was wonderful, but it was hard," says Stacey, of the support she received. "Every night [I had to] perform to a new audience and I felt like I had to meet those high expectations every time I went on stage."

The reviews didn't stop, with more and more people joining the chorus of praise for Stacey's performance in the Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour production.

"It kind of exploded."

It's easy to see how the media frenzy occurred. TV footage of Stacey twirling in a red dress under a giant chandelier on Sydney Harbour seemed to be playing on loop on television and social media. She was engaged in non-stop interviews leading up to opening night and admits that she hasn't always felt natural in front of TV cameras. But one of the essential lessons Stacey learned as a Melba Artist was to be prepared for anything, not only when dealing with the media, but in being adaptable to new technologies and diverse working conditions. This held her in excellent stead when one of her first professional performances was *The Eighth Wonder*, an outdoor silent opera on the steps of the Sydney Opera House.

"It was my first time working outdoors, first time working with in-ear microphones and first time working in the elements."

Stacey faced the elements again, shortly thereafter, when she played Micaëla in Opera Australia's production of *Carmen*.

"Then *Carmen* was outdoors, and I was being lifted seven metres in the air on a shipping container, suspended by two cranes. I had to sing my aria from there!"

If seven metres wasn't high enough, her international debut in the 2019 Bregenzer Festspiele saw her performing the role of Gilda in *Rigoletto*, 15 metres in the air, hanging tenuously from a helium balloon.

"My career seems to be all about going up - anything to do with heights!"

"So, my career seems to be all about going up – anything to do with heights!" she says.

Although admittedly afraid of heights, these challenging early experiences helped Stacey prepare for *La traviata* which would see her singing from a giant chandelier over Sydney Harbour. Throughout rehearsals Stacey faced the dual demands of both mental and physical training, but the production was also marked with a deeply emotional blow. First scheduled to open in March 2020, the production had to be postponed indefinitely due to COVID-19, just as the cast went into technical rehearsals.

It was devastating for Stacey whose life and career, like so many Melba alumni, revolves around live music.

"For a while, I couldn't even pick up an opera score, it was [emotionally] too difficult," she says. Instead, she used the time to create her debut album, *Moonlight Reflections*, a selection of art song in collaboration with alumnus and celebrated pianist, Amir Farid. Completely self-produced and created under very strict isolation guidelines, Stacey believes it was essential to maintaining her craft during a difficult time.

"Doing the album was my way of dealing with COVID-19," she says, "but it was also my way of giving back, and saying say thank you to the people who have supported me through everything. To remind them I'm still here!"

As live performances tentatively re-opened around the country, Stacey returned to her preparation of the role of Violetta. Determined to return to the role with fresh eyes, she went into a deep research phase at the request of director, Constantine Costi. Stacey discovered a rare edition of the 1852 Dumas play online and delved further into the story behind *La traviata*.

Stacey found that engaging with the source material expanded her experience of the story.

"The opera is condensed, and intense," she says "but reading the play gives more context and some amazing insight into the characters."

The depth of research enabled Stacey and the cast to bring an extra dimension to the performance.

“I was able to completely embody Violetta on stage,” she says “and in a production that was so physically driven, I felt empowered by the knowledge I had gained from the research.”

To embody Violetta so completely required absolute commitment, which, for Stacey, meant bringing herself physically to the role, and even engaging a personal trainer.

“It was a very physical performance. The whole of Act 1 was like running a marathon. And the raked stage – plus heels on top of that – puts a lot of pressure on the body.”

Then on opening night, Opera Australia’s Artistic Director, Lyndon Terracini AM acknowledged Stacey’s journey in a moving public speech.

“Lyndon acknowledged how far I’d come. He said in front of everyone: ‘she’s performed in schools, sung in pig sheds on regional tours, gone through the Young Artists, and tonight, she is a star.’”

“It was a sense of achievement. I’ve always tried to do a good job, to aim for excellence. But this was an acknowledgment of the work.”

The acknowledgment is particularly well-deserved because Stacey’s journey has been defined by resilience and tireless work. From The Schools Company to Chorus to Regional Touring to the 2016 Young Artists Program and now Principal Artist, Stacey has just marked 10 years with Opera Australia. She knew there were perceived challenges to being a chorister, but working full-time in the chorus gave her the opportunity to understand Opera Australia as a company. She was always prepared to cover a principal role and she kept a tight dialogue with the management team to ensure she remained front of mind for opportunities. It was this work ethic, along with her obvious talent, that led to her being awarded a place in the Opera Australia Young Artist Program in 2016. Her tenacity and commitment was clear throughout.

“I’ve spoken to a number of singers coming up the ranks, and sometimes they want to know the quickest road to the top, but it doesn’t really work that way. It takes time. It took almost 10 years to become a Principal Artist!”

There is more to Stacey’s dedication than being the prima donna. She can see a future in giving back through continued work with young artists.

“I love coming back to do the Mentor Program at Melba,” she says. “Being able to talk to young artists who aspire to be where I am today... we need to break those barriers down, make sure artists can talk to people, learn from them.”

“I spent so much of my early career not knowing who to talk to. I wanted to ask these questions, but I was afraid. So for me, personally, I always want to make myself approachable because how else are young artists going to grow?”

Stacey pinpoints her desire to give back to the community and educate young people about opera stems from her experience working with The Schools Company.

“We were performing for kids in schools and they could see all the different elements of working in the theatre, then got to ask questions of the people who are doing it as a career.”

“When I was younger, I never had anything like that. [My desire to give back] all came from there.”

It demonstrates Stacey’s unconditional love of the craft, not only in pursuit of her own career, but in the sustainability of opera in general. She is determined to share what she learned at Melba and throughout her career with emerging artists at every stage of the journey.

“We as performers have a duty of care to young people and artists. One to inspire, but to guide them as well.”

“We as performers have a duty of care to young people and artists. One to inspire, but to guide them as well.”

Stacey acknowledges that another reason she feels so compelled to give back is because her journey has been marked by the people who have supported her along the way.

“Without [the donor community], I wouldn’t have the career I have today.

“As a struggling student, working part-time, it’s difficult to actually focus on your craft because you’re focusing all of your time earning enough money to pay the rent and maybe have a singing lesson a week.

“Having that support allows us to invest in our craft. It allows us to refine and develop our craft so we can share our gift with them.”

Stacey hopes that patrons who support emerging artists feel a sense of pride in their achievements and careers.

According to Stacey, it was Melba’s tripartite development program that was the key to her establishing herself in the industry.

“The Mentor Program is crucial,” she says “because it’s about building your networks. And without organisations like Melba Opera Trust, you’re on your own.

“I first met Johannes Fritzsche at Melba Opera Trust and then worked with him at Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra and got to build on that relationship.”

“I know people who still contact Yvonne Kenny and she’s been able to support artists applying for the Jette Parker [scholarship with The Royal Opera].”



Performance opportunities are equally essential to development. Regularly being in front of an audience lessens the anxiety that comes from the pressure of performing.

“I still get performance anxiety!” she says, but it gets easier the more time a singer spends on stage.

“There are fewer opportunities to perform as a young singer, but you will learn more from the time you spend on stage than time spent in rehearsals or in a studio. The only way you will learn what you can and can’t do with your voice is on stage.”

And what is next for Stacey Alleaume?

“I’m going to Austria in June [to revive the role of Gilda]. So I’m starting the process of doing all the paperwork, the visas,” she says, “and we will still have to go ahead, even to 50% audiences, because if it doesn’t go ahead then [these festivals] could fold.”

It’s a precarious situation, but one that Stacey knows will require dedication from everyone – performers, companies and audiences – to make sure that the performing arts survives potentially destabilising times.

But much like preparation and grounding, dedication is a skill with which Stacey Alleaume is very well acquainted.

Stacey was the recipient of the Ruskin Family Opera Award (2010) and the Amelia Joscelyne Reserve Scholarship (2012)

In conversation with Constantine Costi

We spoke with director and librettist, Constantine Costi, about his approach to staging, being part of the diverse stagecraft offering in this year's Mentor Program and his advice for emerging artists.

What is your approach to directing? Does it change whether it's a large scale outdoor extravaganza like *La traviata* for Opera Australia's Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour or an intimate, original film like *A Delicate Fire* for Pinchgut Opera?

Whatever I'm doing, I always go to the source material. Always back to the original text.

Especially for big shows like *La traviata* which sometimes come with certain expectations from the audience. *La traviata* was a play and a novel before it was an opera and before that, it was a true story. Going back to that material gives a much clearer understanding of the intent of the story. I was working with Shannon Burns on the waltzes, and the waltz was considered a very sexually charged dance at the time; it was the dance of fallen women. The libretto was considered completely immoral and there was talk of it being banned.

You won't understand these elements of a story if you just do what's been done in the past without going to the source material and uncovering what might have been lost along the way.

What do you look for in a performer?

What I look for in a singer – and this is something that Melba is particularly good at – is someone coming in as prepared as they can possibly be. Stacey Alleaume, whom I just directed in *La traviata*, is the Melba poster child for preparation. A big part of my job as director is throwing curve balls, getting people out of their comfort zone which works when they're prepared.

If you know the music and the text inside out, including the scenes you're not in – which often tell you a lot about your character – then we can play. If a singer comes in prepared and they've done their homework then they can explore all the details of characterisation. You prepare so you're free.

After that, I really value a spirit of truthfulness. If a singer is there with honesty, and it's not all about looking good or being beautiful, but they are being truthful and authentic, then it will be beautiful anyway. They go on the journey of the story, and they take the audience on that journey.

That can be stressful or uncomfortable for a singer, because it makes them vulnerable. But when a singer doesn't do that, it's like they're performing from behind a veil or a piece of glass.

What attribute of an emerging artist is most important to you as a director?

Understanding that failing is OK.

There is a reason the Italians call rehearsals *prova* – try! Give it a try. It's not called 'win'. It's not called 'let's nail it the first time'. It's called 'try'.

And I will keep saying it to young singers: just try. Maybe it takes you somewhere interesting, or you really hear or see why something doesn't work and then you won't do like that again.

Sometimes, as the director, I say 'try this' and as soon as I see it in action I think 'what was I thinking?!' But that's the point of *prova*. It's a journey and a process. It's about being courageous and allowing yourself to be thrown into the thrilling ride of not everything working all the time. It's so good because we're sculpting the work as we go.

What do you think is the most important thing for emerging artists to consider in preparation for a diverse career?

It really can't be overstated that interpersonal relationships, word of mouth and reputation are the most important currencies in this industry.

A lot of people become obsessed with having a perfect website, headshot and social media profile. These things are important, absolutely, but they have far less power than being endorsed by word of mouth in the community. If you're the kind of person who can say 'yes', foster good working relationships – regardless of who or what status they are – something will come out of it.

I recently became the director of the Old Fitz Theatre and that came about from relationships. Everybody knows each other, so you never know where you're going to end up.

What is the role of an organisations like Melba Opera Trust in the opera industry?

I see Melba as being a great operatic gym. Where singers can get fit, but they're not exposed to some of the pressures of the industry. Melba makes it clear to artists what the industry standards are. The amount you should be practising, how much language study you need. And consolidating that you need a ferocious work ethic, there's no getting around that. Melba sets a certain standard. I've seen it with the artists I've worked with because they come out of the program ready to go.

Melba is also a great connector, in terms of meeting those industry contacts and making impressions as a young artist.

Which brings us to the upcoming Mentor Module. This year's program has a strong focus on working with a variety of directors which was difficult last year due to COVID-19. You will be bringing choreographer and collaborator Shannon Burns to your stagecraft sessions. What words of wisdom will you bring?

The importance of movement for a performer. It is the way you physically embody a character, the way you move, the way you hold yourself. And that can physically manifest by being the most over-the-top cartoon character imaginable, or it



might be a sense of charged stillness. It is a skill and a technique that will take you very far and will ultimately aid the voice, I believe, if the body is in tune with what you are trying to do emotionally.

Opera singers need to do so much acting when they're not singing. They can't drop their character physically when they're not singing, they need to continue to embody the role.

The age of the 'park and bark' is over. What's happening in Europe in the great houses, the level of performance, and the acting required, shows us that movement is really valuable.

What is in the future for opera?

The appetite for live performance now is more than it's ever been because we've been digitally sanitised. I think the improvements in the digital world are really exciting in terms of the gateway to experiencing opera, but I think the appetite to be in the room is huge right now.

Making opera affordable to bigger audiences, including students. I know some opera companies are bringing in \$20 tickets to make it accessible. I think that's a way to cultivate long-term subscribers in people who will support the form emotionally and financially.

But especially what I'm seeing and what I want to be part of is more opera going back to the source material. Recognising that what we're seeing on stage might also be a true and devastating story, understanding that a waltz isn't just for sunset cruises on the Danube.

I'm hopeful and excited for the future. Opera has been dying since the 1600s! There are so many lessons to be learned from honouring that past, and making it work for now.

Melba Opera Trust's Mentor Program is made possible by John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith, the Reilly & Logie-Smith Mentor Endowment, and the The Robert Saltzer Foundation

Creating tangible professional pathways for Indigenous opera singers

Deborah Cheetham AO discusses continued importance of the **Harold Blair Opera Scholarship**, and her latest production, *Parrwang Lifts the Sky*, featuring alumni of the program.

“I’m in town for our youth outreach program.”

Deborah Cheetham AO is on route to Shepparton and the program she’s referring to is Short Black Opera for Kids, a regional engagement and development program for young Indigenous people aged 8–16. Participants of the program develop musicianship, stagecraft and song writing in preparation for singing with the Dhungala Children’s Choir. The choir has performed at Hamer Hall, the Sydney Opera House and the ARIAs.

It was a chance encounter at a community engagement program just like this one that provided the genesis for Melba Opera Trust’s stewardship of the Harold Blair Opera Scholarship.

“I was running a regional engagement program in Armidale,” says Cheetham, “when I was approached by Jenny Crew.”

Jenny was a child in 1945 when her grandparents, John and Gwenda Lloyd, invited then 17-year-old Harold Blair to live with them for the duration of his 3-year diploma at Melba Conservatorium on Albert Street. Following Blair’s death in 1973, Jenny’s family had continued his legacy with a fund to sponsor the development of Indigenous opera singers.

“Jenny wanted the fund to be more targeted,” says Cheetham. “It takes a long time and a lot of money to develop a singer. I knew Amy [Black] and Melba Opera Trust, and I knew they could turn it into

something really tangible for Aboriginal singers. Once you’ve done your training, you need that next level of development. That’s what Melba does so well.”

The inaugural recipient in 2012 was Tiriki Onus, and it has since been awarded to Shauntai Batzke and Georgina Hall. Both Shauntai and Georgina will appear in Cheetham’s upcoming opera *Parrwang Lifts the Sky* with Victorian Opera in June, Hall in the title role of Parrwang and Batzke as Mrs Waa.

“I wrote the role of Mrs Waa particularly for Shauntai and it’s the second role I’ve written for her, the first being Old Alice in *Pecan Summer*.”

Based on a traditional story from Wadawurrung Country, *Parrwang Lifts the Sky* is a story of the bravery required to create a new world after a time of darkness. The opera will be sung in both English and Wadawurrung language. Melba alumnus Michael Petruccelli also has a role.

According to Cheetham, the Melba Program provides the kind of development that is absolutely essential to a forging an opera career, and that it’s been really exciting to see what has been achieved through the partnership.

“I couldn’t be more proud of the Harold Blair artists and where they have gone. Melba brings the best people into the room so the artists can see what it takes to succeed.”

“Because you are not just a singer when you’re on stage. You are a singer with every breath you draw.”

“It’s that intense devotion that I expect of the singers I work with. And what I expect of myself.”



DEBORAH CHEETHAM AO



GEORGINA HALL

Harold Blair Opera Scholarship
Ruskin Opera Scholarship 2017, 2019



SHAUNTAI BATZKE

Harold Blair Opera Scholarship 2014, 2015

“For First Nations people, the arts have always been indivisible. The singer is the dancer, the dancer is the painter, the painter is the storyteller. We are stronger when we are not siloed.

Opera is all the arts combined.” – Deborah Cheetham AO



Virtual Reality at Nellie Melba Retirement Village

In an exciting partnership between Inverse, Ryman Healthcare and Melba Opera Trust, residents at Nellie Melba Retirement Village had the rare chance to experience opera in virtual reality.

The pilot program aimed to measure the therapeutic benefits of VR and music with a fully simulated front row experience.

The 60-minute recital featured alumni Stacey Alleaume, Nathan Lay, Michael Petruccelli, internationally renowned pianist Amir Farid, and was hosted by the presenter of the ABC’s ‘The Opera Show’, Mairi Nicolson.

With no shortage of digital experiences on offer, adding a virtual element to the music made the recital all the more exciting. In the virtual audience was acclaimed soprano, former Director of the Melba Memorial Conservatorium of Music – and resident of the village – Nance Grant MBE.

Ryman Healthcare’s Operations Quality Manager Joanne Wang said they were excited to be part of the VR opera pilot.

“There’s a mountain of research showing that music can have a hugely positive impact on people living with dementia. It can connect them to people and places in their past, stir emotions and memories, and just generally improve their wellbeing.

“Music is a life-enriching experience for people of all ages, and a big focus at all our villages is ensuring residents can continue to do the things they’ve loved doing their whole lives.”

Melba Opera Trust is proud to be working in partnership with Inverse and Ryman to deliver a series of VR performances featuring current artists and alumni. These performances will continue to be shared with the aged care sector.



VR at Nellie Melba Retirement Village.
Image: Ryman Healthcare



Introducing: Melba Amphora a new wine by De Bortoli

For decades, De Bortoli has paid tribute to Dame Nellie Melba with their ‘Melba’ brand. Consisting two premium Cabernet Sauvignons – Melba Vineyard and Melba Reserve.

To celebrate the 160th anniversary of her birth, De Bortoli released a new addition to the range on May 19, her birthday, or as they call it ‘Melba Day’.

Melba Amphora is made from an exceptional Cabernet Sauvignon grape grown on the Melba Vineyard. The term ‘amphora’ refers to a traditional clay vessel, and amphora-aged wine is a traditional method of winemaking dating back more than 6,000 years ago. What makes this wine unique, and forms the basis of its name, is that it has been aged in clay.

This traditional method has long been used in Old World wine regions, but it is experiencing a renaissance in New World regions like Australia and the USA.

The fruit is hand picked, meticulously sorted and destemmed to 1,000L Amphoras. The skins are hand plunged during fermentation, the Amphora

is topped and the wine sits quietly for 150 days soaking up colour from the skins and softening the tannin. The fruit and wine that has already started to soften, is removed from the Amphora, pressed from the skins and then matured for a further 150 days in older French oak.

Melba Opera Trust and De Bortoli Wines have enjoyed a long partnership celebrating Dame Nellie Melba, with shared family values and appreciation of traditional methods, viewed through a modern lens.

TASTING NOTES

Variety: Cabernet Sauvignon

Vineyard: Melba Vineyard. First planted in 1971 with additional plantings in 1987, 1988 and 1990.

Region: Yarra Valley

Tasting Note: Bright, medium red with bright edges. Haunting, ethereal, scented autumnal aromas. Mouth filling flavours, quite supple, arised tannins, gentle, earthen and complex.

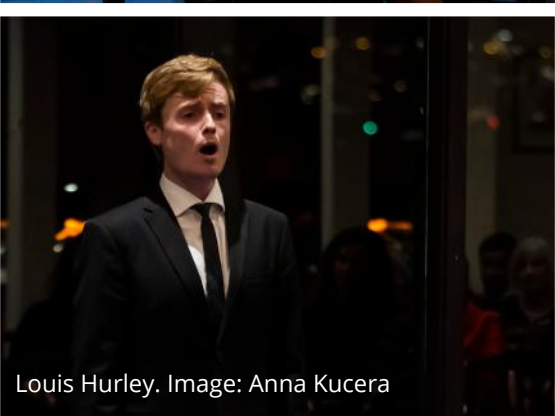




Meet the Artists. Su Chuong, Nathan Bryon, Louis Hurley, Emilia Bertolini, Georgia Melville, Katherine Allen, Chloe Harris. Image: Anna Kucera



Nathan Bryon. Image: Anna Kucera



Louis Hurley. Image: Anna Kucera



Kris Neill, Katherine Allen, Annie McFarling. Image: Maia Hanrahan



Jeremy Ruskin, Nathan Bryon, Roz Zalewski-Ruskin. Image: Maia Hanrahan



Su Chuong, Assoc. Prof Andrew Cochrane. Image: Dean Phipps

Meet the Artists, 2021

April 11, 14 and 15 at Victorian Artists Society, Joan Hammond Hall and Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron.

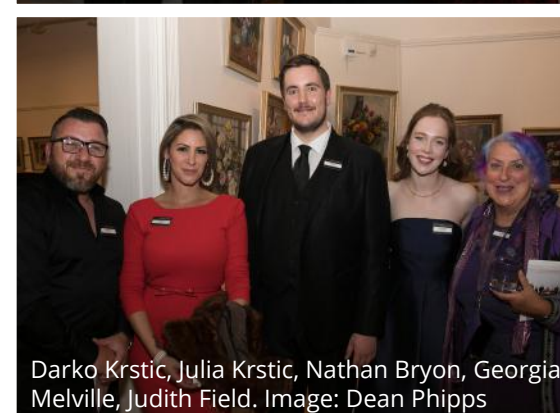
It was wonderful to reconnect with our community in April for a series of live Meet the Artist performances in Melbourne and Sydney.

For the 2021 Melba Artists this was their first time performing all together, and a long-awaited opportunity to speak with the donors who make the program possible.

The performances consisted an uplifting program of songs, inspired artist addresses and ended with an encore of Dame Nellie Melba's famous 'Home, Sweet Home'.



Garry Fehring, Lady Southey, Stephen Shelmerdine, Sharolyn Kimmorley AM, Kate Shelmerdine. Image: Dean Phipps



Darko Krstic, Julia Krstic, Nathan Bryon, Georgia Melville, Judith Field. Image: Dean Phipps



Katherine Allen. Image: Dean Phipps



Louis Hurley, Prof. Mary-Jane Gething. Image: Dean Phipps



Warwick Bisley, Emilia Bertolini, Paulette Bisley. Image: Dean Phipps



Chloe Harris, Valma Alloway OAM, Pauline Cleary. Image: Dean Phipps



Chloe Harris. Image: Anna Kucera



Deborah Humble, Dr Bruce Caldwell. Image: Anna Kucera



Performance Program

A live opera performance is an extraordinary experience and one that belongs not only in concert halls but in gardens and dining rooms alike. Our Performance Program can enhance your event, giving your guests the unforgettable experience of a private opera performance. Designed to give artists real-world experience, the Performance Program puts their extensive training into practice.

By engaging artists for your event through the Melba Performance Program you play an essential role in supporting their development in preparation for their international career.

For more information, visit:

www.melbaoperatrust.com.au/performance-program/



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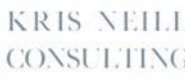
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