

THE MELBA

MAGAZINE OF MELBA OPERA TRUST

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MELBA ON TOUR

THE LEGACY OF HAROLD BLAIR AM

ANNOUNCING THE SHAROLYN KIMMORLEY ARTISTIC ENDOWMENT

Contents

Note from the
Chief Executive Officer

2

A dedication to
Elizabeth Wright-Smith

2

2023 recipient of the Dame
Heather Begg Memorial Award

3

Securing the future of
artistic excellence

4

Learning from the best
in the business

5

An evening with Yvonne Kenny AM

6

Au revoir to Natalie Grimmett

6

The legacy of Harold Blair AM

7

Once a Melba, always a Melba

8

Melba on Tour

10

Preserving culture,
shaping the future

11

At home with Quest

12

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 opera’s world stage.

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Oliver Heuzenroeder in Masterclass with Michael Schade OC, photography by David Ng

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

Note from the Chief Executive Officer

Welcome to the Spring Edition of *The Melba*. It’s been an exciting, action-packed year for Melba and we’re delighted to share some of our highlights in the pages to follow.

In September artists completed their seventh and final module of the year – and what a finish it was. In addition to regular language coaching, business sessions and rehearsals, other highlights included a conversation with Simone Young AM, vocal coaching with Michael Schade OC and a masterclass with Jessica Pratt. Read more about these precious opportunities on page 5.

The Performance Program has also kept artists busy entertaining audiences at the annual opera nights of The Australian Club and The Melbourne Club, an Opera Society luncheon, Father’s Day at Coombe, a sold-out Beleura concert and our recent *Melba Artists in Concert* at the Malthouse Theatre, to name a few.

We have now reached a bittersweet time of year, as we farewell some of our current artists whilst simultaneously preparing for our next round of auditions and alumni grants in November. Read updates from the 2023 cohort throughout the magazine.

A significant highlight this year has been our inaugural international study tour, made possible thanks to generous grant funding from the Prior Family Foundation. The objective of the tour was to create a world-class immersive learning experience: establishing career pathways, building international connections and prioritising language development.

Connecting to alumni was also a focus of the tour, and it was a joy to see friendships forming between past and present Melbas. We are so fortunate to have such a warm, generous and vibrant community of alumni who are willing to support and celebrate each other. In this industry, it makes the world of difference. You can read more about the tour on pages 10 and 11.

The work of the study tour was a practical extension to our core work in the Melba Program: establishing sustainable careers with artistic excellence.

Striving for artistic excellence is in our organisational DNA. Melba was known for her quote ‘If I’d been a housemaid, I’d have been the best in Australia – I couldn’t help it. It’s got to be perfection for me.’ It’s a sentiment that the Melba Program embodies, instilling in our artists attention to detail and thorough preparation.

Much of this comes down to artistic leadership and, if it began with Dame Nellie Melba, it undoubtedly carries through in the work of our Artistic Manager Sharolyn Kimmorley AM.

It could not be more appropriate that the quality and high standards of education she has helped instil in the Melba Program will now remain a focus forever, thanks to the extraordinary generosity of Peter Griffin AM and Terry Swann, who have launched an endowment to be named the Sharolyn Kimmorley Artistic Endowment.

We hope that others will join Peter and Terry in pledging their support to this ground-breaking initiative. Read more about the Sharolyn Kimmorley Artistic Endowment on page 4.

In closing, I take this opportunity to thank all of our community for their participation and support this year. The accolades celebrated in this magazine are only possible thanks to the exceptional power of philanthropy, and I deeply appreciate the loyal support we receive from you. I hope you enjoy this edition of *The Melba*.

To find out how to become more involved in supporting Melba through tax-deductible giving or bequests, please contact Catherine McElhone, Philanthropy Manager.



Amy Black, Chief Executive Officer

Celebrating the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award

On 16 November we will celebrate the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award with a special performance and reception at The Alexandra Club, Melbourne, thanks to our hosts Nola and Ernest Dawes OBE OAM.

All ticket proceeds directly support the Award. Tickets are now available (unless sold out prior) via **www.trybooking.com/1126174** or call the Melba Office for assistance (03 9944 2100).

A dedication to Elizabeth Wright-Smith

This edition of *The Melba* is dedicated to our friend Liz.

Liz was sunshine, lighting the room with her warm smile, fabulous sense of humour and genuine interest in everyone she met.

Together with her loving husband John, Liz’s enthusiasm, steadfast belief and extraordinary generosity has helped pave the path for the world-class program we have today.

Her influence shines ever brightly in the artists she and John have supported through their scholarship, their alumni grant and their major gift to the Mentor Program.

Liz will be greatly missed, and we send our deepest condolences to John and the extended Wright-Smith family.



Liz is pictured with John and Melba Artist Brenton Spiteri, after being awarded a Melba Medal in 2014.

Nathan Bryon announced as the 2023 recipient of the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award

As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award, we are proud to announce that this year’s recipient is NSW tenor Nathan Bryon.

STORY DEANNE SHELDON-COLLINS



Image: Anna Kucera



Image: Valentina Sadiul Photography

Established in 2013, this important award provides \$25,000 in funding to an emerging singer from Australia or New Zealand. It stems from the will of Dame Heather Begg DNZM OBE (1932–2009), a mezzo-soprano whose own operatic career spanned the globe. ‘She was in the profession for a long while, and she saw a lot of young careers bloom and flourish and others flounder’, says Moffatt Oxenbould AM, a Trustee of Dame Heather Begg’s estate. ‘I think her intention was that the Award should make more people succeed.’

Nathan says he is ‘honoured’ to be this year’s recipient. ‘It is a very full circle moment for me, as many of the Australasian singers I most admire have been past recipients and gone on to have exciting international careers.’

These previous recipients are a group of acclaimed singers who are defining the next generation of opera: Samuel Dundas, Janet Szepei Todd, Amina Edris, Jeremy Kleeman, Emily Edmonds, Lauren Fagan, Nicholas Jones, Fleuranne Brockway and Filipe Manu.

‘It’s very expensive for people to set up a home base in another country as their careers are beginning, to be able to afford the right number of lessons and coaching, to be able to make the most of the career opportunities they have’, explains

Moffatt. This funding has a significant impact on the pathways of young singers, helping ‘to ensure that they have the best possible opportunity to realise their potential and make the careers that they deserve’.

Nathan, who was a Melba Artist from 2020 to 2022 (Ruskin Opera Scholarship and Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship), is one of several recipients who are also Melba Alumni. Now studying in the United States, he is undertaking his second year at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM). He recently returned from the Aspen Music Festival, where he performed in Jimmy Lopez’s contemporary opera *Bel Canto* and covered the roles of Arbace and the High Priest in Mozart’s *Idomeneo* under the artistic leadership of Renée Fleming and Patrick Summers. His upcoming projects include Rinuccio in *Gianni Schicchi* with SFCM Opera and Tamino in *The Magic Flute* with Livermore Opera.

These successes are evidence of Nathan’s operatic talent but also highlight how important recognition and support is to this stage of his progress. As a busy student preparing for a career as a singer, Nathan says that funding from the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award will be ‘extremely useful in solidifying the path from study into the profession’.

The Award helps maturing artists reach their full potential, and recipients can use the funding in ways that are tailored to their needs. ‘The award can respond to the realities of the moment’, says Moffatt. ‘There is no career path that is going to be identical to any other ... All careers have ups and downs ... but the basis of it is to have a securely founded technique and to be absolutely prepared and have realised potential.’

The Award has established an extraordinary legacy over the last decade, helping to shape the careers of young artists in a highly competitive industry. ‘With every success that the individuals have, we feel genuine pride and immense pleasure that the award has been part of that’, says Moffatt. As it continues to provide opportunities for emerging artists, the award will remain what he describes as ‘a remarkable tribute to a wonderful lady’.

‘Dame Heather, like so many singers, loved good singing. And she was also a considerable actor and complete artist, a wonderful singer and a magnetic performer. (We) look for people who, if Heather were in the room to talk about it, would be the sort of artist she would be responding to. Because she was such a dedicated, professional and multi skilled operatic performer, as we hope all of these singers can be.’

Past recipients of the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award



Image: David Notes

2013 Samuel Dundas, baritone
Samuel recently performed Wolfram in *Tannhäuser* for Opera Australia and The Count in *Capriccio* for Victorian Opera. In December he will create the title role in the world premiere of Richard Mills’ *Galileo* for Victorian Opera.



Image: Blueprint Studios

2016 Jeremy Kleeman, bass-baritone
Based in London, Jeremy recently completed a very successful season as Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte* for Opera Queensland and in November will perform Figaro in a new production of *The Marriage of Figaro* for State Opera South Australia.



Image: Edmund Choo

2019 Nicholas Jones, tenor
Nicholas recently joined l’Opéra national de Paris as a Principal Artist. His roles in the current season include Vitek in *The Makropulos Case*, Poisson in *Adriana Lecouvreur* and Pong in *Turandot*.



2014 Janet Szepei Todd, soprano
Now living in Los Angeles, Janet recently performed in the Joe Hisaishi Symphonic Concert for Wolf Trap Opera, then to a sell-out stadium crowd at the Hollywood Bowl with Los Angeles Philharmonic.



Image: Michelle Grace Hunder

2017 Emily Edmonds, mezzo-soprano
In September Emily performed *Quatre instants* by Finnish-French composer Kaija Saariaho in Sydney Chamber Opera’s *Earth.Voice.Body* and in November will perform Cherubino in a new production of *The Marriage of Figaro* for State Opera South Australia.



2021 Fleuranne Brockway, mezzo-soprano
Fleuranne has been a member of the ensemble at Staatstheater Wiesbaden since 2019. Her performances this season will include Second Lady in *The Magic Flute*, Meg Page in *Falstaff*, Sonjetka in *Lady Macbeth from Mtsensk* and Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel*.



Image: Capucine de Chocqueuse

2015 Amina Edris, soprano
Based in Paris, highlights of Amina’s year have been Manon at Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona and Manon at Opéra Bastille in Paris. Her 2024 performances will include Liù in *Turandot* at Teatro San Carlo in Naples and Beatriz in *The Exterminating Angel* at l’Opéra national de Paris.



Image: Victoria Cadisch

2018 Lauren Fagan, soprano
Lauren recently performed Roxana in the Lithuanian premiere of *King Roger* by Karol Szymanowski, as part of the Pažaislis Music Festival. Upcoming performances include Gutrune in a new production of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* for Opernhaus Zürich and Gretel in *Hansel and Gretel* at the Royal Opera House.



2022 Filipe Manu, tenor
Filipe’s 2023/2024 season will include Nemorino in *The Elixir of Love* in the Glyndebourne Autumn Season, Ferrando at the Wiener Staatsoper in a new production of *Così fan tutte* directed by Barrie Kosky and Eduardo in *The Exterminating Angel* at l’Opéra national de Paris alongside fellow award recipient Amina Edris.



Image: Nico Keenan

Securing the future of artistic excellence

Peter Griffin AM and Terry Swann spoke about what inspired them to launch an initiative in honour of Sharolyn Kimmorley AM

STORY DEANNE SHELTON-COLLINS

‘We think that providing assistance to fund the development of young people is hugely important in the community’

Peter Griffin AM

We are honoured to share the news of an endowment launched by the generosity of longtime Melba Opera Trust supporters Peter Griffin and Terry Swann.

Established by The Peter Griffin AM and Terry Swann Foundation, the Sharolyn Kimmorley Artistic Endowment will fund the role of Artistic Manager in perpetuity. Terry and Peter have begun the initiative with an extraordinarily generous gift of \$650,000 across the next five years, and they hope that others will join them in pledging support to grow this endowment.

‘We think that providing assistance to fund the development of young people is hugely important in the community’, says Peter. ‘Melba has positioned itself uniquely in this regard ... to assist in the development of raw talent.’

‘Australia is quite isolated from the rest of the world,’ says Terry, ‘and it’s really important that our young talented people get the opportunity ... to experience opera on a global scale. And they need Melba to assist in all that.’

The endowment is named in honour of Sharolyn Kimmorley, whose contribution to the Melba Program’s high standards inspired the gift. As Chair of the Melba selection panel, Artist Advisor, and more recently Artistic Manager, Sharolyn has played a vital role in the success of countless young singers and répétiteurs.

‘Sharolyn strives for a degree of excellence across many, many fields, not just the way the students sing and how they sing, but how they present themselves’, says Terry. ‘She can see not only just the voice but the whole person and what that person actually needs or requires.’ This focus on ‘not just the voice but everything else that goes with it’ demonstrates the ethos behind Melba Opera Trust, which is driven by Dame Nellie Melba’s conviction that ‘a beautiful voice is not enough’.

As major supporters of the arts, Peter and Terry recognise that there are experts ‘behind the curtain’ who help to bring out the best in performers without being in the spotlight themselves. Setting up this endowment and naming it after a ‘quiet but vital’ part of the organisation, is a way to acknowledge the hard-working artistic development that takes place behind the scenes.

‘It’s critical that there’s an artistic director who’s got the experience and commitment to carry out this role’, says Peter. The goal of the endowment is to permanently secure the position of Artistic Manager, guaranteeing that the Melba Program will always be guided by a professional dedicated to young artist development, mentoring, fostering quality and the pursuit of artistic excellence.

‘Peter and I always feel that if you really help a young person with education, it’s life changing for them’, says Terry, adding that if emerging artists ‘can follow their passion and their dream, that’s a wonderful thing to be able to do’.

Peter notes that opera ‘is the most expensive form of theatrical presentation, and everywhere it requires either public or philanthropic money to keep it going.’ Philanthropic support will be crucial to reaching the endowment’s ultimate goal of \$2 million, and contributions from Melba donors will make the success of the endowment a community effort.

‘I am very humbled by the generosity and vision of Terry and Peter in ensuring the ongoing excellence of the Melba Program through their very generous endowment of the position of Artistic Manager,’ says Sharolyn. ‘The Melba Program is unique, and it is reassuring to know that our work will continue into the future as we identify and develop the future generations of artists.’

‘I thank Peter and Terry for their visionary philanthropy’, said CEO Amy Black when announcing the endowment at our Melba Artists in Concert performance in September. ‘And I join them in expressing Melba’s appreciation and respect for Sharolyn, for what she has personally achieved as an artist, and what she has given to so many artists throughout her career. She is revered by artists and industry alike – and we are so fortunate to have Australia’s best leading our program each year.’

For more information about how to become involved with the Sharolyn Kimmorley Artistic Endowment, please contact Philanthropy Manager Catherine McElhone on (03) 9944 2100.



Image: Clare Haman



Image: David Ng

Learning from the best in the business

It isn't often that three of the world's most acclaimed performers are in Melbourne at the same time, but in August, Simone Young AM, Michael Schade OC and Jessica Pratt were in town for Victorian Opera. Happily, they all agreed to take time out of their demanding rehearsal schedules to share their expertise and practical advice with our artists.

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT

Simone Young and Michael Schade

Having collaborated many times in Vienna and Hamburg, Australian conductor Simone Young and German-Canadian tenor Michael Schade were reunited in Melbourne for Strauss's *Capriccio*.

In conversation with our artists, Simone stressed the importance of musicianship and observing questions of style. She also prioritised language acquisition for performers wanting to achieve an international career, contending that there's a tremendous difference between merely translating a text and the deep understanding of words that comes only with fluency. Expert in French, Italian and German, Simone particularly advocated the study of the latter because of the greater opportunities for work in Germany. And there is no substitute for learning a language in the country in which it is spoken.

Simone asked each singer about their vocal type and their repertoire. She emphasised learning parts appropriate to their age and stage of development and to audition singing arias from an opera only if

they are prepared to sing the entire role. Simone also recommended listening to the best singers of the past and of today, so that the artists could appreciate the history of singing. Her advice also touched upon the benefit of allowing time to travel and rest between busy periods of engagement.

Michael Schade, too, is in high demand at all of the top opera companies. In *Capriccio*, Michael sang the role of the musician Flamand who, during the plot's deliberation upon whether music or words are more important, declares 'Prima la musica' – First the music. When coaching the artists, however, Michael said that, with the greatest music, it is the words that come first. No surprise then that he underlined the necessity of correct pronunciation.

Michael's take on auditions included two suggestions. First, a singer must have at least one aria that is so in their voice they can sing it at 5.00am in the morning! Second, they should pretend that the audition is taking place on their birthday. This helps to take the pressure off and makes it a celebration. And rather than be intimidated by the illustrious names of those who have sung in these theatres before, singers should think 'it's cool that I am here', that 'I am worthy, and, even if nothing comes of this, I have had this moment.'



Image: David Ng

'The most important thing is to sing really beautifully'



Image: Klaus Lefebvre

Michael often employed food analogies to make his point, saying that each singer has a unique flavour and colour, like ice cream. An artist must 'buy into their colour', and there's no point imitating others. You are not the second Fritz Wunderlich but the first you. 'You can only be your personal best.' Ultimately, Michael urged everyone to 'to follow your inner muse', that is, whatever drives you to come out and stand before an audience. One must remember that 'the loving of it is the be all and end all'. Maintaining that passion will sustain you. 'The difference between you and the person who doesn't have an inner muse is you won't burn out.'

And Michael's parting message? 'The most important thing is to sing really beautifully.'



Image: David Ng

Jessica Pratt

STORY DEANNE SHELTON-COLLINS

In August we were privileged to host a special evening at Astolat, the historic Camberwell property and private home of Deputy Chair Peter Reilly OAM and Linton Soderholm. World-renowned Australian soprano Jessica Pratt worked in masterclass with three Melba Artists: Samantha Hargreaves, Oliver Heuzenroeder and Nina Korbe.

Sharolyn Kimmorley AM accompanied the masterclass, and she spoke about how important it is for artists to connect with and learn from professionals on a global scale: 'It's an international family, the Melba family.'

Masterclasses can be confronting for performers, who share with audiences the normally private process of being critiqued by an experienced professional. A gifted teacher as well as singer, Jessica effortlessly guided the artists through her feedback with humour and warmth.

'Jessica Pratt was a true master of her instrument in that she knew the voice so well that she was able to pinpoint what needed to be corrected in my voice immediately', says Samantha of the experience.

Jessica identified the challenges each artist faced in their chosen pieces, then took them through breathing exercises, posture adjustments, and techniques tailored to their improvement.

'With opera', Jessica said, 'one of the most important things is the silence.' For Samantha's performance of 'O mio babbino caro', Jessica demonstrated ways to draw out pauses and create



an atmosphere that would let an audience 'feel the stillness' of the piece.

'She was very specific and technical with the placement of the tongue and the head', says Samantha, 'and I immediately felt a big difference in the sensation of singing – especially my pianissimo notes.'

For Oliver's rendition of 'Ah! per sempre io ti perdei', Jessica talked through the linguistic differences between singing in English and Italian. Microscopic changes to palette and posture refined his pronunciation and breath control.

When Nina sang 'Je veux vivre', Jessica advised on how to inject more vulnerability into the aria while maintaining its passion, showing Nina ways to control her sound so that it could be more refined as needed.

Many of the changes Jessica suggested were 'micro movements' – tiny shifts of the body and breath. Such movements might be small, but their impact is huge; they are integral to operatic

Images: Nico Keenan



performance and take years to learn. 'Audiences can hear the difference between quality and non-quality', explained Jessica. Even listeners who are not trained in music can pick up on whether a performance is strong, and fine-tuning these nuances will allow the Melba Artists to elevate their performances as they hone their skills.

Jessica encouraged the artists to explore their limits and grow beyond them, rather than 'get away with' passable performances and become complacent in their talents. Although some differences in singing became immediately apparent, Jessica noted that it takes more than a few minutes of training to improve. Instead, she advised the artists on exercises and tips they can build into their long-term practice, habits to develop as they continue preparing for the careers ahead of them.

'I loved it when Jessica said that you need to let the voice travel along the path that you have set', says Samantha. 'If the path is unobstructed and clear, the sound will be beautiful, full and buoyant.'

'With opera', Jessica said, 'one of the most important things is the silence'



The 2023 Masterclass series is sponsored by Dr Bruce Caldwell. Simone Young, Michael Schade and Jessica Pratt appeared courtesy of Victorian Opera.



Au revoir to Natalie Grimmert

Natalie Grimmert has been the recipient of The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship for her two years in the Melba Program.

STORY KATELYN BANNISTER PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID NG

In July the Joscelyne community gathered to hear Natalie perform one final time before she commenced her studies at McGill University in Canada.

The morning began with a warm welcome from Mary-Jane Joscelyne OAM. She shared precious memories of her daughter and emphasised the poignant legacy of Amelia's scholarship: Mary-Jane thanked the donors, and everyone involved, saying 'it is very rare to have a scholarship like this continue for such a long time and to have so many people continue their support. It's wonderful and unique.'

The morning celebrated a great sense of reunion with many of the community having been involved since the scholarship was established by Bill and Mary-Jane Joscelyne in Amelia's memory in 1989.

Mary-Jane read some reflections she had received from alumni about what receiving the scholarship had meant to them:

'The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship is special because of the community of people that surround it ... I believe that community is something that can never be underestimated ... my life has been changed forever by Mary-Jane, her family, and knowing there is a community ... who are committed to making dreams of young people a reality.' Paull-Anthony Keightley

'(It) comes not only with an invaluable year of learning but (also) a built in community. The donors, the Melba staff and teachers and the Joscelyne family ... continue to support the artists and cheer them on well after our time in the program has passed. We are people before we are artists, and having their support and friendship is crucial.' Morgan Balfour

'With The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship ... it is a family!' Fiona Jopson

Guests got to know Natalie better through a brief Q&A, before being awed by her artistic growth, talent and poise through a beautiful performance. Accompanied by Artistic Manager Sharolyn Kimmorley AM, Natalie presented a program including art song and opera, from Schubert to Verdi.

The morning continued with cheerful banter over a cup of tea. It was a wonderful farewell for Natalie, a heartwarming tribute to Amelia and a lovely celebration of community.



An evening with Yvonne Kenny AM

In August the Melba Program hosted a special event in Sydney with celebrated soprano Yvonne Kenny AM back in her hometown on one of her regular visits from the UK.

STORY DEANNE SHELDON-COLLINS PHOTOGRAPHY MAJA BASKA



Yvonne is Professor of Voice at London's Guildhall School of Music & Drama and has enjoyed a long and distinguished international career.

The event took place at the Australian Chamber Orchestra spaces in the scenic Walsh Bay Arts Precinct, against the backdrop of Sydney Harbour. The evening began with a Q&A, in which Sharolyn Kimmorley AM spoke with Yvonne about the industry and the remarkable opportunity that kick-started her international career. Yvonne then worked in masterclass with Melba Artists Nina Korbe and Oliver Heuzenroeder.

Nina sang Ilia's aria 'Solitudini amiche ... Zeffiretti lusinghieri' from Mozart's *Idomeneo*. Yvonne workshopped the character with her, taking Nina through breathing and posture adjustments to draw out a more vibrant interpretation of the role with a freer sound.

Oliver performed 'Bella siccome un angelo' from Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*. Yvonne also refined character with Oliver, who found the experience enlightening: 'Yvonne helped me to realise the extent you need to take the characterisation of an aria, particularly in the bel canto style, so that what might seem too extreme for the singer really does carry to the audience.'

The Masterclass Series, which is sponsored by Dr Bruce Caldwell, provides opportunities for Melba Artists to learn one-on-one from some of the world's most renowned operatic talent. Masters have included Nicole Car, Étienne Dupuis, Simon O'Neill ONZM, Jessica Pratt and Teddy Tahu Rhodes. These sessions demonstrate the core of the Melba Program: helping young artists to develop their skills by learning from professionals at an international level, preparing them for the pressures and expectations of global careers.

'It was a privilege to hear from and sing for such an accomplished singer who is an example of hard work and dedication, particularly before my move to the UK', says Oliver, who has now relocated to England to begin his studies at the Royal Academy of Music. 'I'm really looking forward to working with Yvonne again in London!'

Yvonne has been involved with the Melba Program since its inception, mentoring our artists for over ten years through vocal coaching and masterclasses. 'After many years as a performer both internationally and in Australia', says Sharolyn, 'and now through her teaching at Guildhall School of Music and with the Jette Parker Artists Programme, Yvonne is able to offer a truly international perspective to our aspiring artists.'



Bonjour from Montréal!

It's been three weeks since I touched down in Canada to start my Master's in Opera and Voice at the Schulich School of Music, McGill University, Quebec.

It's summertime in Montreal and the city is alive and bustling! A lot of the roads are closed to cars and the streets are full of people enjoying pop up market stalls, going for bike rides, and enjoying the summer breeze – while it lasts!

I took a hike up Mount Royal to get the best view of my new home – I have to say it's pretty spectacular, and this is even before the leaves start turning into the famous Canadian tapestry of red, orange and gold.

I've also just survived my first week of classes. It's strange to be a student again, but I'm soaking up every minute and excited to hear how I'll be singing at the end of these two years.

Missing everyone back home,

Natalie Grimmert

The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship



Natalie Grimmert – soprano

‘He sang in the first opera at the Sydney Opera House,’ I’m told. ‘Oh,’ I think, ‘was he in *War and Peace*?’ It turns out this is just the first of many things I hadn’t known about the life and achievements of Wulli Wulli tenor Harold Blair.

Yvonne Frindle talks to two Harold Blair artists

The legacy of Harold Blair AM

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

I quickly learn that the first opera to be performed in the newly completed Sydney Opera House wasn’t Prokofiev’s epic but *Dalgerie* by James Penberthy and Mary Durack. Yvonne Kenny, then a student, recalled the cast included dancers from Arnhem Land. And it included Harold Blair, who in 1973 returned to the stage to sing the role of Mundit.

The story of Harold Blair (1924–1976) has been increasingly documented, and his achievements as a trail-blazing First Nations artist – succeeding in what was then an unlikely musical realm – have become more widely known, especially with the Sydney Opera House celebrating its 50th anniversary. Even so, it’s embarrassing to realise that Blair had slipped under the radar in our musical history. The realisation is even more astonishing for First Nations artists like Melba alumnus and Biripi man Elias Wilson, or Nina Korbe, a Koa, Kuku Yalanji (Wakka Wakka) woman and the current Harold Blair Opera Scholarship holder.

‘He was a complete unknown to me,’ says Nina, ‘which is astounding, because his career was monumental.’ As for Elias: ‘I’d been at the Sydney Conservatorium for five years, you think you know about Australian music history, but there was this artist I’d never come across.’

Both Melba artists responded by researching the man for whom their scholarship was named. ‘And I’ve been really glad,’ says Elias, ‘to see how he’s been featured over the past year.’ Those features include a video documentary, *Paving the Way ... Harold Blair: The first Aboriginal opera singer*, released by Museums of History NSW in July, and a panel discussion celebrating Blair’s life and contribution, *First Stories of the House*, as part of the Sydney Opera House’s anniversary celebrations in October.

More than ‘just a singer’

In *Paving the Way*, Blair’s daughter Nerida describes the joy his ‘melting tenor’ gave audiences, while emphasising how he used his charisma and voice as an Aboriginal man to change

attitudes. Even as Blair was paving the way for future artists, he was using his profile as a performer to advocate for his people.

For Nina, that ‘connecting back to community’ is something that has resonated deeply. ‘There were so many facets to him. There was the performer and the voice that we recognise, but also the political and social justice angle as well.’

Finding a voice

‘My struggle as a First Nations artist,’ explained Nina, ‘was that I didn’t publicly acknowledge my heritage through my undergraduate years.’ She wanted the focus on her talent, not her history. ‘And that was a backwards way of thinking about it.’ As a Harold Blair artist, she says, ‘my approach now is to build awareness so that other First Nations performers behind me can have similar opportunities.’

The Harold Blair Opera Scholarship, she continues, ‘has forced me to bring my heritage to the forefront of my identity as an artist ... I have to be vocal and comfortable talking about that part of my heritage. Growing up, I’ve been fortunate to be surrounded by powerful First Nations women. So, this scholarship has given me the confidence to step into that power, and to walk with pride and confidence in my history.’

Elias found that being a Harold Blair artist helped him reconcile his family history and connection to Country with his commitment to classical music and its largely European traditions. ‘When I started at Melba, I had a view of those things being at odds with each other. And the program – experiencing Harold’s legacy, meeting his family and singing in Indigenous contexts – has helped me take ownership of my culture through the lens of music.’

As a powerful example of this, Elias talks about his work in the Victorian Opera production of *The Visitors* (18–21 October, with a cast that also includes Melba alumna Shauntai Sherree Abdul-Rahman). During rehearsals, the performers were encouraged to bring something of their own culture into the roles. ‘I had a bit of a crisis,’ Elias explains,

Image: supplied by National Library of Australia



Image: Pier Carthew



Image: Charlie Kinross



‘because my family has become disconnected from our cultural inheritance through the generations ... But then we realised that disconnection from culture is the story we’re telling in *The Visitors* and I was encouraged to reframe my thinking and think about my own indigeness.’

For Elias, who has recently finished a season in the ensemble of an acclaimed *Sweeney Todd* (directed by Stuart Maunder at the Sydney Opera House), his scholarship experience also gave him increased confidence, and not just as a performer. ‘Harold Blair went off to New York to study at Juilliard,’ he explains, ‘and he accepted support from people around him, which is hard to do sometimes. One thing that Melba taught me is being comfortable accepting help from people who want to support you.’

***The Visitors*
18–21 October, Arts Centre
Melbourne, Playhouse
Presented by Victorian Opera.
An opera by Christopher
Sainsbury after Jane
Harrison’s play.**

Guten Tag!

After undertaking an intensive German language course in Mannheim for three weeks, I’m ready to embark on my journey to Leipzig!

I was recently there in springtime – with the wildflowers and crisp breeze, it felt like a Brisbane winter.

Now I look forward to beginning my studies at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater with teacher Prof. Roland Schubert, who holds the esteemed title of Kammersänger after singing for decades with Oper Leipzig.

I can’t wait to see what the future has in store, I’ll just have to work my hardest to reveal it!

Until next time,

Tom Nicholson

Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship

Tom Nicholson – baritone



Hello Melba family

It’s been lovely to watch my fellow artists jet off overseas!

While I won’t be joining them right now, I’m looking forward to travelling with Queensland Youth Symphony to Austria and Germany at the end of this year to perform. Hopefully I’ll be able to catch up with a few of them on tour.

I’ve had a busy few weeks since the last module, having performed with Camerata for the Brisbane Festival and sung at Beleura, and now going into rehearsals for Queensland Ballet’s *Strictly Gershwin* this week!

Next month I’ll also be heading south to sing for and speak on a panel at the Sydney Opera House discussing Harold Blair’s life and legacy. An exciting back half of the year filled with opportunities for which I’m beyond grateful!

Sending my love,

Nina Korbe

Harold Blair Opera Scholarship and the Ruskin Opera Scholarship

Nina Korbe – soprano





Image: Robert Catto

Once a Melba, always a Melba

Alumni Grant Program

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT

Four alumni received grants from Melba in 2022 – we chat to them to find out how the funds have moved them forward.

Young Jacqueline Porter had no inhibition in raising her hand at school and announcing, ‘I want to sing in class today’. Reflecting that she ‘always had a musical outlet at school, and it was a part of my identity’, Jacqueline fears that today’s students don’t get the same access to music she was so fortunate to receive. Now she’s a passionate advocate to change that.

For several years, Jacqueline has balanced concert work along with teaching. Then COVID-19 cancellations confirmed both the desire and the need to diversify. Already doing her Master of Education, she conducts several school choirs and has private singing students. But, wanting to hone her skills, Jacqueline was inspired to apply for a grant to attend a 10-day intensive in the Kodály method at the Cuskelly College of Music. Kodály includes conducting, musicianship and ensemble work. There is a focus on training the inner ear, which Jacqueline believes ‘is amazing for singers’, as well as pitch, intonation and rhythm. An embodiment of music is a core component, too, with a lot of movement while singing.

Jeremy Kleeman is keen to point out that everyone had trajectories interrupted by COVID-19, but, nevertheless, he uses the word ‘devastated’ three times as he outlines the missed opportunities when he felt forced to leave London, having moved there only four months before to advance his career. Now Jeremy has moved back, thanks to the alumni grant and thanks, too, to the personal generosity of patron Mary-Jane Gething AO. He acknowledges that, without this dual support, these opportunities would not be happening at all.

Jeremy is relieved to be rebuilding his confidence by learning in person again with his teacher, Russell Smyth. ‘When we did get back in a room together it felt like a dream. It was magic.’ He has also been able to work with esteemed coaches like Tony Legge and Carrie Dowdle and his alumni grant has paid for one-on-one acting lessons with Shakespearean actor Scott Brooksbank, too. Jeremy says, ‘You need a bit of an edge to set you apart in the industry and I want that to be acting for me.’

Greetings from London!

I have recently commenced my studies at the Royal College of Music (RCM) in the Master of Performance program, and I feel deeply honoured and privileged to be here. I have already made wonderful connections with students from countries all over the world, and I know that this is the perfect place for me to continue extending my musical and singing pursuits.

Being in London is fantastic, and each day feels like a precious gift. I am so grateful for all the guidance and support Melba has provided me as I prepared for this new chapter in my life. On our first day, Nicholas Sears, Head of Voice at RCM, spoke to the singing cohort about the crucial role our generation must play in shaping the future of music. I feel incredibly encouraged and supported here. Both the faculty and staff have filled me with the inspiration to work diligently and contribute positively to make a change in the world through the power of music.

I hope all of you back home are doing well and enjoying the upcoming warmer days!

James Emerson

John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship and the Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship



James Emerson — bass-baritone

Hello from Sydney

I am excited that I've got several upcoming engagements, including a performance with fellow Melba Artist Nina Korbe at the Sydney Opera House in October.

Then, later this year, I will be playing for a new production entitled *Trackworks*, which is produced and directed by NIDA staff, and will be staged at Sydney's Central Station. This production will feature 15 well known classical arias presented with a contemporary narrative. There will be 36 performances from late November through to December.

I am absolutely thrilled to be part of this project and look forward to further performance opportunities on the horizon.

All the best,

Stacey Yang

Margaret Schofield Opera Scholarship and the Max & Jill Schultz Opera Society Scholarship



Stacey Yang — répétiteur



Since leaving Melba, Katherine Allen's professional highlight was her German debut as Adela in Reimann's *Bernarda Albas Haus* in Gelsenkirchen. Although fiendishly difficult, it was 'more liberating to sing something unknown and make it your own.' How Katherine secured the role is quite a story. During a training course in Graz, Austria, she had to sing for an agent. After her first aria, he dismissed everything else on Katherine's list, asking if she knew 'Quando m'en vo'? She replied 'Er, somewhere in my brain' and, showing tremendous nerve, performed the aria, not having looked at it for ages, with a very kind fellow soprano mouthing the words to help! The agent, obviously impressed, got Katherine her audition at Gelsenkirchen and the rest is history.

The focus of Katherine's alumni grant is to enable her to do more such auditions, aiming to be accepted in a Young Artist Program or to win a fest contract for a smaller provincial house in Germany. But with travel and accommodation costs of an audition being around \$700, the value of her alumni grant is quickly apparent. 'It would have been a case of having to pick and choose which opportunities I went for, which, in an industry saturated with young sopranos, is not a good decision.'

One of Emily Edmonds's most treasured professional achievements was the role of Varvava in *Kát'a Kabanová* at Covent Garden. The moment the production was being revived for Rome Opera coincided with Italy's COVID-19 situation spiralling out of control and she decided to come home to Australia. While Emily says that COVID-19 remains her 'greatest professional challenge', she is determined to come back from this interruption.



'Melba acknowledges that the career can have challenges and that people need help along the way'

Emily has used her alumni grant to help fund an audition tour in the UK and Europe and will tour again in the near future, allowing her to re-establish her career. Returning to the UK will also enable her to renew her Global Talent Visa, of which Emily is justifiably proud, knowing it makes her employable to smaller companies. And, following her first US performances and engaging American agent Justin Werner, Emily is enthusiastic to spread her artistic wings in North America, where 'there is a visceral energy around creating new work'.

Like Katherine and Emily, Jeremy has also used funding to pay for auditions, in his case in France and Germany. 'It's an expensive game, unfortunately', but there are chances opening for him, as well.

Jacqueline loves coaching some of the up-and-coming young singers. 'I can see the positive impact of what I am doing . . . it is a highlight of my day seeing their development.' She is sincerely grateful for the upskilling that the alumni grant allowed her to have. And, in supporting her project, she is delighted that Melba is 'investing in the next generation of singers'.

Katherine says, 'The alumni grant is a small demonstration of how you are once a Melba always a Melba.' Jeremy recalls the same phrase, adding, 'I am so grateful' that 'Melba acknowledges that the career can have challenges and that people need help along the way.'



Katherine Allen
Warwick & Paulette Bisley Alumni Grant

Emily Edmonds
John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Alumni Grant

Jeremy Kleeman
MJ Gething Alumni Grant

Jacqueline Porter
Honor Sambrook Alumni Grant

Greetings from London!

It is surreal to think that I was here just a few weeks ago on the study tour.

I arrived back at Heathrow Airport yesterday, feeling very accomplished as I navigated the Tube successfully. I am so lucky to be supported by the Melba community, not only in Australia, but here in the UK!

I received a very warm welcome from alumni Katherine Allen and Nathan Breeze, who showed me around my new home, Goodenough College. It is only a twenty-minute walk from Guildhall School of Music & Drama, where I will be studying for two years.

Having recently finished my final Melba module, I am feeling primed to begin the course at my best. I am so excited for what is to come.

Cheers,

Samantha Hargreaves

Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship, the Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award and the Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship



Hiya from London

I've been here for just over a week and I'm straight into the deep end of classes at the Royal Academy of Music in beautiful Marylebone. Last week was full of orientation activities and meeting like-minded musicians, as well as getting myself set up in my accommodation at Goodenough College! I have already discovered the bike culture of the city and I've been riding to and from the Academy, which is a great way to get some exercise in and avoid the crammed and hot Underground. The advanced training resources made available to me are amazing; we can book drop-in coaching sessions and diction sessions at any time, and we have been assigned a student accompanist to work directly with for the year – they will accompany me in all of my diction classes and recitals too. It's such a fantastic idea as the singer/pianist relationship is so important. I've also been measured up for my *Ariodante* costume as I am in the chorus for the Royal Academy Opera's first production! Can't wait to get started on that with my fellow musicians.

Looking forward to keeping everyone updated on this exciting next chapter,

Oliver Heuzenroeder

Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship and the Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship



Melba On Tour

In July we embarked on our inaugural international study tour, a project made possible thanks to generous funding from the Prior Family Foundation.

STORY KATELYN BANNISTER



London: Learning together

Four artists in their second year with Melba – Samantha Hargreaves, James Emerson, Natalie Grimmett and Tom Nicholson – participated in a four-week immersive program.

This life-changing opportunity began with a week of group activity in London: the artists made countless connections, attended thrilling performances and worked with industry experts. Much of their time was spent at the Royal Opera House, where they received private coaching from Elaine Kidd (Head of Jette Parker Artists Programme), David Gowland (Artistic Director

of Jette Parker Artists Programme) and renowned vocal coach Tony Legge.

The tour created invaluable connections and opened exciting pathways for the artists, giving them access to the world-class standards for which the Melba Program has been preparing them.

Productions



Travelled by train to Glyndebourne to see Lauren Fagan and Samuel Dale Johnson perform in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



Attended world-class performances at the Royal Opera House: Jette Parker Summer Artists Programme, *La traviata* and *The Marriage of Figaro*.



Visited Opera Holland Park and saw Chloe Harris perform in *La bohème*.

Backstage



A trip backstage with Siobhan following her performance as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*.



Exclusive backstage tour of the Royal Opera House.



Spotted a portrait of Melba, backstage at the Royal Opera House.

Connections



Alumni dinner – connecting our current artists with our UK-based alumni.



Met with artist management company, Harrison Parrott, to gain an international perspective on artist representation and some insights on securing an agent.



Private coaching with Siobhan Stagg at the Royal Opera House.

In Melba's Footsteps



The artists gave their London debut with a special recital in partnership with Tait Memorial Trust. The sold-out performance, *In Melba's Footsteps*, was a triumphant success, generously hosted by Leslie and Peter Macleod-Miller.





Briefly reunited to see Tosca at the Verona Arena in Italy.

Preserving culture, shaping the future

Going to the opera, says David Prior, is a ‘chance to enjoy the beauty of a centuries-old art form’, to be connected to the past.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

He attends the opera with his wife, Sallie, and they both love the way that watching a performance ‘can transport us to a different world’.

They also have a deep appreciation for ‘the complex technical training the artists have to go through in their pursuit of excellence’, and this has led to their generous support of Melba’s work through their Prior Family Foundation.

At the Foundation, David explains, ‘we support projects that focus on “preservation of culture”, and this naturally extends to art as well’. For a traditional art form like opera to survive and grow, it’s important to engage and attract the younger generation, and to support the development of young artists. The Melba study tour, he says, ‘was designed to nurture our best Australian talent on a global stage. We wanted to support the development of Melba Artists by providing them the opportunity to experience first-hand the standard and expectations required at an international level.’

The Prior Family Foundation has a wide remit, supporting diverse projects concerned with environment and wildlife as well as culture, but the common themes are innovation, evidence-based solutions and, above all, preservation.

David and Sallie recognise that many of the world’s problems ‘were masked behind agendas and half-truths. Our intention to do something meaningful and give something back was driven by finding and backing solutions that got to the heart of issues. Our Foundation’s motto is “Say what’s needed, do what works”’.

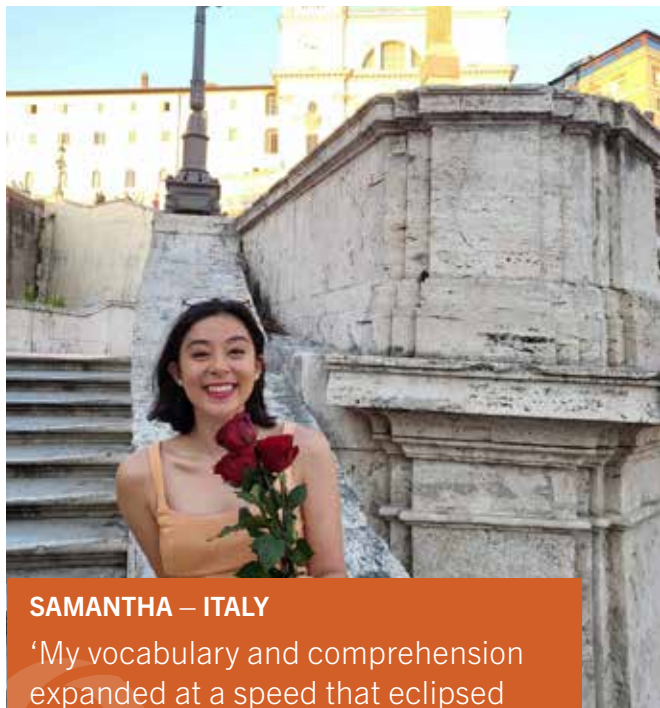
In addition to seeking to influence change in our environmental footprint and reduce the risk to critically endangered species and habitats, they also believe that an understanding of culture and history is essential for communities to live together in harmony, ‘so we want to preserve and strengthen different cultures, especially First Nations’ cultures’.

Preserving the cultural aspect of art relies on the passing down of craft, something which is central to the mission of an organisation like Melba. But there’s more to it than that, says David. ‘Art tells the stories of our ancestors and society. It’s a way we can pass down knowledge and learnings from the past to our future generations.’

‘Art can also be a tool to address key social and environmental issues and to influence change in the future. It encourages people to view the world from a different perspective. It has the power to shape a society.

Europe: Forging their own paths

Following a week of extraordinary experiences in London, each artist travelled to a European destination of their choice to undertake independent learning: Natalie to France, Tom to Germany, and Samantha and James to Italy. Their tailored study plan involved intensive language study, vocal coaching, audition preparation and industry reconnaissance.



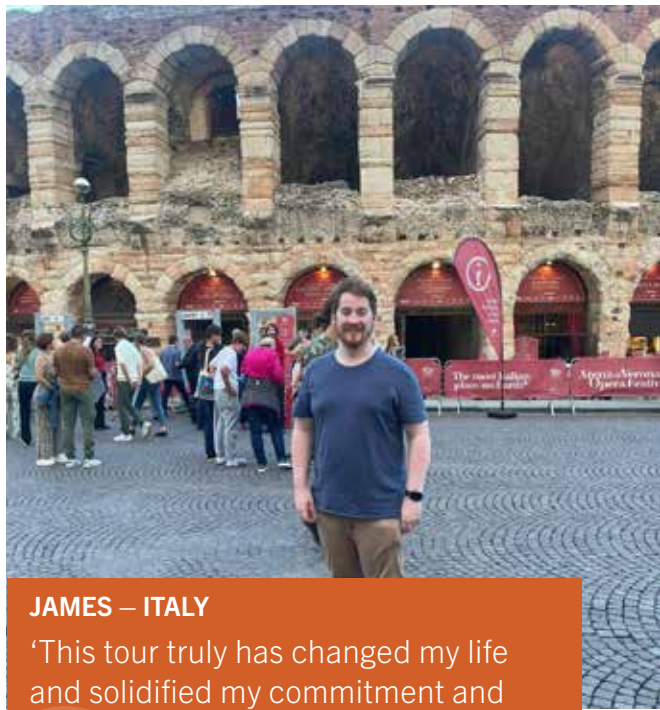
SAMANTHA – ITALY

‘My vocabulary and comprehension expanded at a speed that eclipsed what I learnt over years in Australia.’



NATALIE – FRANCE

‘This study tour has really opened my eyes to the amazing things happening in Europe and the high standards of opera being performed there.’



JAMES – ITALY

‘This tour truly has changed my life and solidified my commitment and dreams to perform and make music part of my life, but also to give back to others in the future.’



TOM – GERMANY

‘Everything I saw, heard and did across England, Germany, Switzerland and Italy has been a truly pivotal opportunity in my development as a singer. The chance to see what I had sung about a thousand times, to stand where the great composers stood remains in my mind a once in a lifetime experience.’



At home with Quest

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT
PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID NG

Cat Mapperson from Quest spoke with Melba about the passion behind our partnership.

Cat Mapperson laughs almost mischievously, recalling how, when she was a youngster, her family would groan about her youthful enthusiasm to get involved in everything cultural that Melbourne had to offer. Born and bred in the city, she became a keen attendee at the ballet, the opera and Melbourne Theatre Company, amongst other pursuits. Now, years later as the owner of Quest St Kilda Road and Quest on Dorcas, these same passions for Melbourne and the arts continue to inspire Cat as she welcomes visitors to the city.

Quest St Kilda Road Melbourne has been Melba Opera Trust's accommodation partner since April 2021. Partially obscured from the street, the property is set back from the footpath, nestling discretely behind Charsfield, one of the very few remaining mansions, which, in times long

vanished, once lined the boulevard as it wended its way south from Flinders Street towards St Kilda. Within strolling distance of Albert Park, Quest is close to Melbourne's arts and sporting precincts, too.

A central aspect of Quest's ethos is building relationships with local communities and, as Cat says, 'to get involved with things that you're passionate about'. Cat was involved in setting up the Melbourne Cabaret Festival and her Dorcas Street property has been its accommodation sponsor for 12 years. She's proud of this partnership, as well as the one with Melba, because they help to showcase the arts, as well as promote the growth of young people. Cat was particularly 'ecstatic and honoured' about collaborating with Melba. 'For me there was that added benefit, not just the arts, but we're developing young people and giving them tools to succeed in life. It's a no-brainer!'

From Melba's perspective, relationships like this are essential to the running of the Melba Program; this in-kind support

allows the organisation to channel precious funds to where they are needed most: undergirding the program and nurturing our artists.

One of this year's interstaters, repeteur Stacey Yang loves staying at Quest, highlighting the staff's friendly attitude. 'They know we're Melba people and that feels very special.' She appreciates the spacious rooms, the kitchenette for cooking and says the gym is excellent! Stacey also likes the leafy location, which is surprisingly quiet and suitable for walking, and there are several excellent coffee shops pretty much next door. Only eight minutes by tram to the Melbourne Opera Centre, Stacey finds it is a stress-free commute to the Melba Program's sessions.

Cat sums up our partnership, saying, 'we are just delighted to be associated with Melba ... we love everything that Melba stands for and is trying to achieve. We are pleased to be a small part of that.' And, as Stacey puts it, 'Yes, Quest does feel like home'.



Thank You

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Sharolyn Kimmorley

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