

THE MELBA

MAGAZINE OF MELBA OPERA TRUST

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PARTNERSHIP WITH COOMBE YARRA VALLEY
IN CONVERSATION WITH CHAIR KATE SHELMERDINE
MORE THAN A VOICE – OUR 2022 ARTISTS IN FOCUS

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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 opera’s world stage.

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Designer

Kerry Aker

Copy writing and editing

Luke Willoughby
Bruce Raggatt
Amy Black

Photo Credits

Pier Carthew
Fi Mims
David Ng
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Cover image

Tom Nicholson, Samantha Hargreaves and Elias Wilson performing at the 2022 *Meet the Artists* concert

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.

Note from the Chief Executive Officer

It’s a pleasure to present the winter edition of this year’s *The Melba* magazine and, in particular, to showcase our 2022 Melba Artists.

From necessity, the last two years have been focused on agility: adapting to support our artists through one of the most challenging times in modern history and doing what we could to remain connected with our community, without whom there would be no Melba Program.

This year, with huge relief, normality is returning. Whilst it has not been without its challenges, our focus is firmly fixed on delivering the highest standard of program to this year’s scholarship recipients.

Being back in the rehearsal room and seeing our new artists working in-person with our extraordinary mentors has brought with it a renewed sense of optimism. And it is thrilling to be able to welcome back international and interstate visitors: Simon O’Neill ONZM, Nicole Car, Étienne Dupuis, Asher Fisch – to name but a few.

With more than 70 mentor sessions programmed and 30 performances scheduled throughout the year, we are

forging on with the business of helping our artists be the best they can be.

Even more heartening is the avalanche of updates we are receiving from our alumni (57 and counting!) who are back performing, learning and building their careers after the long hiatus. Melba alumni are performing throughout the UK, Europe and USA, and closer to home with the state opera companies, state orchestras and Opera Australia. If you are planning some travel, do reach out and we can let you know where there might be a Melba performing near you! There will also be plenty of alumni news in the next edition of *The Melba*.

After so long of not being able to share program activities in-person, we have relished recent opportunities to perform for the community and to again welcome our donors to observe the program first-hand, and the impact of their contribution. We’re looking forward to doing much more of this as the year continues.

Melba holds a critical position in the cultural landscape as an elite training ground for emerging artists, many of whom continue their professional



Amy Black, Chief Executive Officer

careers in Australia and overseas. We do this as an independent organisation and without ongoing government funding.

To those who have enabled the Melba Program through their generous philanthropy, we offer our deepest gratitude.

A tax-deductible gift to Melba Opera Trust not only supports the delivery of our annual program. It also helps us build an endowment to preserve this precious pathway for future generations of Australian opera artists, just as Dame Nellie Melba did for us.

If you are interested to learn more about ways to support Melba Opera Trust, please contact the Melba office, we would love to hear from you: (03) 9944 2100 / info@melbaoperatrust.com.au I hope you enjoy this latest edition of *The Melba*.

Coombe Yarra Valley

a (wine) pairing for the ages

We’re delighted to announce that Coombe Yarra Valley, once home to Dame Nellie Melba, has become the exclusive wine sponsor for Melba Opera Trust.

It is a fitting and historic partnership given the familial links our two organisations share. After all, Dame Nellie Melba was one of the most famous women in the world when she chose Coombe Cottage to be her home in Australia. Purchasing the six-acre dairy farm in 1909, she renamed the property Coombe Cottage after a house she had rented in England while performing in Covent Garden.

The patronage of the organisation began with Nellie Melba, in support of the Conservatorium, and has been passed down through the generations.

Today, Melba’s great-great-granddaughter, The Hon. Saffron Foster, is Honorary Patron.

Hosted by Dame Nellie, and later by Pamela, Lady Vestey, Coombe was the backdrop for many lively picnics raising funds for the Conservatorium, featuring performances by the students.

Melba Opera Trust have been privileged to host soirees and masterclasses

in Melba’s own music room, which leaves an extraordinary impact on our artists. And each year the artists make a pilgrimage to the Valley to better understand Melba, including a visit to Coombe.

This partnership is an excellent opportunity to continue our long association with Coombe and to bring music back to Melba’s home, beginning with a performance for their wine club members in June.

The Hon. Saffron Foster said: ‘I’m absolutely delighted that two organisations with such deep meaning for our family are to be so closely associated once again. Both Coombe and the Conservatorium were very dear to both my grandmother and my great-great-grandmother’s hearts, and it gives me tremendous pleasure to know that Granny Melba’s legacy remains as potent today as it ever was.’

Melba Opera Trust CEO Amy Black said: ‘Coombe is the home of Melba and Melba Opera Trust is her voice. How wonderful that we can bring the two together once again in support of the next generation of opera artists. We are very grateful to Coombe and the Vestey family for their continued support.’



Samantha Hargreaves pictured at Coombe Yarra Valley with the statue of Dame Nellie Melba

Dame Nellie Melba herself has also been immortalised on Coombe’s grounds after the Victorian Government gifted a statue of her to the estate earlier this year. The statue’s former home was previously in Docklands and then, until recently, it resided in storage. The statue was unveiled at a special event at Coombe earlier this month, where our very own Samantha Hargreaves performed ‘Home, sweet home’ as a fitting tribute in honour of the occasion.

COOMBE
YARRA VALLEY

Preserving and enhancing our proud legacy

*In conversation with
Chair Kate Shelmerdine*

The phrase ‘more than a voice’ has always resonated deeply with me.

Arts training organisations are vital in helping artists to develop the kind of strong professional skills that will serve them well in both their career and in their lives in general.



As a member of the Myer Foundation and the current Convenor of the Arts and Humanities Committee of the Sidney Myer Fund, realising the potential of artists in our society has been a guiding principle of my career.

By their very nature, artistic industries tend to be elite and extremely competitive.

The National Institute of Circus Arts (NICA), the Board on which I served for just under 10 years, instilled in me a great passion for helping young artists at that difficult stage between training and work placement. As such, I firmly believe that developing a diverse set of skills beyond the ongoing study of their specific discipline is critical for any young artist.

Not dissimilar to the Melba Opera Trust, NICA emphasised the importance of its artists developing a diverse set of skills well beyond their natural talent. At NICA, excellent circus skills were of course essential, but through the NICA training program, each of these talented young people became a ‘one-man band’ – learning technical skills on many levels over and above their extraordinary circus skills.

Melba too excels at this – the broad, deep and comprehensive training across key skill sets puts our artists in a position to be competitive in an extremely challenging environment both nationally and on the world stage.

As Chair of this small organisation, I am passionate about sustaining and enhancing the proud legacy we have created together as the Melba community.

The necessity for good governance is a key component for the sustainability of any organisation.

It is not uncommon for artistic organisations to be born organically, the result perhaps of a vision to bring to reality a long-held dream or aspiration.

*As Chair of this small organisation,
I am passionate about sustaining and enhancing
the proud legacy we have created together as
the Melba community.*

This can result in that new-born organisation being able to focus solely on the work that it was created to do – which is of course, imperative!

Parallel to this, however, is the need for appropriate constitutional structures and strong governance procedures to be in place, not only to adhere to the important legal frameworks by which we are governed, but for the long-term preservation of the organisation.

This is particularly critical at specific junctures in an organisation’s growth, in order for it to become truly professional.

During my tenure, part of my intention is to build on the excellent work done in this area by former Chair Roz Zalewski.

Further to this, there is much to be done.

To involve more young people in the work we do, to ensure that inter-generational change is to hand, is imperative. Board renewal is very much a part of this.

To this end we are thrilled that Siobhan Stagg has joined the board. It is vital that young people with the right skill sets (and, in Siobhan’s case, an alumna) are represented around the table.

Melba has shown flexibility and resilience over the last few years as the impact of the pandemic has made itself known. This we must build upon, increasing our capacity to adapt where

necessary in order to achieve the goals of the organisation.

In addition, deepening our relationships with our colleagues will strengthen the artistic ecosystem, which is such a vital part of the Australian cultural landscape. Not only organisations involved in opera, but organisations of the same ilk. Shared issues, problems, indeed positive attributes, can only be of mutual benefit. Collegial relationships are vital for organisations such as Melba.

Pivotal to all of the above is, of course, the financial health of Melba.

We are committed to making sure the Melba Program remains financially secure for future generations.

Currently, the Melba Opera Trust endowment covers almost half the costs of running our activities. The annual support we receive from our donors is crucial to making sure we deliver our program each year. After the challenges of the past two years, we are all the more appreciative of the generosity that the Melba community has shown us.

Dame Nellie Melba established her scholarship by bequest in 1931 ‘in the hope that another Melba may arise’. While there can never be another Melba, we must follow her example and nurture both current and future generations to be – that powerful phrase again – ‘more than a voice’.

More than a voice – our 2022

For Dame Nellie Melba, talent alone was not enough. True to Melba's sentiment, our 2022 Melba Artists are so much more than the obvious gifts they possess.

For this feature, we spoke to them to get to know the person behind the talent. We also learnt what inspires and drives them, on and off the stage.



Nathan Breeze

BARITONE

*Annie McFarling Opera
Scholarship*

*Max & Jill Schultz Opera
Society Scholarship*



Su Choung

REPETITEUR

*Margaret Schofield Opera
Scholarship*

Mel & Nina Waters Award

What led you down this path?

I think a love of music in general. I learnt guitar from a young age and had my first band in primary school playing indie rock. Then I moved on to perform in musicals at high school. A real game changer for me was when I switched singing teachers in year 9 and discovered that the classical style of singing really suited my voice.

You're relocating to London soon – how does that feel?

Yes, I'm relocating in September after receiving a scholarship to study Master of Performance, Classical Voice at the Royal College of Music in London. Travelling and relocating has always been part of my life. My dad was in the Air Force, so we moved around a lot – we lived in Malaysia for three years. Living somewhere different is a great opportunity: it opens you to new experiences and helps you see life through the eyes of other cultures.

Outside of opera, do you have any other interests?

When I was younger, I was really into sport, specifically rowing. My last coach was Drew Ginn, three-time Olympic gold medallist. Having a mentor with that level of success was inspiring. It's the same with my musical mentors.

Having someone believe in you who's had real success themselves just gives you so much confidence.

For me, there's a similarity between sport and music. I love the discipline that's needed to practise something and it's the same for music as it was for rowing. I loved training my body for sport and I love training my voice for music.

I think physical fitness is important in opera. Your body is your instrument; you're expected to sing and dance and often you're travelling long distances, so you want to make sure your body is prepared.

I'm also keen on meditation and journalling. I think those reflective pastimes can serve you very well in rehearsal environments when emotions can run high. They help keep me grounded.

What's your end goal?

I think if you get given opportunities, be open to everything – unless it's bad for your voice! I hope that next for me will be a young artists program with an opera company, followed by auditions, competitions and, ultimately, establishing myself as a principal artist in Germany.

What led you down this path?

I was 7 when I started learning the piano. It was out of necessity really as both my parents worked, and my music teacher doubled as daycare! My mum was a singer in Korea. Surprising I know, but I actually hated the piano as a kid. Luckily, I persevered! In the early days, we moved around a lot. So, I changed teachers quite regularly.

I was about nine when I got a regular teacher who really nurtured my growth. When we moved to Sydney, I was introduced to a great teacher who was head of music at the Conservatorium High School. Later I went to university, studying a solo piano degree, in the same building. I learnt a lot at university, but the tunnel vision you're expected to have can limit your creativity a little – I remember distinctly my teacher saying to me 'OK, now you're finished. Now you go to Germany to study opera.' It all seemed a little bit preordained in retrospect.

It wasn't until later when a teacher of mine taught me to work with the voice that I started to consider being a repetiteur.

How do you perceive your role as a repetiteur?

You need to be both a coach and an aide to the singers. I love singers. They

are so vulnerable when they perform: they can't hide behind an instrument.

You're a repeat artist at Melba. Is it difficult to adjust to a whole new cohort?

As I mentioned, every singer is different, so you definitely need to adjust your style to suit the singer.

Each singer has a different rhythm, and as a repetiteur you must respect that, while taking into account the different group dynamics when multiple singers are on stage.

This group is so different to the last cohort, but it's exciting. I'm so excited to be performing with them.

Outside of music, what interests you?

It's very important to have a life outside of your work. Although I find that music starts to bleed into your lifestyle after a while! I have a lot of respect for what pop artists do, (English singer songwriter) James Blake, for example. What he does with his voice is incredible.

I've also started to look at sport a bit differently now. I do fine motor skills all the time but watching sports recently I have a newfound respect for the discipline and talent involved.

Melba Artists in focus



Samantha Hargreaves
SOPRANO

*Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship
Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award
Eleanor Blakemore Opera
Society Scholarship*

What led you down this path?

Well, I'm half Filipino, so music was always around me. There were no family parties without a karaoke machine! It's a very 'musical' language – 'open' sounding with lots of double vowels. I've never met a Filipino who couldn't sing in tune!

In terms of my introduction to opera, we had an Austrian family friend who used to blast Maria Callas whenever he came to visit. He burnt us CDs of her music which left a lasting impact on me. Looking back, it almost feels inevitable I'd take this path.

My first public performance was The Beatles' song, 'While my guitar gently weeps'. The school principal heard it and said I'd be well suited to opera. So, I gave it a go, and I haven't looked back since.

I hear you perform with your sister?

That's right. We're not twins – we were born about 14 months apart. We have very similar voices which means we blend very well when we're singing together. I've never experienced that blend with anyone else.

Any interesting projects you're working on?

I'm preparing the Mozart Requiem Mass and *Coronation* Mass which I'm very excited about. I love Mozart. He wrote for singers and it's always a pleasure to sing his music.

I'm also working on five pieces by the Australian composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks, who should be better known. She's brilliant! As far as we know, these pieces have never been performed to modern audiences, so it's exciting to break new ground.

Outside of opera, do you have any other interests or influences?

I love to read, but I also write my own music. I'm into electronic pop music at the moment.

As far as we know, these pieces have never been performed to modern audiences, so it's exciting to break new ground



Tom Nicholson
BARITONE

*Joseph Sambrook Opera
Scholarship*

What led you down this path?

Well, I've always been musically inclined. All my family play musical instruments and I learnt to play guitar at eight or nine.

I didn't start singing solo until I was around 15 after I began lessons with a classical singing teacher. They recommended the Queensland Conservatorium to me and it was there I met voice teacher, Shelli Hulcombe. She really helped shape my ability. I owe all the skills I've built up over the years to her.

On a personal level, what influenced you?

I'm the youngest of four, and all my siblings are very athletic and very musical. So, I struggled to find anything I was better at than them!

I was always very competitive with them – albeit in a friendly way – and I always wondered what I could do that would be unique to me that hadn't already been done better by my siblings. It turns out I was just waiting to discover it. When I tried classical singing for the first time, I found a skill I didn't know I had.

Outside of music, what are your interests?

Music takes up a lot of time, but I love nature and exploring new places.

I like music outside of opera, too. I bounce around a lot in my tastes – jazz, hip hop, heavy metal, electronic music, film scores.

Any projects coming up?

The production of scenes from *The Marriage of Figaro* at Queensland Conservatorium along with several Melba Opera Trust performances with new repertoire.

I'm also building up my audition repertoire for when I start auditioning.

What's your end goal?

In the short term, I'd love to perfect my craft in Germany and learn the language.

Long term, and I really don't mean this to sound arrogant, but I want to be the best singer in the world. I don't say that because I think I am or even will be!

But I think you must have big goals, especially when singing, because it requires years of perfection and training. I think looking to be the best at something will always encourage you to improve. I believe it's important to set your goals high, even if you don't achieve them. You don't improve unless you're aspiring to emulate other people whom you admire.



Nathan Byron

TENOR

*Ruskin Opera Scholarship
Ryman Healthcare Opera
Scholarship*

How did you first get interested in music?

My primary school received a grant to buy a load of instruments – and I ended up with the phonium, I think, because I was the biggest kid! From then I performed a lot in bands, until I met a singing teacher at the local conservatorium.

I distinctly remember going to my music lessons and hearing this wonderful singing coming from outside one of the nearby doors. Eventually I worked up the courage to knock on that door, and I've been singing ever since.

I hear you have your eyes set on the US as a next step. What's inspiring that?

In high school I went on a trip to Washington DC for a young singers training course. I was impressed by the level of training from the singers I met, and I always wanted to be part of that.

I've now been through the audition process for the San Francisco Conservatorium and I'm thrilled to have received a scholarship for the Artists Diploma Course. I'll be heading off in August for two years of intensive study covering industry, role and languages.

You co-founded an opera company in New South Wales. Can you tell me a little about that?

Pre-Melba, I was locally singing a lot of Baroque music. I really enjoyed the style and the repertoire so, with a harpsichordist friend of mine (also called Nathan!), we decided to start this thing. To perform in the Baroque style needs a very specific skill set and we thought it was a bit of a niche that needed filling.

Outside of music, what interests you?

I really enjoy organisational-type projects. I've done a lot of 'back of house' work in productions, including lighting and sound work. I find it helps as a performer to know what's going on behind the scenes. Sometimes performers aren't fully aware of just how much work is involved in making a production run smoothly. So, a word of advice – always be good to your stage managers!

You're a repeat artist – how has it been adjusting to a whole new cohort?

It's cool. Obviously, when you spend two years performing with artists, you get

to know them well, but it's fantastic to have a whole new cohort with different voices and skillsets. It doesn't hurt that they are all fantastic people, too.

Do you have an end goal in mind, or do you prefer to take each day as it comes?

I think it's important to have both long- and short-term goals.

Ultimately, my goal is always to be a little better than I was yesterday. I believe in the old mantra that slow and steady wins the race. In the long term, I want to tell stories through my performances internationally, and professionally. The idea of breathing new life into stories on an international stage is appealing to me.

The last few years have been disruptive for everyone. How did you cope?

Actually, Melba kept me sane! They were great at putting structure in every day for us. We'd be asked 'what are you doing today?' and then we'd have to do something! I was always engaged with something, whether it was Zoom lessons or auditions.

I also did a LOT of self-taping. The silver lining for me was learning some new skills – singing on Zoom for example. There's no room to hide, and you have the undivided attention of your audience. Because there's a bit of a delay, too, you're hyper aware of everything happening around you.



Elias Wilson

TENOR

*Harold Blair Opera
Scholarship*

What led you down this path?

Music was on the fringes of my upbringing. My parents were entertainers and always had an interest in musical theatre.

Early on, I thought the trumpet would be my 'thing' and I played a lot in high school. But I was borrowing the trumpet from school and, at some point, I had to give it back. The only option was to buy one. That's when I decided I wasn't enthusiastic enough to part with precious funds!

I also pretended to be a pianist, but I had some questionable keyboard skills. It was only when I was introduced to singing by trying out a few pieces from the classic songbook *24 Italian Songs and Arias* that I started to realise it might be for me.

My first big role was Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which is a very high rock tenor – it wasn't me then and probably still isn't now! The director introduced me to the Fiori Musicali chamber choir in Armidale, which got me really interested in classical singing.

Later I met George Torbay who was artistic director of Opera New England and this was where I experienced opera for the first time with a role in *La traviata*. A lot of the artists were from the Sydney Conservatorium and that led me to meet Dr Rowena Cowley who became my teacher. I've been developing my skills ever since.

So where do you see yourself eventually?

That's a big question, and a hard one. I find myself most comfortable in an artistic space when I'm taking things as they come.

Outside of music, what inspires you?

I like to have a lot of plates spinning – maybe too many!

One of my side gigs is providing audio description for theatre productions for the visually impaired.

I've always jumped at every opportunity to use my voice. I had a brief stint as a radio presenter: I had a music show and a news show.

I suppose I get my desire to keep so many plates spinning from my parents. My dad was an actor with lots of different roles – his job was never one thing.

That's what's been great about Melba. The modules allow you to focus and the program has helped me to balance my desire to keep trying different things and remove the distractions.

Anything else you'd like to mention that we haven't covered yet?

Well, I'm on the Harold Blair scholarship. So, it feels important to talk about my own aboriginal ancestry as it's a part of my story.

It's always been important to me to bring my whole self to whatever I'm doing. I want to be honest about my identity and my heritage. I'm a proud Biripi man through my grandmother's side, but I'm aware that, unlike my grandmother, I look like a white person. That creates a certain level of 'imposter's syndrome'. I know that my experiences, for example, are radically different from my grandmother's.

I wanted to learn more about Harold Blair and recently I read a book, written in the 1970s, called *Dark Man, White World*. Although some aspects of the book were quite uncomfortable for me – it included ways of talking about Aboriginal people that were quite patronising at times – I was fascinated by his experiences as a trailblazer for indigenous talent. His life story is a huge inspiration to me, and I want to tell stories with the same passion and commitment he always carried with him.





Natalie Grimmett

SOPRANO

*Amelia Joscelyne Memorial
Scholarship*

How did you first get into music?

I've always loved singing. My parents were both primary school music teachers, so I probably had a bit of an unfair advantage! I remember in kindergarten thinking that some of the nursery rhymes were for babies. I had much more mature taste – I was more into the Barbie movies like *Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper* at that age! Strangely the Barbie movies, particularly the early ones, were quite classical – set in the 'olden days', many of them had 18th century influences and the music was quite classical.

The first instrument I learnt was the flute and that was when I began reading music. I enjoyed the flute, but I was always more interested in singing. At my school there wasn't a classical music teacher, so I learnt contemporary singing for a while. That teacher left and their replacement was classically trained and that was when I began to sing classical music.

When I was first becoming aware of classical singing, I remember watching *The Phantom of the Opera* and listening to Christine's high notes, wondering if I could hit those notes, too. I think I discovered I might be quite good at singing when I played a game with friends called Bad Opera Singer. They were pretty angry with me actually – they said I was too good. So, I ruined the game, but it was good for my singing career!

In terms of my route to Melba, I was with Opera Scholars Australia and I noticed a pattern – lots of the artists who won Scholar of the Year went on to join the Melba Program, Chloe Harris among others. I ended up winning Scholar of the Year and joining Melba, so I felt like it was meant to be!

What's your end goal?

Well, when I look at the success of people like Siobhan Stagg, that's inspiring to me. Singing in all the different opera houses all over the world, travelling internationally, telling stories across the globe – I find that so exciting. I love to travel, and I love learning new languages, and being exposed to other cultures. If I had to choose an end goal that would be it. But my philosophy is just to do my best and follow my heart, and whatever happens as a result of that is meant to be.

Outside of music, what interests you?

My housemates and I are part of a permaculture club, which is about gardening sustainably, planting things that work together and complement each other. I've got pumpkins and herbs going at the moment.

You recently performed at the Meet the Artists concert. What was that like?

Backstage at the concert I realised that it was the first time I'd performed live since the start of the pandemic. And it was also the first time in a while that I was performing for fun to entertain an audience, rather than competing against someone else. Often in music you are pitted against others, and that's what's so great about Melba: we all have our own strengths and weaknesses but we're all on the same team, working together to put on a good show.

Talking of live performance, the last few years have been a difficult time for live events. How did you cope?

I took it as an opportunity to try something different. In 2020, just before the beginning of the pandemic, I was ready to present my final recital. When it became clear I wouldn't be able to do it in person, I decided to try something different. I filmed my recital and turned it into more of a short film. My recital was called *Bird Songs* and I used my garden, my living room and kitchen to perform.



James Emerson

BASS-BARITONE

*John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith
Scholarship*

*Paulette Bisley Opera
Scholarship*

You made your debut at age eight – so young!

My family was always very musical. My mother tells me she would sing opera when she was pregnant with me, so maybe it rubbed off. And my father was a director of music. Despite that, they never forced me into it – and I never had any formal lessons or anything until much later. It turns out I had a natural treble voice, so in 2006 when I was around eight or nine I had my first public performance. And it of snowballed from there! But it wasn't until I performed in *The Magic Flute* when I was around 11 or 12 that I really caught the performing bug – I remember the curtain call and just seeing that full audience. To me, there's nothing better than a full audience. That's what we all do it for, I think.

So, when did singing become a serious thing for you?

'I've had singing lessons since Year 7 but it wasn't a career choice for me until Year 12. It was more of a hobby until that point. I ended up being offered a scholarship to Melbourne University.

You mentioned your natural treble voice as a child. Something all singers have to go through is their voice changing. How did you cope with that?

Of course, when I look back at myself singing with that perfect treble, I get a little nostalgic! I actually have a good story about my voice changing.

It happened during a school musical performance of *The Wizard of Oz*. I had a bit of a sore throat and, suddenly, my voice cracked. I lost my whole top register on the spot! I was playing the Lion, so it kind of suited the character, but I had to adapt my singing voice very quickly and in front of a live audience, too!

I'm still figuring out what my voice is, even now. I think it's a bass-baritone, but not everyone would agree.

Outside of music, what interests you?

I love boxing. I've been doing it for about two years now. Music can be stressful sometimes, and boxing for me is an escape from everything where I can put that side of myself away for an hour or two.

You mentioned earlier that there's nothing better than a full audience. What do you love about performing?

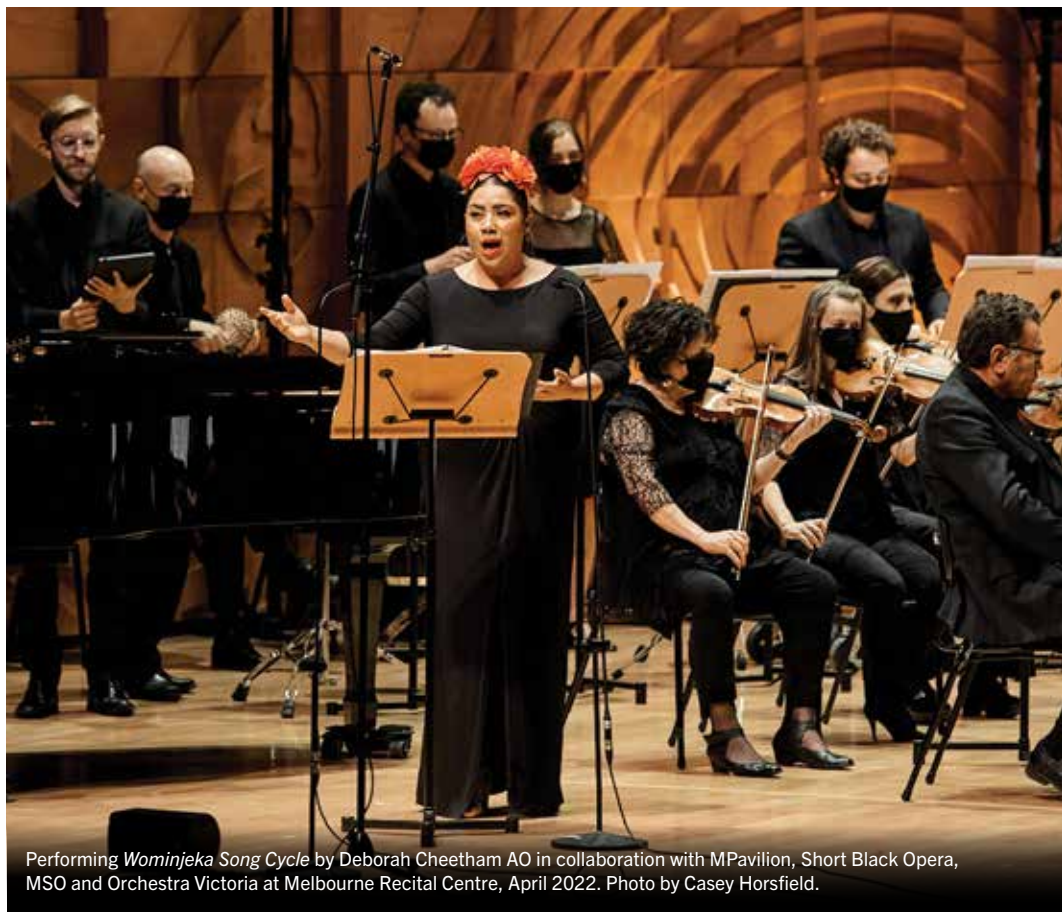
If you can impact one person's life, you've done your job.

Performing of any kind is asking the audience to go on a journey with you. For me, music is all about bringing people together. I also think it's your responsibility as an artist: we have been given a gift, and our job is to share that gift.

What's the end goal for you?

I want to be an opera singer and sing all over the world. I want to engage with as many audiences as possible.





Performing *Wominjeka Song Cycle* by Deborah Cheetham AO in collaboration with MPavilion, Short Black Opera, MSO and Orchestra Victoria at Melbourne Recital Centre, April 2022. Photo by Casey Horsfield.

Shauntai Batzke on taking inspiration from her father's life, and finding her voice

Shauntai Batzke was the recipient of the Harold Blair Opera Scholarship in 2014-15. Since her time with Melba she has established herself as a successful artist, with one of the many exciting projects on her horizon being a musical about her late father, the 13-time boxing champion and Australian Boxing Hall of Fame member, Wally Carr.

Warning: this article contains references to mental health and suicide



A through line of Shauntai's life is 'if you're not able to do something, don't let that hold you back!'

She didn't grow up playing an instrument and singing lessons were not part of her life until she was in her mid-30s. But her family always enjoyed listening to music and she wrote her first song at 10 years old. Not being able to play an instrument, however, Shauntai felt she wasn't able to bring the words to life.

It was only when she started to work with musicians that she truly found her voice. 'When I worked with musicians, or an orchestra, the instrumentation brought my voice to life. These extraordinary artists gave me the confidence and the backing to make my voice heard.'

To Shauntai, the word 'voice' has a meaning beyond just talking or singing. Her voice is what she stands for – her voice empowers her to 'stand up to my calling'.

Translated, her name means 'sing, my sweetheart', an encouragement that has empowered her to pursue her dreams.

'Don't limit your dreams. If you dream it, believe it. Keep striving, keep pushing through, keep dreaming. Knowing that, even if you fall down, you can get back up again and keep trying is so important.'

In some ways, she sees parallels in her own dedication and perseverance to her father's rise from 'tragedy to triumph' as she puts it.

Her late father, Wally Carr, who Shauntai describes as 'an extraordinary person', had much the same philosophy as her. He never gave up on his dreams, either.

Born into trauma, when his father took his own life before he was born, Wally experienced significant adversity in his life and, at his lowest ebb, was suffering from addiction and having suicidal thoughts himself. By the end of his boxing career, he held 13 titles across six different divisions. This is something that, to our knowledge, no other man in the sport has accomplished.

His story is one of triumph over trauma, of rising above your circumstances to achieve greatness. It is this story that inspired Shauntai to compose a musical inspired by her father's life.

Funded by Creative Victoria, Shauntai is writing the libretto and the music, and is joined on the project by co-composer Ashlee Clapp. She is also working with associate artist Stefan Cassomenos on the project, a fellow Melba alumni she describes as her 'partner in crime'.

'The musical is inspired by my father's life, but it contains elements of truth and fiction. His life and his achievements have always been a major source of inspiration to me. This

idea has been in my head for around twenty years, but it's only recently that I've felt I had the confidence and the skills to make it happen.'

In May, Shauntai will be singing at Fed Square for the opening of Reconciliation Week. Her contribution will be an Acknowledgement of Country, sung in Wiradjuri language.

'Singing an Acknowledgement of Country might be a new thing for some, but it's highly likely that's how it would have been done in the past. It's in our DNA as indigenous people to sing. Things become more visceral when you sing them.'

Shauntai will also be singing her own composition *Babirra Nyiwarri Gariya Giran* at the ceremony, and she is excited to announce a new song she will be releasing as a solo artist, which she can't reveal too much about, but says will be a 'very new sound' and quite different to what she has done before.

Looking back at her time at Melba, Shauntai emphasises that 'so many aspects of the program' helped her become the person she is today.

'Public speaking – before I joined the program, I just wouldn't have had the confidence. Now, there's no stopping me – when I'm asked to speak at an event, I jump at the chance! I also like to go back to Dame Nellie's mantra that 'having a beautiful voice isn't enough'. The program demonstrates that – it lives by those words. It's helped me build relationships in the opera industry, and it helped my love of opera to grow deeper, with a full understanding of what working in the industry means. Most importantly, it taught me to take the time to respect myself, the craft and the career. Respect is really important.'

Don't limit your dreams. If you dream it, believe it. Keep striving, keep pushing through.



A letter from abroad

In this regular feature, we ask Melba alumni to write to us from around the world. This edition profiles tenor Damian Arnold, recipient of the Eleanor Blakémore Opera Society Scholarship in 2017.

Bonjour à toutes et à tous,

I'm living in Strasbourg right now, working with the Opera Studio at l'Opéra national du Rhin. I'm originally from Canberra, but I've travelled around a lot, which I think is a similar story for most artists. I moved to London in 2019 where I studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama before joining the Opéra national du Rhin in September 2020. It's been a fantastic journey thus far!

I'd say my experience of living and working in France is different to my experience of London. Living in a place where English isn't the primary language isn't the same as moving to an English-speaking country.

That's what people forget about France (and the majority of Europe), it's not an English-speaking country!

It might seem that way when you come here as a tourist, but living here, it's different. You really must throw yourself into it and make a concerted effort to learn the language.

My first year here, I don't mind saying, was hard. When you don't know the language, and you can't express yourself as richly as you would in your native language, it actually changes your personality a little bit, at least initially. It makes you not want to say anything, and I'm someone who loves to talk and tell stories!

If I were to give some advice to anyone living and working abroad, it would be to be kind to yourself! You won't be fluent instantly, but it will come gradually if you allow yourself to try. It's always helpful to remember that if you can be understood, people don't judge you for not having perfect grammar.

I'd also say to just enjoy it. You want to look back in 20 years knowing you made the best out of the situation.

My last tip – but maybe most important – would be to find people who are nice! You need kind and patient people around you who you can practise the language with.

Of course, it is hard to establish yourself in a new place, but it's so worth it once you do. I'm now thinking

of basing myself here permanently which shows how much more comfortable I am now.

One amazing story was when I recently performed and was interviewed on French TV, in French. They told me it was just a 'petite interview', but it turned out to be a lot more than that – think the Graham Norton show, but in French! To make it even more stressful, I was sharing the couch with the composer of *Les Misérables*, Claude-Michel Schönberg! I think I acquitted myself pretty well in the end and I even made a joke in French which got a laugh! Certainly not bad for a guy who didn't speak a word of French 15 months ago.

I've also got some very exciting things coming up. On the same TV show, I met a tap dancer and singer who was also being interviewed and she ended up having a connection to the organisers of a gala concert in Montpellier in which I will be singing in July. It is called *Folies lyriques* and it is sort of the equivalent of the BBC Proms, but in the south of France. As a result of that chance meeting, I'll be singing live with a full orchestra to an audience of 2,000 people, which I'm excited about. I'll also be singing the lead role in *Candide* in 2023 at L'Opéra national du Rhin, which is a dream role for me.

Whilst French is difficult to learn, France is very good to its artists, so it's totally worth it! There's a program here called 'intermittent du spectacle' which roughly translated means 'artists who are in and out of work'.

If you work enough hours in one year then the following year you are paid by the government when you are out of work. This gives you a sense of security that you don't necessarily have when you're an artist in other countries.

I've also been so lucky to have the support of the Opéra here in Strasbourg. Many artists have been struggling to find work during the pandemic, so I am so grateful to have been consistently employed since September 2020. The Opéra even made sure we had authorisation to work during lockdowns, so I was still able to do a number of filmed live performances during that time. I've been very lucky!

I am so appreciative to be featured in *The Melba* magazine, especially when I know that I am just one of many amazing alumni working over here and around the world.

I was at Melba in 2017 and although I was only there for six months in the end – I wish I was there for longer – I learnt so much that has put me in a fabulous position to thrive overseas.

There was a real focus on the importance of languages and an emphasis on wellbeing, too. These are skills that become vital when you're living as an artist overseas. Looking back, I am grateful to have had such a well-rounded education as part of the Melba Program and I recommend it to all young Australian singers and pianists.

If anyone from the Melba family is ever in Strasbourg, feel free to contact me and we can share a tarte flambée whilst observing the picturesque cathédrale!

All the best and à bientôt!

Damian



Nurturing the next generation to tell opera's greatest truths

Stuart Maunder AM is a renowned opera and theatre director and Artistic Director of State Opera South Australia. As one of the Melba Program's mentors, he is passionate about the next generation.

As one of Melba's mentors, you have an 'inside view' of the program. What makes the mentor program so special?

What I love about the Mentor Program is that the artists get access to 'up close and personal' information, conversation and advice from experienced people who are doing great work in the field. We help them to see where they need to develop, how to hone their skills and to envision the great things they could achieve. The mentors are a group who are only interested in making it better for the next generation. We do this by explaining and dissecting the past, which, in turn, shows our artists how they can learn from the past. The strength of the Melba Program is that these artists can develop in a safe environment, with equal opportunities to focus, experiment and have fun!

What do you think is most important for young artists to learn?

It's important that young artists understand that they have a unique voice and that means that they can

speak to an audience in an individual way. They need to communicate; they need to live in front of an audience; they need to delight!

You directed the recent *Meet the Artists* concert – what were some of your observations from working with the 2022 Melba Artists?

I had a wonderful time directing the last *Meet the Artists* concert. Our artists are young, but they have an immediate connection with an audience and that's what makes these singers very, very special. The program gives them those two valuable commodities – time and opportunity – furnishing them with the expertise to help showcase that special quality.

Obviously, this is just one of many shows you have directed. How do you approach preparing artists for a performance?

Working with singers to prepare a performance is all about going back to the text and the music and, most

importantly, delving into what the creators were trying to say. Within a few moments artists need to create a whole world. They need to be as simple, direct, honest and theatrical as possible.

It's been a difficult few years for live performance. How important are performance opportunities for artists starting out in their career?

I can't begin to imagine how difficult it must be to be a young singer starting now, in a situation where live performance, which is so dependent on an audience, has been curtailed.

The reality is that live performance will always exist. We need to have that moment where people come together as a group and experience something together. So, all I can say is that these poor people who have been necessarily kept in a holding pattern for a couple of years now, finally get a chance to spread their wings, get out there and perform. The sense of relief and release is overwhelming!

From your own career, your proudest moment?

This is the hardest question of all! I don't think I have a proudest moment, but on a personal level I am most proud of my *raison d'être*, which is that the art form needs to continue, needs to develop, needs to build. We need to develop Australian artists. We need to showcase an Australian voice. We need to congregate inside the theatre or inside a hall or whatever it is and feel and experience something collectively.

It's so important that that we continue to develop this art form. People still need to feel the joy of *The Magic Flute*, the pain of *La bohème*, the joy of the relationship between Violetta and Alfredo in *Traviata*, the pain of Suor Angelica in losing her child. These are some of the magnificent moments in opera, some of the great truths. Melba is training a whole new cohort to deliver those truths. What a privilege it is to be part of that!

The Mentor Program

The Mentor Program focuses on equipping artists with practical professional skills while fostering a supportive industry network for their continued development.

The program encompasses a breadth of subjects from language training, stagecraft, vocal masterclasses and audition preparation to sessions on etiquette, public speaking, wellness, negotiation, time management, grant writing, preparing to live abroad and much more. It is carefully curated to provide our artists with the full range of skills needed to navigate a career in opera.



Still to come in the Program...

May Mock audition / Stagecraft intimacy workshop / Media / Etiquette / Dance

July Oratorio / Nicole Car and Étienne Dupuis masterclasses / Conflict resolution / Creating and nurturing relationships

August Director Chuck Hudson / Vocal coach Linnhe Robertson

September Conductor Asher Fisch / Legal / Financial planning / Accounting

Mentor Program made possible thanks to:
Salzer Foundation, Reilly & Logie-Smith
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Magic in the air at Fed Square

In early April our 2022 Artists took to The Edge in Melbourne's Fed Square for our annual *Meet the Artists* concert.

Melba's Artistic Manager and Artist Advisor Sharolyn Kimmorley AM said: 'Study is of course important, but there's no substitute for live performing. It's an opportunity for our artists to practise the skills and implement the tools they are learning through the Program, and channel them into high quality performance.'

Directed by State Opera South Australia's Stuart Maunder, the performance, sponsored by Fed Square, was met with rapturous applause for these stars of tomorrow.

Our artists also travelled to Sydney for an encore performance the following week and have many other engagements scheduled.

After two years of limited opportunities for live performance, this was a fantastic opportunity for our artists to work with a renowned director.

If you'd like to feature Melba Artists at your next occasion, contact skimorley@melbaoperatrust.com.au

Curating performances across the country, the Performance Program provides Melba Artists with the opportunity to put their learning into practice. Audiences can enjoy a unique performance, while also playing a role in the development of talented artists. Performances take place in diverse settings, from large concerts to intimate private gatherings and special events.

Some highlights already...

As part of Ballarat's Heritage Festival, Melba Artists were engaged to perform *Nellie in Her Own Write* with Stefan Cassomenos as narrator. Dame Nellie Melba performed several times in Ballarat and, when developing the musical program, Artistic Manager Sharolyn Kimmorley contacted the Performing Arts Museum to source newspaper articles about Melba's recital before she left for Europe and her farewell tour. Quotes and the repertoire listed in the historic articles were included in the performance.

In April Melba Artists gave a surprise performance for a black-tie birthday party. From 'The Toreador's Song' to 'I could have danced all night', the 20-minute program was the perfect accompaniment to the evening's celebrations.

In May, Melba Opera Trust worked with Renaissance Tours to curate a special musical program, *Friends of Wagner*, to complement its imminent tour for Opera Australia's *Lohengrin*. Participants enjoyed a one-hour program, which, in addition to Wagner himself, included composers whom he influenced or admired.

The Performance Program



Opera Society pledge new scholarship to Melba

We're proud to announce that our friends at the Opera Society have pledged a new annual scholarship in the Melba Program, the Max & Jill Schultz Opera Society Scholarship. Max and Jill Schultz were lifelong supporters of the Opera Society, and, through their estate, bequeathed a generous amount to support the development of young opera singers. It was through this bequest that the Max and Jill Schultz Opera Society Scholarship with Melba Opera Trust has been made possible.

Melba CEO Amy Black said:

'The scholarship has made a huge impact to the Melba Program. Support like this enables us to make a difference in the artistic development of young singers and repetiteurs. We're extremely grateful to Max and Jill for their extraordinary foresight and to the Opera Society who are such strong advocates for our program and artists.'

For several years, Melba Opera Trust and the Opera Society have shared an important relationship: two passionate and like-minded organisations working together to help young opera singers and repetiteurs access the development opportunities their talent demands.

To find out more about establishing a scholarship in the Melba Program, or including Melba Opera Trust in your will, contact Amy Black ablack@melbaoperatrust.com.au Read more about the Opera Society at www.operasociety.org.au



Nathan Breeze (far left) and Samantha Hargreaves (centre) pictured with Pauline Cleary, Valma Allaway OAM and Judith Hooper from the Opera Society

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