

THE MELBA

MAGAZINE OF MELBA OPERA TRUST

EDITION 31 | *SPRING 2024*



FROM MELBA TO THE WORLD
THE TREASURES OF COOMBE
SCHOLARSHIPS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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Melba Opera Trust is a legacy of the visionary soprano Dame Nellie Melba

Nellie once said, ‘in order to succeed in opera, you have to engage in the business of singing. A beautiful voice is not enough.’

This is at the heart of our philosophy: our artists are trained to be *more than a voice*, and are equipped with the skills they need to build sustainable careers. It begins with the Melba Program, our year-long, scholarship-funded training program which supports artists from around Australia with a bespoke course of artistic development, mentoring in business, professional and personal skill development, and performance experience.

Our pathways then extend to support artists at different stages of their careers through the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award, the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award and the Alumni Grant Program.

Following in Nellie’s footsteps, many of our talented alumni are realising their dreams and performing in opera houses around the world.

Melba Opera Trust Board

- Kate Shelmerdine, Chair
- Peter Reilly OAM, Deputy Chair
- Dmitry Danilovich, Treasurer
- Dr Mitchell Chipman
- Victoria Fox-Smith
- Kathryn Kings
- Siobhan Stagg
- Matthew Tutty
- James Williams

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Olivia Giglia, Company Secretary

The Melba Editorial Team

Copy writing and editing

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

Cover

Melba Artists in Concert at The Malthouse Theatre.

Photograph by David Ng.

Designer

Kerry Aker

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

Note from the Chief Executive Officer

‘If you wish to understand me at all, you must understand first and foremost that I am an Australian.’

DAME NELLIE MELBA

Being Australian was quintessential to Nellie’s identity and so too it is with Melba Opera Trust. We exist to support talented Australian artists to pursue a career in opera.

This year national pride was at the forefront of our minds as we cheered for our Aussie athletes at the Olympics in Paris. Such an impressive display of talent, athleticism, dedication, discipline, commitment and achievement. Years and years of training culminated in outstanding performances in front of a global audience.

Consider the journey of these individuals. How their talent and ability has been identified and nurtured within such a highly specialised and competitive field. The constant refinement of training regimes carefully designed to deliver optimal performance. Individual plans to ensure peak physical and mental health. The loyal team of experts guiding every step of the way and the groundswell of community cheering from the earliest wins to the pinnacle of any athlete’s career – representing Australia at the Olympics.

Behind each elite athlete is an enormous investment of time and resourcing, which has enabled them to realise their potential and their dreams.

The parallels run deep.

Much like our Olympians, Melba Artists do all of the above and more, as they seek to hone their craft and develop every aspect of the skillset that they need in their specialised career path.

Just as the Australian Institute of Sport ensures that remarkable athletes have the resourcing and training that their talent deserves, so too does Melba for aspiring artists.

The guidance, expertise and quality that we offer is programmed within a framework that inspires

independent thought, rigour, drive, discipline, self-belief and a sense of community. Balancing individual achievement with industry knowledge, personal well-being with professional development, and encouraging short-term focuses to build a life-long dream.

More often than not that dream takes these artists from Australia to the world. You will see on page 7 exactly where our Melba ‘athletes’ have performed in 2024 – it’s an impressive reminder of the impact they are making, metaphorically waving the Australian flag on stages around the world. In saying that, there is nothing like performing at home and we know how much it means for international alumni to perform for their families and friends. We’re thrilled to see so many Melba Alumni announced in 2025 seasons and hope those opportunities continue to grow.

Of course, behind all great athletes are passionate, enthusiastic and loyal supporters, which Melba is fortunate to have in spades. I sincerely thank all of our donors who give so generously so we can offer these pathways. This type of niche training is a significant financial undertaking, and more so this year with rising costs and a challenging economic environment. Every gift makes a very real difference and we are deeply grateful.

I also thank those who have included Melba Opera Trust in their estate planning. Bequests are vital to our sustainability and help make sure that our ‘opera athletes’ continue to find their way in the international arena.

Later this month, we will be hearing artists from around Australia audition for the 2025 Melba Program and the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award. We are so proud to be at the forefront of discovering and nurturing Australian talent and we’re prouder still to be sharing it with audiences around the world.

I hope you enjoy this Spring edition of *The Melba*.

Be part of the Melba journey with a tax-deductible donation. Gifts can be made through the website www.melbaoperatrust.com.au/support or over the phone (03) 9944 2100.



Amy Black, Chief Executive Officer

Upcoming events

Thursday 12 December

Celebrating the AJIOA

6.30pm at The Alexandra Club

Bookings: trybooking.com/CUOLA

Friday 13 December

Christmas at Como House

6pm at Como House Ballroom

Bookings: melbaoperatrust.com.au/melbaevents/2024-salon-series

Welcome to the Board

We recently welcomed three new directors to the Melba Board, with each bringing a depth of professional skill, business acumen, and enthusiasm for the work we do.

KATHRYN KINGS learned piano as a girl, and through her parents developed a love of musical theatre and Gilbert & Sullivan. Opera, she explains, came later when she was in her 40s, in part because it’s such an expensive art form to pursue. But when she did begin attending opera, she was captured by its excitement, beautiful voices and theatricality. *La bohème* is a special favourite.

Now retired, Kathy was a Judge of the County Court and the first female to be appointed as a Master and Associate Judge of the Supreme Court. She has also been participating in non-profit boards since the late 1980s. In 2010 the Ruskins (Jeremy Ruskin KC and former Melba Chair Roz Zalewski OAM) invited her to attend a Melba performance. Inspired by the level of talent she witnessed, Kathy has been attending Melba events and supporting us ever since.

Joining the board is ‘another exciting step in the journey’. Opera may be expensive for audiences, but it’s equally so for aspiring opera singers, and one of the rewards of being involved with Melba, says Kathy, is ‘providing support in a very practical way and watching these very talented young students develop as their voices mature and their confidence grows. It’s a privilege to know you’ve made a contribution.’



‘... watching these very talented young students develop as their voices mature and their confidence grows. It's a privilege to know you've made a contribution.’

Kathryn Kings

The Melba Medal

A Melba Medal is one of our highest honours – a tangible acknowledgement of the often intangible ways that our community supports our vision.

STORY DEANNE SHELTON-COLLINS

Established at the Melba Conservatorium of Music and continuing today through Melba Opera Trust, the medals play an important part in our history. Presented by the Board to recognise extraordinary contributions, Melba Medals are an esteemed commendation; only 17 have been awarded in 31 years.

The three most recent recipients have championed Melba through their generosity and enthusiastic support.

Warwick and Paulette Bisley (2021)

Warwick and Paulette have supported our artists both in and beyond the Melba Program: as well as endowing the Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship and hosting recitals at their property in Coldstream, the couple were among the first donors to establish the Alumni Grant Program.

‘We know that the Melba Program is becoming known in Europe as one of the best in preparing artists in the complete range of attributes needed to succeed,’ the Bisleys say. ‘We are well aware that their chosen career path is a very competitive one and we can only support them to a certain extent –



Warwick and Paulette Bisley

then it is up to them to capitalise on all they have learned.’

The Bisleys received their medals at a special luncheon hosted by Melba Chair, Kate Shelmardine. ‘We were both surprised and honoured,’ they say now, looking back. ‘It served to remind us of how long we have been associated with Melba – it started at a luncheon on 17 June 2008, where we were excited by the opportunity to support the development of opera singers in the early stage of their careers.’

Warwick and Paulette’s medal is a reminder of not only this 16-year association, but also the five Melba Artists they have supported since the Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship commenced in 2015.

Peter Reilly OAM (2022)

Peter’s endowing of the Reilly & Logie-Smith Mentor Endowment played a significant role in ensuring the future of the Melba Program. He has also donated his time and expertise as a Board Director for over a decade and opened up his home to host Melba performances.



Kate Shelmardine, Chair, and Peter Reilly OAM

Peter was awarded his Melba Medal at a special milestone birthday in 2023. We aim to present the medals in a way that means the most to the recipient, and with the help of his partner, Linton, Peter’s was awarded as a carefully orchestrated surprise at his birthday celebrations, complemented by a sparkling performance from Melba alumna Katherine Allen.

Ryman Healthcare (2024)

Not only has Ryman Healthcare endowed a scholarship that will continue to support singers into the future, but the company is also our newly announced performance partner, with their sponsorship making it possible for Melba Artists to gain valuable experience on the stage.

Ryman Healthcare is the first company to receive a Melba Medal. The timing coincided with the five-year anniversary of their Nellie Melba Retirement Village, and we joined in the celebrations. Melba CEO Amy Black awarded the medal at a ceremony attended by hundreds of residents, bringing together the whole village at an event where Eden Shifroni, current recipient of the Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship, sang to a captivated audience.



Cameron Holland, Ryman Healthcare CEO, and Amy Black



Melba Medal recipients

1993	Joan Arnold OBE
1994	Peter Brereton
1997	Bill Rashleigh
1998	Lynette Casey-Brereton
2009	Pamela, Lady Vestey
2009	Alfred Ruskin AM*
2009	Stephen Bolton*
2009	Graham Sellars-Jones
2009	Bill Joscelyne* and Mary-Jane Joscelyne OAM
2010	Emeritus Professor Mel Waters
2012	Jenny Sutherland
2014	John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith
2015	Professors Joseph Sambrook and Mary-Jane Gething AO
2017	Robert G Logie-Smith AM
2021	Warwick & Paulette Bisley
2022	Peter Reilly OAM
2024	Ryman Healthcare

* Posthumous

Melba Medals are an esteemed commendation; only 17 have been awarded in 31 years.

JAMES WILLIAMS no longer practises commercial law full time, but his well-trained tenor voice has recently seen him welcomed as an ‘honorary barrister’ in the NSW Bar Choir. It was perhaps inevitable he would join the Melba Board: he brings experience as a lawyer; decades on non-profit boards, from Guide Dogs Australia, where he was chair for 23 years, to Bach Akademie Australia and Sydney Chamber Opera; a connection to Melba as a mentor; and he’s a musician himself.

His musical journey began in earnest when, in the 1990s, he decided to act on his ‘overwhelming



‘it’s especially important that people feel “a sense of belonging” to the organisation.’
James Williams

passion for singing’ and ‘learn how to do it properly’. Initially, through the Sydney Conservatorium’s Extension Studies Program, his teachers have included Maree Ryan, Valerie Collins-Varga, and more recently, Anke Höppner-Ryan, with whom he still takes weekly lessons. Professional opportunities came his way early on – the Australian Opera offered him contracts – but, sadly, were incompatible with life as a corporate lawyer with a young family.

As he talks about the work of his children (Clemence Williams is a director and composer; Kip Williams is outgoing Artistic Director of the Sydney Theatre Company), as well as his own experiences on non-profit boards, it’s clear James has a clear understanding of the challenges faced by the performing arts. He points out that the key for a successful non-profit is the same as that for a successful business: ‘communication, communication, communication.’ In both cases, you’re preserving and enhancing the brand, but with performing arts, he explains, it’s especially important that people feel ‘a sense of belonging’ to the organisation. In his new role as a Melba Director, James is looking forward to the work of governance – ‘rolling the sleeves up’ – and to flying the flag and introducing new supporters to the essence of Melba so that it can continue to flourish.

MATTHEW TUTTY studied voice at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music. His teacher Joan Arnold was the first female director of the Melba Conservatorium from 1975-1986, a link that now comes full circle as he joins the Melba Board. And music has been a ‘close companion’ since childhood. His first exposure to opera was watching his brother Dermot on stage, singing boy soprano roles in Australian Opera productions of Britten’s *Turn of the Screw* and Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea*. ‘I saw what was involved in making a production. It was an incredible world, and I began to appreciate all the dimensions of opera as an art form.’ Later, as a music student, Matt witnessed how graduates were often left unsupported in their transition to a professional career. ‘Credit goes to Melba Opera Trust,’ he says, ‘for recognising that gap.’ His subsequent academic path led him to a career as a strategist, and he is currently a Managing Partner of PwC Consulting.

But, he says, ‘the educational experience that’s been most valuable to me has been music, because it taught me to think and be creative, and that has underpinned my career.’ When he talks about the responsibility of a non-profit board (he has also been Chair of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre), he highlights the importance of strategic direction – staying true to the mission – and balancing ambition with sustainability.



‘... music taught me to think and be creative, and that has underpinned my career.’
Matthew Tutty



‘It was an emotional final performance with the Melba cohort for this year ...’

Jack Bolton

Celebrating the year’s success

Performance, a key component of the Melba Program, allows our artists to put their extensive learning into practice and this year the Ryman Healthcare Performance Program has provided plenty of opportunities.

STORY KATELYN BANNISTER



Our artists have entertained audiences at Pentridge Prison, Labassa Mansion, The Pride Centre, Beleura House and Garden, and McClelland Sculpture Park, to name a few of the unique venues.

A highlight on the calendar was *Melba Artists in Concert* at The Malthouse Theatre in September. The concert was the culmination of the behind-the-scenes preparation the artists have undertaken during their year with Melba, and it was a wonderful opportunity for our community of supporters, partners, and friends to marvel at the growth of our 2024 artists.

With confidence and poise, the artists performed a colourful concert directed by mentor Con Costi, with musical direction by Sharolyn Kimmorley AM. The audience was treated to a fabulous rendition of ‘The Mermaid’ (the magazine cover image says it all), arias and ensemble works, all accompanied by Stacey Yang on a stunning Kawai piano.

Jack Bolton says, ‘It was an emotional final performance with the Melba cohort for this year, but with such wonderful staging and storytelling.’

Prior to finale favourite ‘Home, sweet home’, Nina Korbe delivered a moving speech. She reflected on her journey in the Melba Program:

‘When I first joined the program, I did not fully realise how unique and incredible this opportunity is. Despite knowing about the Trust through friends and past scholars I don’t think anyone can truly realise just how special it is until you are gifted the opportunity to be a part of it.’

The evening also served as a celebration of our enduring relationship with Ryman Healthcare, now lead sponsors of our vital performance program. Ryman Healthcare CEO, Cameron Holland, spoke of the organisation’s commitment to Melba and of their focus on supporting emerging talent.

The evening concluded with a celebratory reception enjoyed by artists and our community. It was certainly a night we will remember fondly.

To stay in touch with upcoming performances be sure to subscribe to our e-newsletter and follow our socials.



If you would like to feature Melba Artists at your next special occasion, please contact Artistic Manager Sharolyn Kimmorley on (03) 9944 2100 or skimmorley@melbaoperatrust.com.au



Aidan HODDER

Baritone

AGE 25 John Wegner AO Opera Scholarship
Max & Jill Schultz Opera Society Scholarship

Aria of the year ‘Curt, she called him Curt’ from Jake Heggie’s *Three Decembers*
Language focus Italian

Favourite performance

The end-of-year *Melba Artists in Concert* – it really felt like a culmination of all our work and all our friendship over the last several months.

Piece of advice that has had the most impact

‘I want to be surrounded by colleagues that I trust, directors I respect, and conductors that I admire.’ – Nicole Car

If you could invite two artists for a dinner party

I’d love to catch Mozart up on 200+ years of modern history over dinner, especially with the help of someone just as mischievous as him – I’m thinking Tom Lehrer.

Three key takeaways from the Melba Program

- Preparation is king.
- Music is so much more than just the right notes.
- Bring your kindest self to work every day.

Caitlin FORREST

Mezzo Soprano

AGE 23 Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship

Aria of the year ‘Faites-lui mes aveux’. I LOVE this aria!
Language focus Italian, French and German

Pre- or post-performance ritual

I always have pasta a couple of hours before I sing. I have a recipe that I call my ‘Performance Pasta’ followed by a sugar-free Gatorade. I love to listen to some country music while doing my makeup and if I have time I also go for a walk.

What surprised you most about the Melba Program

It surprised me how personal the program can be regarding your own artistic and vocal development. The flexibility of being able to focus on what you need to work on as an artist has been life changing! And how much the Melba community is like a family – it has certainly been my home away from home!

Hurdle you overcame this year

Not to compare myself with the success of others. Melba has taught me that we are all on our own journey and that it is different for each artist.

If you could invite two artists for a dinner party

Dame Nellie Melba herself, I think she would be loads of fun to have a dinner party with. I would love to go back in time and attend one of her parties at Coombe Cottage.

Fuelling for optimal performance

An important part of the Melba Program is wellbeing. We want our artists to be equipped with the knowledge they need to be the best versions of themselves on and off stage. Mentor Katherine Shone, Advanced Sports Dietician, meets Melba Artists each year to educate them on fuelling for performance.

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT

When Katherine Shone was at university, starting to compete in triathlons, she realised for the first time that what to eat, when to eat and how to eat was critical for performance. She knew she had to be better informed. Many years later, it is this knowledge, experience and passion that Katherine shares with all her clients, whether they are professional athletes or Melba Artists.

An advanced sports dietician, Katherine has presented in the Melba Program since 2020, helping our artists to fuel for optimal performance. As fellow Melba mentor Dr Andrew Waterson, a sports psychologist with AFL team the Western Bulldogs, showed parallels between professional sport and opera in ways to combat performance anxiety (*The Melba, Winter Edition 2023*), Katherine's nutrition presentations highlight ways in which elite athletes' eating techniques might also point the way for elite artists. It comes down to an individual approach incorporating balance, planning and practice.

'Yes, we need to eat healthily as humans, but there's also that complexity that being on stage brings ... Long rehearsals, under lights, in heavy costumes increase our need to be very mindful about our food intake.' Katherine notes, too, that appetite cues can be missed because of busyness or anxiety and artists 'might drop the ball when it comes to hydration as well'.

'Something that is important to remember is that how we fuel for performances actually starts many, many hours before the curtain goes up.' It begins with 'an energising but sustaining breakfast' and then is followed up with regular meals and snacks. These might include some carbohydrates, rice, potato, pasta, 'a bit of colour', like salad or vegetables, and some protein as well. Water might work best for most, but sports drinks might also help some replenish what is lost through perspiration.

Melba's interest in nutrition today can perhaps be traced back to that of our illustrious namesake, who famously advised students at the Albert Street Conservatorium – as it then was – to eat, inter alia, a raw tomato and weak tea for breakfast on a performance day. Katherine says that while Dame Nellie's strategies might have worked for her, 'sports science has evolved, and we now know a lot more about strategies to fuel and hydrate our artists to support their performing.'

Katherine normally steers performers towards slower-to-digest food with a lower GI carbohydrate source and errs away from highly complex, easy-to-digest things like lollies. 'The technique of consuming a high-carbohydrate option, like jelly lollies, is commonly used in the world of sport. It can give a bit of a boost, but we want to nestle it amongst other solid sustaining food choices leading into that performance.'

Some artists might have a ritual of consuming a handful of lollies or chocolate to get some energy. 'In some ways it is a lovely thing, their ritual to do ... a handful of x, y or z is not a problem and possibly a helpful thing.'

Katherine encourages performers to practise in rehearsal how they are going to eat, so that, on the biggest days, 'it is a familiar, comfortable go-to option and there is nothing radically new'. Just like the elite athletes with whom she develops a race day plan, Katherine suggests that our singers have a routine that is 'tried and tested' for 'those more challenging food days'.

Performance anxiety may also interfere with the inclination to eat. Katherine suggests that 'small, munching along approaches' might work best. This way artists are doing their best to top up energy levels and then, once the show is over, they can relax. For them, 'having a post-show dinner is probably going to be the better approach.'

Katherine is pleased that Melba understands that expert nutritional advice is 'a key component in the development of artists'. She believes that

not a lot of organisations appreciate this. 'I think Melba enlisting the support of a professional in this space shows how at the forefront you are in acknowledging that there are lots of elements that help an artist become the best they possibly can.' They are 'extremely lucky to be in this position whereby their development as a whole individual is carefully thought about.'

As for presenting a seminar in the Melba Program and giving the artists private consultations, Katherine says 'it is always a pleasure and an honour to have the opportunity to work with the artists ... it is such a privilege to be involved.'

'We have to be healthy humans before we can be amazing, exceptional artists.'

We spoke to Melba Alumni about what's on their performance menu

Emily Edmonds

Emily follows sports nutrition protocols (pre- and post-performance, especially). It's crucial to her performance and recovery, and it has been game-changing (so to speak) for her artistic work. She focuses on high-energy foods and macronutrient balance, as well as tactical timing of her meals and snacks.

Jessica Harper

'It depends on the day, the week, the gig, but a general rule of thumb pre-performance for me is porridge with some banana, chia seeds, peanut butter, cinnamon and a bit of protein powder ... I definitely enjoy a celebratory beer/ cocktail when a big gig is finished too!'

Morgan Balfour

'I don't have a set dinner, but I prefer dishes that are vegetable heavy and cooked with a lot of oil, especially Asian cuisine. A banana is my go-to snack, and all the potassium supposedly helps keep you calm!'

Adam McMillan

'I love to have some Lindt 85% dark chocolate on hand for a little pre-performance energy boost, as well as some trail mix. And if I really need energy – coffee!'

Michael Petrucci

'Having Italian blood, I have a nice carbohydrate-full lunch around 1pm, usually pasta with red sauce and a bit of meat ... I have always found a little ristretto an hour before my first entrance provides me the little extra kick to begin a performance with a bang!'

Eden SHIFRONI

Soprano

AGE 24

STATE NSW

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

Aria of the year Nannetta's aria from *Falstaff*
(Sul fil d'un soffio etesio)
Language focus German

Favourite performance

The Pa-pa duet from *The Magic Flute* with Aidan Hodder at The Pride Centre. Following the performance, we turned to each other and I said, 'If I get to have this much fun and laughter "on the job", then this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.'

Piece of advice that has had the most impact

To try and move away from a 'good student' mindset and start working towards being an individual artist. Especially as I fit into the most competitive voice type category (high soprano), it's important to find and acknowledge what makes me special.

Hurdle you overcame this year

I've worked really hard on understanding the business side of being a singer. It's not something I focused on much at university, but I feel proud to say that I feel much more proficient now in legal issues, tax regulations and financial planning.

Three key takeaways from the Melba Program

- Don't rush anything.
- Find your team of people that you trust and stick by them.
- More preparation off stage = less anxiety on stage.

Jack BOLTON

Bass

AGE 23

STATE QLD

Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship
John & Elizabeth
Wright-Smith Scholarship

Aria of the year
Vi ravviso from Bellini's *La sonnambula*
Language focus Italian

Pre- or post-performance ritual

I always sing my best after a day filled with light movement and a wonderful yoga session, so that my body is limber and ready to sing.

Piece of advice that has had the most impact

There are no shortcuts.

Words of wisdom for a future Melba Artist

If at any point you may feel overwhelmed or unsure at how to do better, ask for help! It is a ginormous change moving out of institutionalised learning and into the profession where you are your own boss, and the staff at Melba have helped many before you find their feet.

If you could invite two artists for a dinner party

Cesare Siepi and Luigi Lablache. It would be amazing to be picking the brains of two of history's greatest basses. Cesare is comfortably placed as my favourite singer of all time. Luigi was acclaimed to be a magnificent teacher of the bass voice, and possessed an extremely powerful and agile voice himself.

Beyond Melba

STORY KATELYN BANNISTER

Successfully building a stellar career is more of a marathon than a sprint. It requires hard work, long hours, financial investment and a commitment to ongoing learning.

The Alumni Grant Program was launched in 2021 to help support artists beyond Melba. It offers annual grants to assist with professional career development, providing continuity of support and access to funding during any chapter of artists' careers.

Over four years the program has supported 14 Melba Alumni, providing funds for audition tours, lessons and coaching, personal career-related challenges and projects.

Through our Alumni Grant Program, we hope that our artists can reach for new heights, be supported through challenges and have a community to rely on throughout their careers. As the saying goes ...

*Once a Melba,
always a Melba*

Image: Emilia Bertolini

An update on the 2023 Alumni Grant recipients



SUPPORTED BY
MJ Gething Alumni Grant

Su Choung

Su received a grant to support her further studies as a répétiteur internationally. As part of her project, Su undertook an audition tour to the UK with great success. She is now one of four répétiteur Young Artists at the National Opera Studio in London, and has recently commenced her studies.



SUPPORTED BY
Warwick & Paulette Bisley Alumni Grant

Stephen Marsh

We all know that preparation is key. When Stephen received the 2023 Deutsche Oper Berlin Award, he was faced with the challenge of preparing 12 roles within as many months. Stephen's grant supported his role preparation with repertoire coaching and intensive language study – conversational and diction. Stephen is now in Berlin and will perform those 12 roles across 55 performances.



SUPPORTED BY
John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Alumni Grant

Emilia Bertolini

Having just completed her formal studies at the Royal Academy of Music and seeking to specialise in early music, Emilia utilised her grant to undertake coaching with renowned experts in Baroque repertoire. The grant helped prepare her for auditions in London and across Europe. She has achieved success in various Baroque competitions, and this has led to a string of performance opportunities including several solo recitals at the Festival Radio France Montpellier and the Nouvelles Voix en Normandie tour with Le Poème Harmonique.



SUPPORTED BY
Honor Sambrook Alumni Grant

Damian Arnold

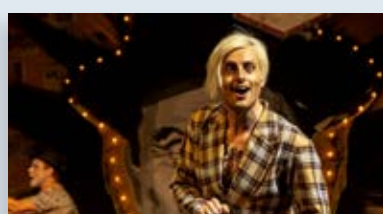
Damian's grant was able to offer support after he developed health conditions that were impacting his life and career. Since receiving the grant, he has relocated back to Australia from France and continues to perform. He recently appeared in *Hamlet* with Opera Australia and *The Merry Widow* with National Opera.

Melba to the world

Our 66 Melba Alumni are busy making their mark across Australia and internationally. Spanning over 300 performances, we have captured where our alumni have featured in 2024, from Amsterdam to Auckland and everywhere in between.

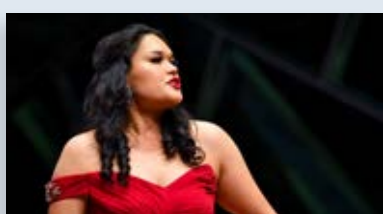


Some of the many career highlights from this year



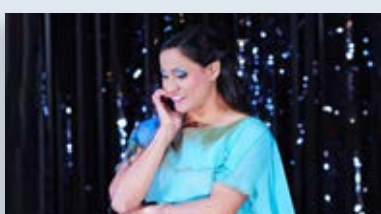
Daniel Carison

A Principal Artist at Landestheater Coburg, Daniel has performed the title roles in *Don Giovanni* and *Gianni Schicchi*, Nick Shadow in *The Rake's Progress*, Fred Graham in *Kiss me Kate*, Figaro in *The Barber of Seville*, and Peter in *Hansel and Gretel*.



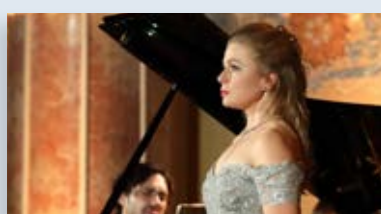
Fleuranne Brockway

A Principal Artist at Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden, Fleuranne has performed the title role in *Carmen*, the title role in *Fantasio*, Amando in *Le Grand Macabre*, Meg Page in *Falstaff*, Wellgunde in *Götterdämmerung* and Rossweise in *Die Walküre*.



Stacey Alleaume

Following successful performances with Opera Australia, Stacey is now living overseas. She is currently performing Norina in *Don Pasquale* for Scottish Opera and will debut as Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor* with Deutsche Oper am Rhein later this year.



Siobhan Stagg

Siobhan's performance schedule has spanned more than 27 cities this year. She recently appeared as Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Royal Opera House and at Edinburgh International Festival. Siobhan also toured Australia with her *Echoed Voices* recital and released a new album.



Louis Hurley

Louis has had a busy performance schedule nationally. He has appeared in Pinchgut Opera productions of *Theodora*, *Dido & Aeneas* and *Eternal Light*. As a member of the Australian Vocal Ensemble, he has toured to regional areas to promote a new album *Thought is Surrounded by a Halo*.



Lauren Fagan

Lauren's busy freelance career has seen her travelling the world. She performed the role of Gretel in *Hansel and Gretel* and Musetta in *La bohème* at the Royal Opera House, made her Opera Australia debut in the title role of *Suor Angelica*, performed as Komponist in *Ariadne auf Naxos* for Zurich Opera and featured at the renowned Baden-Baden festival.



Samuel Sakker

Samuel has been working his way through the Wagner repertoire, performing the title role in *Tristan and Isolde* for Teatro Massimo in Italy and for Oper Wuppertal in Germany. He also performed the title role in *Lohengrin* for Ópera de Oviedo in Spain and the title role in *Tannhäuser* for Oper Graz in Austria.



Xenia Puskarz Thomas

Xenia has been sharing her time between New York and Munich. A Young Artist at Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich, Xenia is currently performing Lucienne in *Die tote Stadt* and has performed Flower Maiden in *Parsifal* and Krystins in Weinberg's *Die Passagierin*. She has also toured with the Juilliard Historical Performance Orchestra to Beijing, Shanghai and Nanjing.



Stefan Cassomenos

Appearing with orchestras, in festivals and solo recitals, some of Stefan's many highlights include performances of *Das Lied von der Erde* with the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 2 with Darwin Symphony Orchestra and solo performances in London and Bonn.



Alexandra Flood

A Principal Artist at Volksoper in Vienna, Alexandra has performed as Frasquita in *Carmen*, Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*, Brigitte in *Iolanthe* and Princess Fantasia in *Journey to the Moon*. She has also spent time in Australia, as Artistic Director of the Queensland Art Song Festival.

Scholarships in the spotlight

At Melba, community is at the core of what we do. In this issue, we're shining a spotlight on two of our named scholarships and the vibrant communities that celebrate them.



Paull-Anthony Keightley, Mary-Jane Joscelyne OAM, Siobhan Stagg, Jesse Linke and Aidan Hodder.



Roz Zalewski OAM, Nina Korbe and Jeremy Ruskin KC.

Images: David Ng

The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship

Amelia Joscelyne was a beloved young woman who, above all else, loved to sing.

After Amelia tragically passed away whilst studying at the Melba Conservatorium of Music, her parents, Bill and Mary-Jane Joscelyne OAM, helped by their friend Graham Sellars-Jones, established The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship.

For 35 years, this deeply personal scholarship has provided opportunities to young singers in Amelia's memory, creating a legacy built on her love of music.

Since the beginning, it has been generously supported by a loyal community of family and friends. Each year, they reunite to meet the new recipient, reconnect with alumni and share memories. Most recently, the community gathered for a morning tea, and

to hear current recipient Jesse Linke perform with fellow Melba Artist Aidan Hodder, who was dubbed an 'honorary Amelia' for the day.

As part of the occasion, Mary-Jane paid special tribute to Graham Sellars-Jones, who sadly passed away earlier in the year. Graham's children, Richard and Kate, were part of the morning, along with Amelia's siblings Victoria, Antony, Simon and Matthew.

Following the recital, alumna Siobhan Stagg (2009-2012) was interviewed by family friend and journalist Richard Allen, offering insights into her life as an Australian soprano living in Berlin, and what life is like as a freelance artist travelling the world.

This unique scholarship is absolutely one-of-a-kind and we are so proud of the community's commitment to helping talented young artists in Amelia's memory.

The Ruskin Opera Scholarship

The Ruskin Opera Scholarship was born from the legacy of Alfred Ruskin AM and Pamela Ruskin, who were instrumental in the leadership of the Melba Conservatorium of Music, our predecessor. In their honour, Jeremy Ruskin KC and Roz Zalewski OAM initially established an Award through the Conservatorium. Following its closure and the launch of Melba Opera Trust, they continued – and extended – their support to establish the Ruskin Opera Scholarship offered today.

We celebrated the scholarship's ten-year anniversary with a special event late last year, featuring performances by current recipient Nina Korbe, Melba alumnus Stephen Marsh and accompanied by Sharolyn Kimmorley AM. The celebration was a heartfelt reminder of the impact the scholarship has had on the eight singers who have received it, with updates on

their lives and video messages from alumni now working at opera houses overseas.

Roz and Jeremy have been the champions of this scholarship. However, it was always their intention to encourage others to be involved: to broaden support for opera, young people and the specialised training the Melba Program provides.

Like her father-in-law, Roz's contribution has extended beyond scholarship support, serving as a director of the Board for more than 11 years and leading the organisation as Chair from 2017 to 2021.

The family's legacy has contributed significantly to Melba's successes over the years and we hope it will continue into the next generation. In the meantime, the scholarship is supported by a loyal community of donors who have discovered Melba thanks to Roz and Jeremy.

Jesse Linke

Soprano

AGE25

STATEVIC

Aria of the year

'The Flower Duet'

Language focus

German

Most unique performance

Pentridge Prison – there's nothing like having a jail cell as your green room.

Who do you dream to share a stage with and why?

It's not an opera singer but ... my husband! He's an incredible French horn player and luckily there are beautiful horn solos in a lot of soprano arias, so the odds are in our favour.

Words of wisdom for a future Melba Artist

Make the most of every single second. Sometimes the session you thought would be the least exciting in the week ends up being the one you take the most away from. Don't let a second of it pass you by. Just soak it all up, write it down, review it, store it away and review it again later – the mentoring we get is GOLD!

Currently working on

I'm working on some Mozart arias to sing for the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's session with the Australian Conducting Academy. Long term my eyes turn towards Germany, as I am moving there at the end of the year, and my focus will shift towards audition and general preparation for the opportunities available there.

The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship

Nina Korbe

Soprano

AGE26

STATEQLD

Aria of the year

Not an aria, but I performed Mahler's Rückert Lieder with Queensland Youth Symphony – a beautifully challenging work.

Language focus

Italian

Who do you dream to share a stage with and why?

Joyce DiDonato, she has for the longest time been one of my favourite actresses and I would love to share the stage with her one day. I'm sure every day would be a masterclass.

What surprised you most about the Melba Program

The sheer comprehensive nature of what we are taught and have access to, genuinely anything you could think of we have resources to improve ourselves.

Piece of advice that has had the most impact

Find your advisors, build your team and keep it a small group – it seems obvious but when we are so used to taking every opinion and bit of advice, sometimes we need permission to keep a few voices close and take the rest under advisement.

What are you proud of?

My growth as a professional and advocate. I am naturally very proud of my progress as a performer, but it's my work in First Nations Affairs that I have seen the most drastic growth.

Ruskin Opera Scholarship

Indigenous Opera Scholarship

Celebrating 40 years

of the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award

The AJIOA has a proud 40-year history of supporting gifted young singers in their pursuit of success on the opera stage. Yvonne Frindle traces the evolution of this prestigious and valuable award.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

Bill Cowan AM vividly remembers his first year as Chair of what is now the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award. It was 2003 and, he says, ‘it was kind of hair-raising, because that year the judges couldn’t decide who to award the scholarship to’. The decision was down to two contestants, and each was invited to sing a third aria in what’s best described as a sing-off. ‘I was more stressed than they were,’ says Bill, but Lorina Gore, the eventual winner, ‘was so calm and cool, and it really taught me something about how good successful singers must be at managing these kinds of crises.’

In 2003 the Award was still known as the Covent Garden Award, which had been founded in 1983 by Opera Foundation Victoria, chaired by Jeanne Pratt. Bill was involved from the beginning, when Lady Mary Fairfax asked him to be on the board of this new Victorian branch of Opera Foundation Australia.

Lisa Gasteen was the first Award recipient, in 1984. The ‘Covent Garden’ name was a bit misleading, she says – in practice the scholarship funded attendance at the National Opera Studio in London, although students did have access to rehearsals and performances at the Royal Opera House.

‘I probably sang my two party pieces,’ recalls Lisa, naming ‘Dich, teure Halle’ (*Tannhäuser*) and ‘Pace, pace, mio Dio’ (*La forza del destino*). ‘I do remember being naughty: we had to have five arias, but one of mine wasn’t really ready to perform. And thank goodness they didn’t ask for it, because I would have been very exposed!’

The year of study in London was intense, says Lisa. ‘I had no experience of international coaching or what the expectations were. So to get regular, intensive coaching on music and roles and language ... It was huge.’ Lisa went on to enjoy a flourishing career, but one direct result of her Covent Garden Award experience was the seed it planted for her own National Opera Program, which she founded in 2011.

Through the 1980s and 90s, the Award supported singers such as Miriam Gormley, Liane Keegan

and Shu-Cheen Yu, to name a few. And for a period (1987–1996), Shell Australia was a naming rights sponsor of the award. During the 1990s, Jeanne Pratt – busy establishing The Production Company for musical theatre – invited Dr Alastair Jackson AM to take over the chair.

A medical doctor by profession, Alastair started playing the piano at four. He saw his first opera, *Rigoletto*, on television as an impressionable eight year old; in 1965 he saw Joan Sutherland on stage as Lucia di Lammermoor. His love of music led to him joining the board of the Melba Conservatorium of Music, as well as involvement with Melbourne Opera and 20 years as host of the long-running Vocal Chords on 3MBS.

Opera Foundation Victoria continued to send winners to the National Opera Studio, but eventually established an independent, Melbourne-based scholarship. As Bill explains, ‘We were extremely proud of the fact that we were a voluntary organisation with no overheads. Over the years we’ve raised millions of dollars, making the Award the most generous scholarship in Australia for young singers.’

Both Bill and Alastair credit the success to a tremendously capable board of directors, together with a specialist Music Board – soprano Nance Grant AM MBE, mezzo-soprano Roxane Hislop, tenor David Hobson and baritone Roger Lemke – responsible for selecting Award recipients.

In 2007, Alastair established an alliance with tenor Dennis O’Neill CBE, director of the newly formed Cardiff International Academy of Voice (now the Wales International Academy of Voice), and for the next decade, Award recipients attended the academy’s one-year master’s program. Among the notable success stories from this period is soprano Siobhan Stagg, now also a Melba Board Director.

Opera is extraordinarily competitive, and Bill recalls how ‘Dennis O’Neill once told us that only one in ten award winners would actually make it. But I’d say we’re doing much better than that, and we’ve been more successful than ever because we’ve evolved and changed the format’.

Key to that evolution has been a new partnership with the Royal College of Music (RCM) Opera Studio in London and the expansion of the scholarship to two years. RCM’s two-year Artist Diploma not only brings together some of the world’s leading coaches, it also gives students the opportunity to appear in fully staged opera productions, providing crucial performance experience and the chance to be seen. Mezzo-soprano Fleuranne Brockway (2018) was the first recipient under the new format.

With the Royal College connection has come a change in the selection process. ‘Originally we ran it as a competition,’ says Bill. ‘Now we hold auditions and we interview the singers, talking with them about their plans and ambitions.’ This year Nicholas Sears (Head of Vocal & Opera at RCM) will himself attend auditions, ensuring the Award is offered to a candidate well-suited to the Royal College program. And as Lisa Gasteen points out, this moves beyond simply identifying the most impressive voice or the greatest potential: any institution that promises staged productions for its students will inevitably need to find particular voice types – effectively ‘casting’ each cohort in the way an opera company might choose its ensemble of principals.

The most recent milestone in the 40-year history of the Award was reached in 2022, when Alastair made a generous \$3 million bequest, funding it in perpetuity. ‘We were living year-to-year before,’ says Bill. ‘Now the future of the Award is assured and we can continue to change lives.’

That same year, management of the Award was transferred to Melba Opera Trust. As Bill explains, the volunteer-run, overheads-free strategy that was such a source of pride had its downside when it came to succession planning. Prospective volunteers can be ‘quite daunted by the idea of taking over’ from a longstanding board that’s deep in institutional memory. ‘Alastair’s generosity has allowed us to gracefully retire.’ And it’s good for Melba as well, he adds, because the Award – which remains the most generous scholarship of its type in Australia – ‘extends what they offer to a new level’.

Award Alumni

1984	Lisa Gasteen, soprano	QLD
1985	Miriam Gormley, soprano	QLD
1987	Christine Hore, soprano	NSW
1988	Helen Adams, soprano	VIC
1989	Maria-Brigid Ryan, soprano	ACT
1990	Gail Robertson, mezzo-soprano	NSW
1991	Rosemarie Arthurs, soprano	QLD
1992	Liane Keegan, mezzo-soprano	VIC
1993	Catherine Ireland, soprano	NSW
1994	Shu-Cheen Yu, soprano	NSW
1995	Sarah Hills, soprano	QLD
1996	Hilary Taylor, soprano	VIC
1997	Terence den Dulk, baritone	ACT
1998	Garrie Davislim, tenor	VIC
1999	Lorena Stipani, soprano	VIC
2000	Joslyn Rechter, mezzo-soprano	VIC
2001	Sarah Sullivan, soprano	QLD
2002	Caitlin Hulcup, mezzo-soprano	WA
2003	Lorina Gore, soprano	NSW
2004	Maxine Montgomery, soprano	VIC
2005	Paul O’Neill, tenor	WA
2006	Christopher Hillier, baritone	NSW
2007	Katja Webb, soprano	WA
2008	Mary-Jean O’Doherty, soprano	NSW
	Rejieli Paulo, soprano*	VIC
2009	Lauren Easton, mezzo-soprano	NSW
	Stephen Smith, tenor*	VIC
2010	Roberto Abate, tenor	WA
2011	Lauren Easton, mezzo-soprano	NSW
	Morgan Pearse, bass-baritone*	
2012	Siobhan Stagg, soprano*	VIC
2013	Greta Bradman, soprano	VIC
2014	Panayiota Kalatzis, soprano*	QLD
	Samuel Sakker, tenor**	QLD
2015	Matthew Reardon, tenor*	NSW
	Jonathan Abernethy, tenor*	NZ
2016	Nathan Lay, baritone*	VIC
	Tabatha McFadyen, soprano*	QLD
2017	Bronte Zemlic, mezzo-soprano	VIC
	Fiona McArdle, soprano*	SA
2018	Fleuranne Brockway, mezzo-soprano*	WA
2019	Jeremy Kleeman, bass-baritone*	VIC
2020	Jeremy Kleeman, bass-baritone*	VIC
2023	Georgia Melville, soprano*	NSW

* Melba Alumni *Special Supplementary Award
Not awarded in 1986, 2021 and 2022; became a biennial award in 2019.

Stacey YANG

Repetiteur

AGE

LATE 30ish

STATE

NSW

Southey Shelmerdine Repetiteur Scholarship

Mel & Nina Waters Award

Margaret Schofield Opera Scholarship

Aria of the year

‘Jewel Song’ from *Faust* by Gounod

Language focus Italian and French

Who do you dream to share a stage with and why?

Ying Fang. She is an inspiration for me because she is a fellow Chinese-background artist with an enchanting voice and stellar career at the most prestigious opera houses across the world. Her journey of embracing the most sophisticated arts genre of Western civilization and achieving such success is simply amazing.

What are you proud of?

The speech I delivered at the *Meet the Artists* concert in March. I also kicked off three new languages and enjoyed performing several high-calibre recitals at various prestigious venues. I am proud of my ability to hold my nerve and stay focused.

If you could invite two artists for a dinner party

Richard Wagner and Wilhelm Furtwangler. My favourite composer and my favourite conductor. Their artistic vision and imagination separate them from others and still vividly inspire me today.

Currently working on

I am learning the complete scores of *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, and *Carmen*.

Syrah TORII

Mezzo Soprano

AGE

27

STATE

VIC

Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship

Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship

Aria of the year

‘Dôme épais (flower duet)’ takes the crown – it’s an audience favourite!

Language focus French and Italian repertoire, German and Italian spoken language

Pre- or post-performance ritual

I take inspiration from elite athletes in my approach. Pre-performance, I do a physical warm-up and then a vocal warm-up. I also incorporate visualisation of the whole performance experience. Post-performance, I do a vocal cool-down, I hydrate, refuel my body, and write down some reflections.

Who do you dream to share a stage with and why?

Nicole Car, The Cat Empire, Cynthia Erivo, and Jacob Collier. I’ve always looked up to these artists for their musical excellence, authenticity, and work ethic, and I’d be able to learn so much from sharing the stage with them. It would be artistically enriching to mix our different genres together and create something vibrant and new.

Piece of advice that has had the most impact

Take risks artistically! Go beyond your comfort zone!

Hurdle you overcame this year

Managing my work-life balance, to be a well-rounded performer!



A visit to Melba's music room

Like a lot of Melburnians of a certain age, I remember being driven past Coombe Cottage on family trips to the Yarra Valley. My father would point to the enormous expanse of hedge and say, with a note of reverence, 'That's Nellie Melba's house.'



STORY BRUCE RAGGATT

One could make out only a little white tower, poking just above the green foliage. And who this lady might be also remained a mystery to me. All I knew was that I wanted desperately to see behind the hedge because no child likes to be denied, especially one with his curiosity aroused.

Fast forward a few decades and here I am chatting inside Coombe Cottage to historian and house guide Courtney Lucas. Courtney confirms that no one need speculate anymore as to what is behind the hedge: he takes visitors on tours around the house and gardens throughout the year. When I ask if people are intrigued by Melba the singer, he confesses that he isn't sure. Many seem to glaze over when he shows them signed portraits of Gabriel Fauré or Giuseppe Verdi. He confides that the aspects of Melba's life that fascinate most are the stories about her family, celebrities and royal connections. But whilst these are of no shortage, it is the Australian diva's musical life and achievements that repay the greatest attention.

Before Courtney was employed at Coombe he wasn't an opera aficionado either, but, as a Melbourne city tour guide, he had come across Dame Nellie. Amazingly, Courtney also has a connection to Melba: his great-grandmother, the soprano Stella Wilson OBE, was one of her students.

When Melba purchased Coombe Cottage in 1909, much against the advice of her esteemed builder-father David Mitchell — who maintained it was shoddily built — she undertook the first of several renovations. John Grainger was the architect who oversaw the designs. Much of the blame for the resulting poor workmanship has been sheeted home to him. Described by his son, composer Percy Grainger, as 'the totallist wreck', John was a syphilitic alcoholic and often drunk when supervising the workmen. Nevertheless, Melba was fond of this family friend and kept him on.

The first new room that John created was the music room. Located at the centre of the house, it soon became the centre of the home in every respect. As the largest space it was the most suitable for entertaining Melba's party guests, ranging from artists to politicians. Room enough indeed for Melba to waltz across the floor one evening in the arms of Prime Minister Billy Hughes.

It seems that the room itself has never been altered. The colour scheme has always been two-tone green and photos from the time attest to the furniture being the same. There is a decided Gallic feel in the furnishings and the room is dominated by a French chandelier. (Melba was amused by local rumours that her chandelier was very expensive. 'It is very expensive, but what they don't realise is that *everything* I have is very expensive!')

The impressive Mason & Hamlin grand piano, 'representing the finest in American manufacturing', is the largest item in the music room. It doubles as an elegant place to display some of the many signed portraits given to Melba.



Like an Edwardian version of Facebook, exchanging portraits was a usual practice amongst society's elite. Verdi is there, as is Marchesi, Puccini, Bernhardt and Chaplin. There are, however, no photos of Caruso. 'Their relationship was a bit strained', says Courtney.

One particularly attractive piece is a three-section French screen, which Melba ingeniously used to display nine fans, a common gift at the time. One is from the Queen of Spain, another from the Princess of Monaco, and a third is from Alfred de Rothschild, scion of the famed banking family. (Rothschild was passionate about opera and, after Melba performed privately for him in the 1890s, he took over the management of her money.) Sadly, no one now knows which fan was from whom.

Another notable item is a guestbook, opened on the page signed 'Philippe 12 Juin 1919'. This is none other than Prince Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, with whom Melba had an affair in the early 1890s, leading to her husband, Charles Armstrong, filing for divorce.

On the door from the music room to the Melba wing is a wooden and metal door chime that clicks charmingly whenever it is moved. Its provenance is unknown, but it's owner's identity could not be clearer, with the interlaced N and M monogram emblazoned across the middle.

At the London premiere of *Pagliacci*, attended by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII), Melba sang Nedda and made her entrance on a horse. After the performance she hosted a supper for the artists at the Savoy Hotel. Courtney shows me the invitation she gave to the composer Leoncavallo, which he signed, along with several cast members. It was at this dinner that Peach Melba was served for the first time.

Melba was also given an autographed score of *Pagliacci* by the composer with the inscription 'To the great artist Madame Melba, souvenir from your devoted admirer, R. Leoncavallo 9 May 1893'. There is an autographed score of *La bohème*, too, with an inscription from Giacomo Puccini. It's hard to make out the exact wording, but it concludes with 'con amicizia', 'with friendship'.

In the gallery adjacent to the music room are further treasures, including an invitation to the coronation of King Edward VII. Melba had been

invited to sing, but, unfortunately, the ceremony had to be postponed due to the King becoming ill. When it was rescheduled Melba was no longer available.

There's also an embossed program for a Command Performance at Buckingham Palace in front of Queen Victoria on 28 June 1889. Although just at the very start of her career, the program shows that Melba sang the Bell Song from *Lakmé* and the quartet from *Rigoletto* in very distinguished company: operatic royalty in front of actual royalty.

Another 'program du concert' comes from the SS La Touraine, a French ocean liner that operated between Le Havre and New York. The extraordinary roster of operatic stars to sing — and sign — on this 1894 voyage includes Melba, of course, as well as Emma Calvé, Pol Plançon, Fernando de Lucia and brothers Jean and Édouard de Reszke! (An historic side note, La Touraine set sail for New York in 1912 just ahead of the Titanic. The first ship sent iceberg warnings to the second, but, tragically, to no avail.)

Every year the artists in the Melba Program come to visit Coombe Cottage, the music room and its treasures. And the connection between Melba Opera Trust and Dame Nellie continues today with her great-great-granddaughter, the Hon Saffron Foster, who is our Honorary Patron. Coombe is still a family home and that's where Saffron stays when in Australia.

Coombe Cottage, a living testament to a remarkable Australian, is a place everyone should see. As I make to go, Courtney recounts the story of a jazz band coming on Melba's private train from town to play for a party. They recalled later that as the occasion drew to a close, at 3am, Melba brought all the remaining guests into the music room, turned off all the lights and the candles, save one candle on the piano, and then sat down and played 'Home, sweet home'. And that was everyone's cue to leave! And so I left too, but am already impatient to revisit Melba's home, sweet home and appreciate her extraordinary legacy once again.

Experience Melba's treasures with a visit to Coombe Yarra Valley.
coombeyarvalley.com.au/the-gardens

Coombe is a proud partner of Melba Opera Trust.



As the largest space it was the most suitable for entertaining Melba's party guests, ranging from artists to politicians. Room enough indeed for Melba to waltz across the floor one evening in the arms of Prime Minister Billy Hughes.

Anna-Louise Cole

announced

as the 2024 Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award recipient

Anna-Louise Cole was recently honoured as the 2024 recipient of the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award, which supports early-career opera singers. We spoke with the Australian soprano about her reaction, life in Germany, and what this means for her career.

STORY DEANNE SHELTON-COLLINS

‘I’m still completely floored,’ Anna-Louise starts by saying. ‘Genuinely. I really can’t quite believe it.’

Fresh from a run of roles across Australia, Anna-Louise has already accumulated an impressive repertoire. In 2023 alone, her performances included both Sieglinde and Brünnhilde in all operas in Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* (Opera Australia), Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (Opera Queensland), Venus in *Tannhäuser* (Opera Australia), Mahler Symphony No. 8 at the Sydney Opera House (Sydney Philharmonia), and Mahler Symphony No. 2 (Zelman Symphony Orchestra). As she looks to the future, however, there are still many obstacles for a maturing singer to overcome, and receiving the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award will make a significant impact on her next steps.

‘It will be good for me in so many ways beyond the money,’ says Anna-Louise, though she notes that the financial support is also ‘valuable beyond measure’.

‘I’m at this kind of interesting point in my career where I’ve had some absolutely incredible opportunities in Australia, I’ve moved to Germany, and now I’m trying to establish myself there.’ However, the distance from Europe makes it challenging for Australian singers to establish themselves overseas. ‘Casting decisions are really only made by hearing people in person. Opera is an acoustic artform, and they just have to hear your voice. They have to see you perform. And so it means that trying to build a career over there is tricky. It takes time.’

The funding and recognition that comes with this Award will allow Anna-Louise to pursue more opportunities in Europe, a prospect she describes as ‘really exciting’. Based in the north-west of Germany, she is well placed to reach major cities around the country and further abroad, and she sees herself continuing to live there as she auditions for roles across Europe.

Dame Heather Begg DNZM OBE (1932–2009) was herself an opera singer – born in New Zealand – who managed to build a longstanding, internationally successful career. Established in 2013, the Award is a legacy from her will and provides \$25,000 annually to support an emerging singer from Australia or New Zealand.



Image: Jade Ferguson @ Visual Poets Society

Celebrating its tenth anniversary last year, it claims an impressive list of alumni: Samuel Dundas, Janet Szepei Todd, Amina Edris, Jeremy Kleeman, Emily Edmonds, Lauren Fagan, Nicholas Jones, Fleuranne Brockway, Filipe Manu, and Nathan Bryon.

‘I’m very honoured to be on this list and also to have my name associated with the legacy of Dame Heather Begg,’ says Anna-Louise, who takes inspiration from her ‘enormous and very influential career’.

Having performed in many roles for Opera Australia, she feels an extra sense of connection with Dame Heather, whose photos are on display in the company’s Sydney premises. ‘I know where she is on the wall. I can picture her picture!’ she says. ‘I also have colleagues ... who worked with her and who spoke of her so glowingly as an artist and also as a person.’

Moffatt Oxenbould AM, a Trustee of Dame Heather’s estate, is one of many people who remember the great mezzo-soprano fondly, describing her as ‘a wonderful singer and a magnetic performer’. At a recent event in Sydney – featuring the 2022 Award recipient, tenor Filipe Manu – Moffatt spoke of the parallels between Dame Heather Begg and Dame Nellie Melba, whose bequests to nurture operatic talent have each created an enduring legacy.

These legacies ‘meaningfully benefit young artists,’ explained Moffatt, ‘and honour the memory of two very distinguished Dames – whose talents and achievements continue to inspire us.’



Anna-Louise performing the role of Lady Macbeth in Opera Queensland’s *Macbeth*.

‘I’m very honoured to be on this list and also to have my name associated with the legacy of Dame Heather Begg,’ says Anna-Louise, who takes inspiration from her ‘enormous and very influential career’.

Main image: Jade Ferguson @ Visual Poets Society



MELBA’S WILL

LEAVING A LEGACY

A legacy gift to Melba Opera Trust represents a timeless gesture of support.

It is a commitment to sustaining world-class training and precious pathways for exceptional young opera singers.

To find out about including a gift in your will, or to receive information about our Melba’s Will Bequest Circle, please contact Catherine McElhone on (03) 9944 2100 or cmcelhone@melbaoperatrust.com.au



Maggie performing in the 1960 Sadler's Wells production of *Orpheus In The Underworld*

In Memory of Maggie Nisbett



Margaret Nisbett MBE (1929-2023), fondly known as Maggie, was a coloratura soprano and beloved singing teacher who taught at the Melba Conservatorium of Music for nearly two decades.

STORY DEANNE SHELDON-COLLINS

After she passed away last year, Maggie’s son Jon Weaving and his wife Marian made a generous donation to Melba Opera Trust in her memory. ‘I think it’s important to support the arts,’ explains Jon, ‘and this is a field I want to support because it was my mum’s field.’

‘Opera was her absolute passion – that and cats!’ he says. ‘Opera and Melba were so incredibly significant in my mum’s life.’

Maggie taught her students using the Melba Method, a manual of techniques co-authored by Dame Nellie herself in 1925 to promote the bel canto style.

‘She had this belief that it worked,’ says Jon of Maggie’s staunch loyalty to the method. ‘In a lot of respects, she had her feet planted firmly on the ground and practised very simple beliefs and lifestyles.’ Her confidence in the Melba Method was one such belief, and it drove her to share the knowledge with generations of singers who continue to remember her affectionately.

‘I still have conversations with some of her students who I got to know over the years,’ says Jon, ‘and they were grateful to learn it themselves.’

Yet teaching was not originally part of Maggie’s plans. After making a name for herself on stages and at competitions in Australia, the young soprano moved to England in 1954 and

established a successful career singing for opera companies, venues such as the iconic Sadler’s Wells, and the BBC. Returning to Australia in 1962, she continued to perform across television, live concerts, and theatre. In 1980, her decades of work were recognised with an MBE for services to music.

As the end of her performance career neared, Maggie worried about what she would do next. It was Jon who said to her, ‘Why don’t you teach?’

The idea had not even occurred to Maggie, who – despite her experience and skill as a professional singer – lacked confidence that she could communicate that knowledge to others. And yet she found a new calling, one that lasted the rest of her life.

‘She was incredibly proud of that,’ says Jon. ‘Teaching became every bit as passionate to her as performance had been. I can absolutely say that with certainty.’

Maggie continued to teach in private studio until she passed away at 94, nurturing vocal talent to the very last: her final lessons were in the hospital, given to a nurse who was interested in singing.

By supporting the Melba Program, Jon and Marian’s gift in memory of Maggie will help to continue her legacy of educating singers, and we hope that Maggie would be happy in the knowledge her passion for musical training will live on.

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